Of Cold Hearts

by DomesticGoddess

Summary

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So what in Mahal's name was he doing sitting here in a dusty armchair next to a cold hearth drinking tea (of all things!) with a (admittedly rather cute) vampire. The same vampire that he came to this old castle to kill.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
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Earlier

Thorin trekked over the barren hills to his most recent destination. He was headed to an old castle, supposably the home of a vampire that was preying on the nearby town of Bree. Though he was still a bit unclear about that. None of the information he had been able to gather was particularly fresh or forthcoming.

He supposed the castle could be inhabited by some other foul beast. The general consensus, from what he gathered, was that the old castle was haunted or cursed to the extent that even the lands around it remained brown and barren.

The evidence didn't particularly scream vampire, but he knew that vampires often favored old abandoned castles. Made them feel superior or something. Regardless, if something was causing a blight on the land it couldn't possibly be good, so he decided to check it out in the hopes it would be a vampire. He'd slaughter a vampire for free any day.

He made it to the castle gates with no trouble. He was right on time; the sun was beginning to set. It was best to hunt vampires early in the night before they could feed and bolster their strength. Every good vampire hunter knew that the blood lust was all-consuming. A hungry vampire would not be able to focus on much more than feeding, so it was the best time to hunt them.

He pushed open the rusty gates and let himself into the castle courtyard. The castle itself wasn't particularly big, as far as castles go, but the courtyard was massive for a castle this size. He tried to recall everything he knew about the castle's history and realized he didn't really know anything about it.

Though it looked like it might have been filled with vibrant gardens at some point, the courtyard was now littered with thorns and rubble from the castle. The castle certainly looked the worse for wear. As he approached the castles main entrances he noticed that the windows all seemed to be boarded up. That was encouraging. Vampires often covered up windows to reduce light leakage into their homes.

When he came to the main doors, he stopped and listened for any indication that his presence had been detected. The sun wasn't quite down all the way, but some vamps were early risers. He double checked his weapons to make sure they were easily accessible, then drew out his crossbow and set it. Being unprepared never went well.

He slowly pushed one of the doors open, anticipating an attack. When nothing happened, he cautiously proceeded to step through the door. With two steps, he was officially inside the castle. He
stopped and listened, scanning the entrance hall for any movement. Still nothing happened. Either this vamp was a late riser or he was to be disappointed. There was no way a vamp wouldn't have heard that door creak.

He took a few more steps into the hall. When still nothing happened, he slowly rotated in place looking to the upper levels.

"Hello."

Thorin spun around so fast it took a moment for his vision to catch up. When it did, he found himself looking down his crossbow's sight at a small well dressed man gazing at him with his hands grasped behind his back.

"Welcome to my castle. If you had knocked, I would have come to greet you sooner."

Thorin just stared. The man was short, barely five feet tall, and looked young, but not childish. He was smartly dressed in a vest and waistcoat with a silk cravat around his neck. The colors were hard to tell in the gloom, but Thorin thought that they would have been brightly colored at one time.

His hair was a short mess of unruly curls which framed a roundish face best suited for laughter and happiness. He had a button nose and was currently wearing a wry grin on his well shaped lips. And his eyes. He had the biggest, sweetest eyes Thorin had ever seen. Yet, for all his appearance of innocence, Thorin knew in his gut that this fair creature before him was a blood sucking demon. Probably.

". . . Tea?"

And was apparently talking to him. "What?"

The little man looked at him like he suspected Thorin might be a little slow in the head. "I said, 'Would you like a cup of tea?'" The man reiterated slowly.

Mahal, even his voice was attractive, a soft tenor that matched his looks perfectly. Wait. Tea? "What?"

The man's eyebrow's rose as his head tilted and his smiled turned exasperated. "Tea. It's a drink. Can be served hot or cold. Goes well with jam and bread." The man was speaking very slowly now as if Thorin was some uncivilized savage who had never heard of tea before.

"I know what tea is," Thorin barked. His anger flaring to cover his embarrassment.

"Well, would you like some?" He was still speaking slowly.

"Tea?" Thorin was sure he was being played with.

"Yes?" The man had the audacity to feign ignorance, as if he wasn't messing with Thorin's head.

"I'm a vampire hunter." Maybe Thorin wasn't the slow one here.

"Yes, I gathered that." He said glancing significantly at the loaded crossbow inches from his face. "Though I assume you have a name."

"Oakenshield." Any monster hunter worth his salt knew never to give one's real name to a magical creature.

"Bilbo Baggins, at your service." He said with a small tip off his head. "Tell me Master Oakenshield,
"can monster hunters not drink tea?"

"What? Of course! We're not . . ."

"Excellent!" The man - Mr. Baggins - cut him off turned on his heal and began walking farther into the castle. "This way then! I have a marvelous vanilla blend that I think you'll enjoy."

Thorin was left momentarily stunned, his brain still trying to process what happened. His brain still hadn't caught up when Mr. Baggins turned and looked at him in a silent question. Before he even realized what he was doing, he was lowering his crossbow and following the curly haired man through the castle.

Present

He barely remembers being lead into the large sitting room and sitting in this musty old armchair, yet here he is, being served some kind of vanilla tea by a man he is mostly (kinda) sure is a vampire. Probably.

After having poured them each a cup of tea and handed Thorin his, he took a seat in another old armchair across from Thorin. The hearth is empty, so the only light in the room is a candelabra sitting on the tea service cart. Thorin belatedly realized that he never saw Mr. Baggins even leave to make tea.

He stared hard at the man in front of him who is slowly sipping his tea seemingly oblivious to the whirlwind of confusion going on in Thorin's head. "You're a vampire." Well, he could have approached that more tactfully.

Mr. Baggins looked up at him with a tilt of his head. "Yes? Isn't that why you're here?" He took another sip of his tea.

Well, that raised more questions than it answered. "I came here to kill you . . . and you're drinking tea." Thorin wasn't sure which was more confusing a vampire inviting him in for tea or a vampire even drinking tea in the first place.

"Just because I'm a vampire doesn't mean I can't be a good host." Mr. Baggins stated simply. "I suppose I could drink your blood if it would make you more comfortable." He said with no little amount of distaste.

"Are you asking to drink my blood?" Now Thorin was incredulous and confused.

"Oh good heavens no! It's terrible manners to drink from a guest. But if it would make you feel more comfortable with the situation, I'm sure I could . . . suffer through it." He said as if he detested the idea.

"No, thank you." Thorin responded blandly. He was so confused he was nearly numb with it. He briefly wondered if the vamp had broken something in him. Maybe that was the whole point. "You've enchanted me." He mumbled in accusation mostly to himself.

Mr. Baggins looked at him in surprise before bursting out in the most charming laugh Thorin had ever heard. Mr. Baggins shook his head. "I take it you haven't met very many real vampires."

"I have slayed dozens of vampires." Thorin replied indignantly. He was a well known vampire hunter; his reputation was well earned.

"Yes, well, most of the vampires out there are high generations. As to your accusation, if I had
enchanted you, you wouldn't be aware of it. Now drink your tea before it gets cold."

Thorin looked at his tea with furrowed brows then looked back at Mr. Baggins who was now watching him over his tea cup. "You're drinking tea."

"I'm beginning to think that stating the obvious is one of your primary skill sets." Mr. Baggins was smirking now with his eyes lit up with mirth.

Thorin was momentarily distracted. Was this vampire . . teasing him? He cleared his throat, but his voice still came out a bit gravelly. "How are you drinking tea if you're a vampire?"

"I would say, the same way as you, but have you even tasted it yet? I promise it's not poisoned. If I wanted to kill you, it'd be much faster to use my bare hands. I wouldn't waste good tea just to poison you."

Thorin looked at his tea again. He was slipping bad. He hadn't even considered the possibility of poison, then again he was having tea with a vampire. His common sense must have fled him some time ago. He took a small sip and grimaced. He didn't much care for tea.

Mr. Baggins chuckled. He must have been watching him. "Would you like some sugar? If you don't like it you don't have to drink it." He smiled understandingly.

Thorin froze up. He didn't really like tea, but for some reason he didn't want to disappoint his (cute) good-mannered host. "Some sugar would be good."

Mr. Baggins got up and poured a fresh cup of tea, adding several spoons of sugar this time. He brought it over to Thorin and traded it for the now cold cup in his hands. "Cold tea is dreadful." He said by way of explanation.

Thorin tried another sip and had to admit it tasted considerably better than his last. He returned his gaze to the well-mannered vampire who was just sitting after pouring himself some more tea. "Why aren't you trying to kill me? If you knew I was here to kill you, why didn't you try to kill me the moment I stepped in your door."

"I could ask you the same thing. You haven't tried to kill me yet."

"You don't act like any vampire I've ever come across and I've never heard of a vampire drinking tea."

"Yes, well, there is enough violence in the world. It's much more civilized to discuss differences over tea, don't you think? Besides that whole 'you try to kill me and I'll try to kill you' thing gets old after awhile. Hunters are the only guests I get; why waste their presence on the same old game."

"How is discussion going to resolve you being a vampire and my being here to kill you?" Maybe the vamp's just playing with him after all.

"Ah. Well, you see, I have a proposal that might do just that."

Thorin headed him off. "I'm not leaving this castle with a live vampire living in it. I don't care how well-mannered you are, I won't just take your word that you won't go out and eat somebody once I leave. I'm a hunter, I eliminate threats."

"I completely understand. Fortunately, my proposition does not include you leaving a live vampire in the castle."
"You're going to let me kill you?" Thorin raised an eyebrow.

"Of course not. I may not have much to live for, but I'm not ready to die yet either. No, I'm offering to accompany you on your travels and help you with your..." he waved his hand around, "slaying. Not that I'm suggesting you need help, of course." He rushed. "Only that I'm sure I have a far greater working knowledge of the 'monster world' as you would call it, and I would be willing to provide you with information. I would be under your supervision and you would have more information than any other hunter out there."

Thorin ruminated on that for a bit. "You're offering to help me kill your own kind?" His brow furrowed.

"You make it sound like vampires are all just one big family. The vampire world is highly competitive, more vampires means more sharing and more hunters. Besides, humans kill humans all the time." He ended matter-of-factly.

Thorin's brow furrowed even deeper. It's true that humans often preyed on other humans. Somehow he just assumed that vampires would stick together. But, that still didn't mean he could trust a vampire. "I still can't trust your word."

"Nor I yours, which is why I propose a blood contract."

"And what exactly does that entail?" He couldn't possibly seriously be considering leaving a vampire alive.

"We would each write out our side of the contract. When we reached an agreement, we would each use our own blood to bind the contract to our bodies. Blood contracts are fatal if broken, even for vampires, and if one side is broken the other is released automatically. We wouldn't complete it, of course, unless we were both happy with each other's side of the contract."

It sounded like it could work. "And what if we couldn't come to an agreement?"

"Then you will leave me be or I will kill you." His face and voice were deadly serious now and his eyes momentarily flashed pitch black.

Ah. There's the kind of vampire Thorin was used to, right down to the self-confident arrogance. Though he couldn't help the shiver that ran up his spine and wondered if it wasn't arrogance after all. This vampire was so different than all the others he had encountered. He wasn't entirely sure he would come out of this fight alive. "And if I refuse?"

"The same." He had more or less returned to his casual demeanor.

"And why would you wish to bind yourself to a hunter, and even go so far as to help one?"

"I'm bored and some company would be nice. You seem a decent sort; there aren't many who would knowingly socialize with someone like me."

Thorin must have gone mad if he was really considering this. "How long do I have to decide?"

"That's entirely up to you. You are welcome to stay until you decide. I can't say the accommodations are quite what they used to be though."

"You would trust me to stay in your castle without the security of the contract?"

Mr. Baggins gave a dangerous smirk. "Master Oakenshield, the moment you stepped foot in this
castle, your life was in my hands. As you said yourself, I'm not like other vampires; there are few who have a chance of actually killing me."

For a brief second, Thorin could feel the power rolling of the man in front of him and then it was gone. It had knocked the breath right out of him. Thorin's gut twisted, there was no doubt in his mind that this was a fight he wouldn't win.

Chapter End Notes

A new idea that came to me. Let me know what you think. I'm still new at this please be kind. Feel free to point out mistakes.
Thorin released a deep sigh. He couldn’t believe he was doing this. He still didn’t know what he was thinking making a deal with a vampire. And he’ll deny with his very last breath that it had anything to do with big eyes and soft curls.

He was a fierce hunter of all manner of dangerous creatures. He could not be so easily swayed. It was convenience and possibly a little bit self-preservation. He had his nephews to think about after all. No point in starting a fight he knew he couldn’t win.

He couldn’t let word get out about his situation. At best, he would be a laughingstock. At worst, he’ll end up on the hunted list with all the other foul creatures. He heaved another great sigh.

It hadn’t really taken him that long to decide. After they had finished their tea, ’Master’ Baggins (as he preferred to be called) had offered him a pipe and some pipe weed then settled down with his own. Master Baggins had grow silent after their talk about the contract and Thorin had taken to quietly observing his vampire host. Watching him sit there smoking his pipe like any normal human, it was easy to forget what he was.

Eventually, Master Baggins had excused himself and left Thorin to his thoughts. Thorin had manage to lose all sense of time and remained lost in his thoughts until, right before sunrise, Master Baggins returned to inform him that he was retiring for the day.

Thorin pretty much already knew what his decision was going to be by that time, but he still hadn’t quite reconciled himself to the idea, so he hadnt’t mentioned it. He knew they wouldn’t be able to leave until nightfall now anyway. After Master Baggins disappeared to who knows where, Thorin decided to take the opportunity to try to find out more about him by exploring the castle.

The search was almost completed unfruitful. What he found only confirmed what he already knew. The castle was mostly void of any furniture or decorations, though it was surprisingly relatively clean. There was nothing that would indicate anything about the previous owners. He had wondered from room to room all day and only found two rooms that looked even remotely used, the sitting room where he had started and the kitchen.

He almost expected (and hoped, he hadn’t eaten since the afternoon before) to find food stores in the pantry. He didn’t, unsurprisingly. But he did find rows upon rows of barrels and kegs of tea blends and pipe weed. He had momentarily wondered if the vampire had found some magical spell or something to allow him to survive on tea and pipe weed instead of blood. He had scoffed at himself. Wouldn’t that be too good to be true.

There were only two places he hadn’t been able to explore: the basement (he honestly didn’t want to
know what he would find down there), which had been gated and securely locked, and a room in the upper level that he guessed was a bedroom but had been locked. He suspected it was the room of his host and didn't really feel like finding out if he was a grumpy riser, so didn't try to pry it open.

His host had reappeared just before sundown and had inquired as to Thorin's decision. He had begrudgingly agreed to the contract which led to his host leading him back to the sitting room to perform the contract. That had been interesting.

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When they arrived in the sitting room, Master Baggins lit the candelabra sitting on the tea cart. Thorin noticed that the tea service had been removed and in its place was a small stack of paper, a small knife, an ink well and two pens. Master Baggins took a sheet of paper and a pen and handed it to Thorin.

"I took the liberty to write out my end of the contract last night. So all you need to do, is write your end and then I can cast the spell and we'll be on our way." He said as way of explanation. "Would you like to read mine before you write your own?"

That would be helpful. "Yes."

Master Baggins handed him another sheet of paper, this one already written on. He read it out loud. "I, Bilbo Baggins, swear to _______ that I will not intentionally cause or be the cause of serious or permanent harm to any humans." It was achingly simple. He was expecting something more cryptic.

"Obviously, I'm going to need your real name to complete the contract." said the vampire in front of him.

He needed to stop forgetting that. His face darkened with suspicion. "I'm not giving you my real name." He didn't know what this vampire was capable of. He couldn't risk it.

"Look, I don't need to know your name to kill or manipulate you. And, since your just a human, it's not really worth the effort to do either. But if it makes you feel better, you can add your name to the contract right before we seal it. That way I won't know your real name until after the contract is in place and then I won't be able to do anything with it."

Thorin couldn't tell if he was being insulted or reassured. "Couldn't you force me to break the contract after it's made when you tire of it?"

"No. To cause you to break the contract would kill you, and thus cause you harm. The contract can only be dismissed by free will. I cannot manipulate or force you to release me from it. It has to be what you desire." He explained patiently. "Of course, you're only protected by the contract for as long as you're human."

Thorin swallowed thickly a new fear making his gut turn. "Would changing me be considered a breach of the contract?" He eyed the vampire warily. If he lied, Thorin would have no way of knowing.

The vampire opened his mouth to speak, but didn't say anything. A second later he closed his mouth and tilted his head looking over Thorin's shoulder. "Hmmm. You know . . . I don't know." He admitted thoughtfully.

Thorin raised an eyebrow. He wasn't expecting that.

"I guess that would depend on how you define harm. Physically, you'd be in better shape after you
were changed. Not emotionally though, the change is definitely hard on the psyche." He paused for a few seconds then nodded as if having decided on something. "How about I just add to the contract that I won't change anyone or cause anyone to be changed? That should cover you I think." He took the paper back and began to write on it.

Thorin couldn't help the way he was staring. It was like this vampire was desperate to form this contract with him. Why else would he keep going out of his way for it? It was suspicious. "Why do you want this contract so bad?"

The vampire looked over at him with a confused furrow in his brow. "What makes you think I do?"

"You could just kill me, then you wouldn't have to make all these promises that will only make your life difficult."

Master Baggins looked at him for a moment, then a mischievous little half-smile started to form on his lips. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were worried for me, Oakenshield."

Thorin flushed, momentarily entranced by the smile. "What?"

Master Baggins just raised an eyebrow at him, then proceed to rake his gaze down Thorin's form in an appreciative way that had Thorin flushing even harder before his eyes returned to Thorin's. He flashed Thorin a perfectly wicked grin before returning his attention to the paper in front of him.

Thorin was very grateful for the lack of lighting in the old castle, though he suspected the vampire could see him well enough anyway if that grin was anything to go by. He cleared his throat, "You still haven't answered my question."

"I could just kill you, but it would be boring and then I would be stuck here in endless boredom. Yes, I could always go traveling alone, but I find that company makes it infinitely more pleasant," he turned his gaze over to Thorin with a mischievous grin, "and entertaining." He handed the paper he had been writing on back to Thorin.

The vampire's part of the contract had been modified to reflect their new agreement. As he looked over the paper, he saw a new section that had been written.

"I took the liberty of writing your side out for you to move things along. If it seems agreeable to you, we can complete the ritual."

Thorin read what he had written, "I, ________, swear to Bilbo Baggins that I will not intentionally harm or be the cause of any harm to Bilbo Baggins." It sounded simple enough. "Is that really all you want?"

"It's not a marriage contract, Oakenshield." He said with a smirk. "Its purpose is only for us to know that we will be safe in each other's company. Besides, it's not as simple as it sounds. To 'not be the cause of harm' means that if you even suggest, by words or actions, that someone else should harm me, you will be held responsible for any harm they cause. The same applies to my end of the contract. Now, is it agreeable or not? I'd like to get this over with."

"Why the hurry?" Thorin wanted to make sure he wasn't being tricked into anything.

"Because I assumed you would want to leave tonight. If not, then by all means take your time."

"Of course we're leaving tonight. How long will this ritual take?" He was under the impression it would be quick.
"Only a few minutes, but, in case you've forgotten, I am a vampire and I'd much prefer to make it to Bree before the sun starts coming up." He said matter-of-factly. "Unless, of course, you want to go on ahead and I'll just catch up later." He suggested a little to innocently.

Thorin did not want to wait another day. He needed to get back to his nephews and his stomach was already trying to join the conversation. But there was no way he was going to leave and trust the vampire to follow. He read it over again one more time and decided it looked harmless enough. He handed it back and gave a quick nod.

"Alright. First, we each need to rewrite our parts in our own blood on two separate sheets of paper." He handed Thorin the knife. "I'll write mine first." He took his thumb nail, which looked much sharper now than it had, and sliced across his wrist carelessly. Blood slowly began to bubble up and he took the other pen that had been sitting on the tray, dipped it into the blood on his wrist, and began to write with it.

Thorin watched with wide eyes and mouth slightly agape. So it was a literal blood contract than. He shouldn't be surprised; he didn't know what he was thinking. He looked at the knife warily.

"I'm not going to lose control because of a few drops of blood." He said while carefully wiping off the pen he had just used. "Now you just need to write out your side of the contract and fill your name in on mine and we will begin. It doesn't need to be a big cut, just enough to draw blood."

Thorin cautiously set the blade to his wrist and watched the vampire while he made his cut.

Master Baggins just chuckled in that charming way of his. "I'm not going to jump you, Oakenshield. Not for blood anyway." He winked mischievously.

Thorin flushed again and distracted himself by writing out his contract. When he finished, he reached over the grab the other one to put his name on it and promptly found himself without a pen. He looked up questioningly.

Master Baggins was wiping off the pen again. "It has to be in my blood." He said as an explanation. When it was clean, he dipped it in his blood and handed it back to Thorin.

After Thorin had finished, Master Baggins continued. "Now, I need you to make a slit on your other wrist. Same size, no need to overdo it." He said this while he was dragging his thumbnails over both of his wrists, the one having healed over all ready.

Once Thorin had done that, Master Baggins picked up the two sheets of paper and handed Thorin the one with his contract on it. "Now, you are going to hold the contract in your right hand, just like this, so that the paper is position right under the slit in your wrist." He demonstrated as he explained. "And your going to take your left wrist and hold it under the edge of the paper so that your cut lines up with the edge of the paper, like this."

Thorin copied his movements, curious and slightly apprehensive.

"Don't be alarmed when I start the spell. It's going to look like you're bleeding a lot, but I promise you'll be fine. Don't move your hands. I'm going to begin." After taking a breath, He began chanting.

Thorin didn't recognize the language, but it it sounded old and had an eerie undertone to it. A few moments after he had started, Thorin noticed the blood flow from his wrist become significantly thicker. It started to drip and was soon trickling down onto the page in a thin stream. He watched fascinated as the blood seemed to attract and absorb the words on the page.

As the blood reached the end of the page it began dripping onto his other wrist where it started to re-
enter his body through the cut there. As his blood was re-absorbed, lettering started to appear, spiraling out around his arm from the cut. After a few seconds of this, the words on the page had all been absorbed and the bleeding started to taper off. As Master Baggins brought the ritual to an end, the bleeding stopped and the cuts healed over.

Thorin pulled up his sleeve and studied the strange writing.

"It's an ancient language. It's the only language that works with the blood magic." He was examining his own arm. "Thorin Durin."

Thorin's head shot up as a shiver traveled down his spine at the sound of his name. When he did, there was an blank dark look on the vampire's face, but it dropped so fast that Thorin wasn't even sure he had seen it.

The vampire righted his sleeve and picked up the original copy of their contracts. "Here." He handed it to Thorin. "You can have this. Do with it as you please. Now, why don't you head out and I'll meet you at the front gate after I grab a few things."

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That was only minutes ago. Thorin was just now exiting the front doors to the castle and heading to the front gate. He was ready to get back to Bree. His nephews would be worried and he could really use a hot meal. He was wondering how exactly he was going to explain the situation to his nephews when he neared the gate. Mater Baggins was already standing there waiting for him. "I thought I was supposed to be waiting for you."

"I never said that. Besides, I'm a vampire. Always assume I'm waiting on you." He said dismissively.

Thorin looked him over in the moonlight. Not much had changed, except now he had a bag slung over his shoulder . . . and he wasn't wearing any shoes. He hadn't in the castle either, but Thorin had figured it was just because he was inside. "You're not wearing any shoes."

Master Baggins looked at his feet, wiggled his toes, then looked back up at Thorin. "You have astounding observation skills." He said with a quirk of his lips.

Thorin leveled him with half-hearted glare; he already knew the vampire was cheeky. "We're going to be on the road. Are you sure you don't need shoes?"

He gave Thorin a mischievous grin. "Are you worrying about me again," he leaned in closer, "Thorin?" He finished in a seductively deeper tone.

A shiver ran down his spine at the sound of his name on the vampire's lips. He flushed when he realized it had nothing to do with magic. He cleared his dry throat. "I'm just don't want you to slow us down." He covered.

Master Baggins scoffed. "Please. I'm not the slow one here and a few rocks aren't going to hurt me."

Thorin huffed. "Fine. Then let's go." Thorin let them out of the gate and they headed off towards Bree.

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They had made it back to the East Road and were about half-way to Bree when Master Baggins let out a dramatic sigh. "This will take some time getting used to. I forgot how slow humans were."
Thorin glanced over at him. "You're the one who wanted to come."

"I wasn't complaining. I was just stating facts." He was silent for a few moments. "I suppose I need to figure out what I am going to do when there isn't a town within a night's distance."

Thorin turned to look at him, incredulous. "Shouldn't that have been one of the first things you thought about?!? How can you forget something like that? I thought that was why you were in a hurry to get going in the first place?"

"It's not my fault you humans are so slow." He snapped back. "I forgot and I didn't. I know humans are slow but I forgot just how slow they really were. You humans take forever to get anywhere."

"Yeah well, we don't typically have to be anywhere within a single night or risk dying if we're not." Thorin retaliated. "How is this gonna work if you can't be out during the day?"

"It's not impossible. It's not like I can't be outside at all, I just can't risk any exposure to the sun." He explained thoughtfully. "We'll just have to go to Belegost in Ered Luin is all. Until then, I'll just use a few thick cloaks."

"That's it? You'll be fine just covered in cloaks?" Thorin wasn't sure why he thought that was a little ridiculous.

"No. I won't be fine. But I'll be alive and that's what counts. Being out under the sun, even well covered, is like . . ." he thought for a moment, "well it's like walking through a desert and a blizzard at the same time."

Thorin tried to wrap his head around that. He gave up, "What does that mean?"

"The sun feels hotter for us than humans. It dries us out and weighs us down." He explained. "At the same time, it's like being very cold. We slow down, our joints stiffen and our senses dull. The best place to be when the sun comes up is under ground: caves, basements, dungeons, crypts. In a pinch, burying ourselves will work, but it's typically used as a last resort."

That was . . . interesting and quite useful information. Thorin was beginning to think this partnership could really pay off. "And what's in Belegost?"

"My tailor, of course."

"Your tailor?" Because why wouldn't a vampire have his own tailor.

"And probably a bunch of 'wanted monster' notices as well. If anyone can make me something that will help with daylight travel, it will be my tailor and his brother. It will be worth the trip, for both of us."

Thorin thought about it. He hadn't been to the Ered Luin region in awhile and he had intended to head there eventually anyways. He didn't really want the vampire slowing them down either. "Fine. We'll head that way next, but we have to stop at Bree first."

"And what's waiting for us at Bree?" He said conversationally. "I would think that if you had companions, they would've wanted to help you with you 'hunt.'"

"They did. I told them no."

Master Baggins furrowed his brow in confusion. "If they're not good hunters, why do you keep them with you?"
"Because they're my nephews. Sometimes they hunt with me, but I make them stay behind on especially dangerous hunts."

Master Baggins side-eyed him. "And how old are these nephews of yours?"

"They'll be sixteen this year."

He gaped at Thorin in disbelief. "You bring children hunting with you?!? Are you trying to get them killed?!?"

Thorin's anger flared at the sore subject. "They can handle themselves well enough! I train them and keep them away from what I know they can't handle! What would a vampire know of children or family?!?"

The flicker of hurt in the vampire's eyes was almost too fast for Thorin to catch. Master Baggins' face and eyes went blank.

"You're right." he replied almost monotone. "I don't know what I was thinking." He turned away and continued walking.

Thorin had never regretted hurting a vampire before.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you think. :)
They had just made it to Bree. Master Baggins slowed down to allow Thorin in front to lead. He had been silent and closed off for the remainder of their walk to Bree. Thorin had wanted to break the silence, but hadn't been sure how. He never had been very good with apologies or feelings.

Besides, there was no reason for Thorin to feel bad. What he said was the truth. What difference does it make to a vampire whether his nephews were in danger or not?

Thorin led the way to the Prancing Pony, while the vampire followed quietly behind him. Thorin was still at a loss as to how he was going to explain this to his nephews. They would think he had gone mad, surely. As the neared the door to the inn, he sighed and decided he would cross that bridge when he came to it.

The inn was very quiet, as it was still very early. They had made it to Bree well before the sun rose, but it would be coming up in the next hour or so. Thorin led the way to the room he had rented. He was ready for a hot meal and good long rest. He figured they wouldn't really be able to leave until tonight at the earliest.

He stopped at the door to his room and knocked, trying to keep it quiet enough not to wake the other lodgers but loud enough to wake his nephews if they were sleeping. He always left the door key with them, just in case he didn't make it back.

He knocked again not getting a response. This time there was a big 'thump' accompanied by quiet cursing followed by what sounded like a scuffle. Master Baggins looked up at Thorin and lifted an amused eyebrow. Thorin sighed and shook his head. Not a second later the door was bursting open and they were met with two very disheveled teenage boys.

"Uncle!" They nearly yelled simultaneously.

Thorin pushed his way in shushing them. "Quiet! You'll wake the whole floor." The vampire sauntered in after him and closed the door.

"Fili was starting to worry about you. He thought that the vampire might have got you." Kili confessed. Fili was too relieved that Thorin was back to do more than halfheartedly swat his brother. "What happened, Uncle? You were gone almost two days." Fili inquired.

"I ran into some . . . complications."

The vampire snorted behind him. "That's one way of putting it," he mumbled and was soon pinned with three gazes.

"Who're you?" Kili had the tact of his uncle.

The vampire put on his most charming smile. "Bilbo Baggins at your service." He said just as he had with Thorin.

The boys just look at him confused before turning to their uncle.

"Master Baggins, these are my nephews Fili and Kili." He gestured to each one respectively.
Master Baggins looked them over quickly. They were twins, but clearly not identical. Kili had a thick mop of dark hair while Fili's hair was a much lighter wheat golden color. His attention was soon drawn to the window across the room. The curtains were thin and the sun would be coming up soon. "A pleasure." He said briefly before he headed over to the far bed and pulled the thickest blanket off and began covering the window with it.

The boys watched him baffled before turning to their uncle again looking for an explanation.

"Master Baggins will be joining us from here on out." Thorin said as if that explained why the man was stripping beds and covering windows.

The boys had enough sense not to push for answers in front of the stranger, who was now walking over towards them. He walked over to Thorin and handed him two gold pieces. "I need two cloaks, as thick and large as you can get them. You can keep the change, consider it an apology for not being able to offer you more than tea."

Thorin raised a brow at him "And what are you going to do?"

"The sun is coming up. I'm going to bury myself in blankets and try to sleep through it." He said while claiming the bed farthest from the window.

The boys were looking more and more confused as the conversation went on and Thorin thought he better get them out and explain the situation before they said something stupid. "Alright." He stripped off most of his weapons and armor until he was more comfortable, then ushered the boys out and down to the dining hall. His nephews were at least patient enough to let him sit and get a meal ordered before they decided they had waited long enough.

"Who is that?" said Fili.

"Where did you find him? He's cute." Said Kili.

"Why is he traveling with us. You've never let anyone join us before?"

"Is he single? Is he interested?" Kili wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Fili side-eyed his brother. Clearly Kili's priorities were confused. "And why does he talk like the sun coming up is a bad thing."

"Yeah," Kili was finally catching on, "He talks like he's a . "

"He's a vampire." Thorin cut him off. Thorin didn't know any other way to break the news besides to just come out with it.

Both the boys gaped at him for half a second. In the blink of an eye, Fili had pulled out one of his daggers, leaned over the table and held the blade against Thorin's throat with the other fisted in his thick fur cloak. "You are not our uncle. Uncle doesn't tell jokes. Who are you and what did you do with him?" His hissed low and threatening.

Thorin's response was even faster than Fili's. Almost instantly, he grabbed Fili's blade hand and kicked at him under the table knocking his feet out from under him.

Fili was caught by surprise and gave an undignified yelp as he fell face first onto the table.

"I am your uncle. And it wasn't a joke." Thorin released his hand. Was it strange for Thorin to be absurdly proud of being attacked by his nephew? "You were right to question it though and your
attack was decent." He looked around. There were only a few men here and there. No one seemed concerned.

"Thanks." Fili moaned holding his aching nose.

"Next time don't leave yourself in such an unbalanced position." He tried to take advantage of any opportunity to teach them to protect themselves. He was glad to see that it was working.

"If that wasn't a joke," began Kili cautiously avoiding his brother's mistake, "then you still can't be our uncle because he would never cooperate with a vampire."

Thorin sighed. He had predicted they would think he went crazy. He didn't think they would doubt his very identity. "There was a situation." He tried to explain. "We decided that it would be more profitable to work together than try to kill each other." It wasn't a lie. It wasn't really all the truth either.

He didn't really want them to know the full truth. He felt like a coward taking the easy way out when he accepted the contract. He could have died trying to kill the vampire, but he couldn't leave his nephews behind when he knew there was no chance of winning. He also didn't want to scare them about there being vampires out there that they would never be strong enough to kill or about the contract. He decided to keep the explanation to a minimum.

"He won't hurt us or any other humans while he is with us. He has extensive knowledge of magical and dark creatures; He will be useful to us." He needed them to accept the situation.

"Okay." Fili sounded a bit nasally, "Even if that's true, why would he choose to help us." Fili was getting good at this suspicion thing. "He's a vampire. We're hunters. We hunt vampires." He said emphasizing almost every word.

"He doesn't seem to mind helping us kill them." He probably shouldn't mention that it cuts down on competition.

"So, what? He's just helping us out of the goodness of his heart?" Kili scoffed skeptically. "What does he get out of it?"

"We don't hunt him." Also technically true, even if it does give the wrong impression.

"So . . you agreed to let him live . . as long as he helps us slay other vampires?" Fili looked both confused and skeptical.

Just then one of the serving girls brought out his meal. Thorin waited until she left to respond. "Something like that." He mumbled.

Both boys were now looking at him skeptically. "So," Kili dragged the word out, "what is he going to eat?"

Thorin froze with a fork halfway to his mouth. He had no idea. How was the vampire supposed to feed if he wasn't allowed to hurt humans? Had the contract said anything about that? Had he been duped? Surely the vampire wouldn't agree to not eat at all. He would have to talk to the vampire about it.

"It doesn't matter." He had to tell the boys something. "As long as he's not feeding on humans, it's not our problem."

The boys looked at each other before looking back to him. "How is he supposed to travel with us?
Are we gonna only travel at night from now on? There aren't inns all along the road." Fili always was the practical one.

Thorin took out the two golden coins from his pocket. "That's what the cloaks are for." He set them on the table. "You heard him. Two of the thickest, largest cloaks you can find. And buy us another horse. You can use whatever's left over for any supplies we may need."

"A vampire on a horse?" Kili scrunched up his nose. "Do vampires even ride horses?"

Thorin's instinctive answer was 'no,' but he wasn't so sure anymore. "It's not for him; its for packs. And his name is Master Baggins." He looked around the room then at them significantly. "We don't want to be overheard saying . . . that."

Fili scoffed. "Why? You afraid someone will try to stake him?" Kili scoffed at the bad joke.

"He won't be the only one they stake if people find out he's with us." Thorin warned lowly.

The boys sombered up at that. "Just another reason why he shouldn't be with us." Kili mumbled.

"But he is, so watch your tongues." Thorin warned again. "Now, go. Get what we need."

"What are you going to do, Uncle?" Fili asked.

"I'm going to finish eating and go get some rest. I haven't slept since the night before I left for the castle."

Kili looked like he wanted to say something, but Fili pulled him up with him and ushered him out the door.

Once the boys were gone Thorin finished eating then headed back to their room. He had considered asking for a hot bath to be prepared but wasn't sure how that would work with a vampire in the room. So, he resigned himself to a sponge bath before bed.

When he got to the room, there was enough light peeking through the coverings over the window to see without lighting the lamp. He looked around. He wasn't sure what he was expecting but a well covered lump on the bed wasn't it. He huffed at the strange vampire. He got himself cleaned up and ready for bed before climbing into the bed nearest the window.

He briefly wondered at the fact that he was getting ready to sleep in the same room as a vampire, but was too tired to dwell on it. It was only minutes before he was sound asleep.

~Fili & Kili~

Fili and Kili were wandering around the town. They had already bought the cloaks and the horse and were now just killing time. They had already checked out all the shops and bought what they needed. They still had some money left over, so they had bought some sweetbreads, which they were now eating.

"Do you think Uncle could be enchanted?" Kili asked out of the blue.

Fili looked at him but considered his question. "He doesn't really act enchanted."

"So, you don't think anything strange is going on?"

"Oh, something strange is definitely going on." Fili said with certainty. "Uncle left to kill the vam. . . , Master Baggins . . . for free! He was gone far longer than usual: almost two full days. And then he
just comes back with this 'Master Baggins' in tow as a partner. No, something is definitely going on."

Kili licked the crumbs off his fingers. "If not enchantment, then what? Blackmail? Trickery of some sort?"

"I don't know." Fili shook his head. "Even the Hunter's Collective doesn't know a whole lot about the dark creatures. We know that some are capable of magic but most accounts seem to be little more than parlor tricks. If this is some kind of enchantment or spell, it's on level no one's ever seen before . . . or at least never lived to tell about."

Kili thought in silence for a few minutes before replying. "Well, we know one thing."

"What's that?"

"He's a 'you-know-what.' His kind all share at least one weakness. And he's supposed to be traveling with us from now on . . . even during the day." Kili hinted.

"The sun." Fili was catching on to what his brother was suggesting.

"Sure. It would be easy to . . . say . . . accidentally pull the cloaks off . . . in the middle of the day."

"He'd be dead before he could retaliate." Fili concluded.

"And Uncle would be free from whatever spell, enchantment, trick or whatever it is that's holding him back."

This might actually work. "But Uncle seemed rather defensive of him. Maybe whatever it is causes Uncle to protect him. If he finds out what we're trying to do, it could backfire." Their uncle always taught them to think out their plans fully to avoid failures.

"Then we just have to make sure it looks like an accident." Kili shrugged.

"This could work. I've never heard of their magic lasting beyond their death. If he dies, whatever he did should come to an end and Uncle should go back to normal."

"So, were gonna do it then?" Kili wanted to be sure.

"We'll do it! Uncle would never want to be tied to a . . . 'you-know-what.'"

Their minds made up, they went about killing time with a new purpose. Now, they only needed to wait for an opportunity.

～Thorin～

Thorin slept soundly until the boys returned shortly after sun down. He awoke to the sound of them coming in the door. He rubbed a hand down his face. "What time is it?"

"Almost an hour past sundown." Answered Fili.

Thorin got up and walked to the water basin to wash his face.

"Umm, Uncle?" Kili started uncertainly. "Did you know your vampire's downstairs?"

Thorin twisted around before he could even finish drying his face and checked the other bed. Sure enough, it was empty. He threw on his boots and outer tunic and strapped on his sword. "Show me." He demanded.
The boys led him down to the dining hall and pointed him over to a crowded table. The boys followed him as he cautiously approached the lively table. He walked up behind his -no, the- vampire. His sleeves were rolled up and he was holding a hand of cards and smoking his pipe.

"I see your wager and raise you five silvers." The vampire threw five silvers to the center of the table will puffing on his pipe. There were various responses raised around the table.

Thorin didn't stop until he was looming over the vampire. "What are you doing?"

Master Baggins looked up at him with a grin, not bothering to to turn around. "Playing cards. You?"

Of course he was. "We have things to discuss." Thorin needed to pull him away before his true nature was revealed.

"Alright, alright. Let me finish this hand." He said without bothering to look up again.

Thorin reluctantly led the boys over to another table and they ordered a late dinner. Several minutes later, there was a collection of loud groans as the game ended and the vampire claimed his winnings. He sauntered over to their table pocketing his coins. He sat himself down next to Thorin with a lopsided grin. "So, what things do we have to discuss, oh great leader?"

"How about you playing cards for one." Thorin looked at him. This was his first time seeing him in decent light. He had the greenest eyes Thorin had ever seen and his curls were a soft honeyed gold. His clothes were indeed colorful. His waistcoat was a daffodil yellow and his coat and cravat were a matching dark emerald green. They were faded with age, but there was no mistaking that they were well made with fine fabrics. Even in the worn state of his cloths, he looked every bit the charming gentleman.

"What's wrong with playing cards?" He asked innocently.

"It's not so much what you were doing as who you were doing it with." Thorin warned subtly.

"That's not very nice. They were perfectly fine gentleman. You shouldn't be so judgmental." The vampire snarked back. "Besides, I can't exactly blend in if I don't socialize, can I? No need to invite suspicion."

Thorin gave him a half-hearted glare. He knew he had a point, though it was hardly likely anyone would suspect him. 'Vampire' would be anyone's last guess going by his appearance. Even his nephews were looking increasingly confused over the new addition to their group. "I just think you should be careful. If anyone finds out, we are all in trouble."

"I've been around a while. I know what I'm doing." He responded lowly as if someone would overhear.

Not even a moment later, a serving girl walked up with their meals. "Is there something I can get you, sir?" She asked the vampire.

He put on his most charming smile. "Yes, actually. I don't suppose you serve tea in this fine establishment?" His voice came out soft and smooth, as sweet as honey.

The girl looked at him more fully at the sound of his voice and flushed. "S-sorry. I-I'm afraid we don't serve tea." She stammered out.

"In that case, a cup of your hottest water will do."
"Of course, I'll bring it right out."

"Thank you, that would be lovely." He said with a wink. He gave a small smirk as she bustled away in a fluster.

The boys were eyeing the vampire suspiciously. Thorin was fighting down a ridiculous wave of jealousy. "You treat everyone that way?" He tried to keep the growl out of his voice.

Master Baggins looked at him and broke out into a playful grin. "Are you jealous?"

"I have no reason to be jealous." The man was a vampire, even if he was a charming, attractive, and intelligent vampire. He was still a vampire.

"Of course you don't." Master Baggins replied in all seriousness. "I was never much interested in lasses." He said with a wink at Thorin. "As to your question, only humans. And, typically only humans who don't know what I am. I find that charmed people are much less likely to be suspicious people." He said quietly.

That made dangerous sense. How many creatures could be prowling amidst humans going completely unnoticed simply because they were sociable and charming. "Is that common for your kind?" He was suddenly concerned about all the vampires he might have been missing all this time.

"Not overly. The young bloods don't have the self-control for it and most of the old bloods have alternative means of feeding. It's not really a preferred hunting method." He informed dutifully.

The serving girl returned with his hot water and his charming smile was back as he thanked her. After she left, he pulled a small paper pouch out of his pocket and ripped it open. He tugged out a small aromatic mesh bag filled with tea leaves and plopped it into his cup. He leaned over his cup and breathed in the fragrant steam, sighing in contentment.

Thorin couldn't help his amusement. "You brought your tea with you?"

"Of course I did. Tea and pipe weed are my staples. What else did you think I had in my bag? It's not like I need anything else."

Thorin huffed a small laugh. "You are so strange."

"How rude!" He replied with no real heat. "I prefer eccentric." He said with an uppity sniff.

The boys had been watching the exchanges in mostly confused silence. Unsurprisingly, it was Kili who broke it. "You're drinking tea."

Thorin smirked, at least he wasn't the only one thrown off by it.

The vampire looked at the boy blankly. "I see you have your uncle's observation skills." Thorin coughed into his mug a bit.

"Really?" Clearly, Kili thought that was a compliment.

Fili picked up the thought for his brother who was momentarily distracted. "Va. 'you' . . can't drink tea." He caught himself.


"What?" The boys spoke over each other.
Thorin was just glad he wasn't the lost one this time. He decided to keep quiet on the sidelines. He had wondered about this too.

"You're a va . . . you know. " Kili said like it explained everything.

"Yes. And?"

"Everyone knows that . . . 'your kind' . . only eats or drinks . . 'you know.'" Fili tried to avoid key words and still get his point across.

"Blood, you mean." Master Baggins said unimpressed then sighed. He looked over at Thorin, who met his eyes cautiously, then looked at Thorin's plate before snatching a small piece of buttered bread and popping it into his mouth.

All three of them gaped at him (though Thorin was admittedly gaping for a different reason) while he briefly chewed then swallowed. The vampire washed down his stolen morsel with an unconcerned sip of his tea.

The boys were nearly speechless. "But . . . how?" Kili articulated intelligently.

"Just because I get no nutritional benefit from it, doesn't mean I can't eat it." He lifted his tea indicatively. "Unlike . . 'some,' I can still taste 'normal' foods, but for many it tastes like eating dirt. And why would you eat dirt, when you can eat gourmet?" he lifted an eyebrow in challenge.

"Personally, I only bother eating 'normal' food when it's something I especially like . . like tea."

Thorin and his nephews considered the new information. "So, you can eat it, but it doesn't do anything for your hunger." Thorin summarized.

The vampire just nodded and took another sip of his tea.

They've only had the contract a day and Thorin was already relearning everything he thought he knew as a hunter.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took a little while. My four month old isn't letting me sleep much. I was actually planning to get them to Ered Luin in this chapter, but, obviously, that didn't happen. Maybe the next one? I thought this chapter came out fine, but I'm a bit sleep deprived. Let me know what you think?
A Confession

Chapter Notes

So, I noticed that I had them riding ponies in the last chapter. In my head, I was still thinking they were dwarves (and a hobbit), but they are not. In this AU, everyone is human unless I reveal otherwise. Just so we're clear. So, if you read the previous chapter before I corrected it, you will notice that they have horses now, not ponies.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thorin had informed the others over dinner that they would be moving out that night and heading to Belegost. But first, they were to get a few hours of sleep in. He figured the best bet would be to spend half the day and half the night sleeping and spend the other halves traveling. That way the vampire could rest some of the day and they could rest some of the night.

The others would only go to bed, though, after Master Baggins had promised not to wander off. So, he had opened the window and sat by it, smoking his pipe. When the others had awoken and gotten their things around to leave, they went to retrieve their horses and set out back down the East Road.

They had ridden for several hours (well, Thorin and his nephews had, the vampire seemed to manage to stay beside them with little effort regardless of how fast they went) and the sunrise was an hour away at the most, when Thorin had finally had enough and decided to confront the vampire. They had been pushing the horses hard, trying to make the most of what was left of the night, so Thorin called for his nephews to dismount so the horses could rest.

He caught up and walked up next to the vampire, his nephews following several feet behind. "What have you done to me?" He accused quietly.

Master Baggins looked over at him confused. "Pardon?"

"My arm has been itching all night and it keeps getting worse." He said quietly to keep his nephews from overhearing.

Master Baggins looked become exasperated on top of confused for a quick second before serious understanding dawned on his face. "You mean the contract."

Thorin looked back to see if his nephews were listening. They seemed to be absorbed in their own quiet conversation. "Yes. Why is it itching?"

"That, my dear hunter, is because your nephews are plotting to kill me when the sun comes up and you could have done something to prevent it." He said thoroughly unimpressed.

"What? How do you know that?"

"Because I can hear them whispering about it. They must think that they are rescuing you somehow." He concluded not overly concerned.

"Why would that make my arm itch? I didn't do anything to suggest that they should off you. Why would I be held accountable for that." Thorin was starting to understand the whole 'more complicated than it sounds' bit now.
"Because, in this case, it's what you didn't say that matters. Your nephews are probably convinced you are under my spell and need them to free you. Which means, that you did not tell them what really happened. So, since their actions are being taken for your sake and you could have prevented it by explaining the situation better, you are held responsible for their intent. The itch is a warning, so you can prevent the cause and spare yourself." He explained patiently.

Thorin cursed under his breath. Of course his nephews couldn't just trust him. He had taught them better than that. He looked over the vampire. "You don't look overly concerned."

The vampire scoffed. "Please. I haven't lived this long to be offed by a couple of kids."

"What are they planning?"

"Something with the cloaks. Does it matter? Just go clear things up and you'll have nothing to worry about."

"If I try to stop them, they'll just think I'm under your control even more." How could Thorin stop them without making them more suspicious?

"Have you considered just telling them the truth?"

"What? That I made a deal with a vampire because I couldn't win?" He spit out. He looked back to check on the boys again. They were stealing glances at the two of them now but he couldn't tell if they overheard.

"They didn't hear you."

Thorin looked back at the vampire.

Master Baggins gave him a small smile of understanding. "I would think that surviving for the sake of your nephews is more honorable than dying for your pride." he said quietly. "And admitting your weakness takes far more courage than faking strength. Your nephews will not think any less of you for telling them the truth."

Thorin's anger flared hot and died just as quickly as the vampire was speaking. Everything that the vampire said was true. At least, he hoped the last part would be true. His words cut deep like a knife, but at the same time were like a soothing balm to a gaping wound. It was a strange feeling. Thorin wasn't very good with feelings, especially such complicated ones. He wasn't sure how to respond.

"If you are going to talk to them you might want to do it soon. The sun is starting to come up."

Master Baggins cut through his thoughts.

Thorin looked up. The sky was indeed starting to get lighter. He sighed. Might as well get it over with. "Let's take a break!"

They led their horses off the road and let them graze.

"Fili! Kili! We need to talk." He called them over.

The boys came to stand near their uncle, curious. The vampire politely kept his distance to let them talk.

Thorin wasn't sure how he could convince them that he wasn't trapped in the vampire's power, but, if they got him killed with their antics, the contract would have been for nothing. "I may have . . left out . . some things . . about when I was gone." He started haltingly. He was terrible at this.
The boys looked at each other before briefly glancing at the vampire and returning their attention to their uncle. "Like what uncle?" Fili asked.

Thorin hesitated. "I wasn't strong enough to kill the vampire." Best to just come out with it.

The boys looked at him in surprise. "What?"

"I had no chance at beating him, but he wasn't interested in killing me either." He continued. "But, I couldn't just leave either, so he offered me a deal... and I took it."

"Did you even try?" Kili looked like he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"How do we know he's not manipulating you to say these things?" Fili, as usual, was a bit more on track.

Kili's question had hurt, though, he couldn't honestly say he had tried all that hard. All he did was have tea with the vampire. Sure, he had pointed his crossbow at him, but he never fired it. "He has no need to manipulate me. He gains nothing from doing so and we have a contract, so I can't kill him."

"What kind of contract?" Kili squinted his eyes at him suspiciously.

"It's a mutual 'do no harm' contract. I can't kill him and he can't kill humans."

"What happens if you break the contract?" Fili picked up.

"It's a blood contract. Breaking it means death."

"I hate to interrupt but the sun is coming up." The vampire yelled softly over to them.

"Why didn't you tell us before?" Kili sounded a bit hurt.

Thorin wished he had. He cleared his throat. "I didn't want you to think badly of me and I didn't want to worry you."

"For what?" Kili was incredulous "Staying alive?"

"Those cloaks would be much appreciated, anytime now!" Master Baggins interrupted again a little louder this time.

"Uncle, you're the only real family we have left. You are more important than any revenge." Fili reassured his uncle.

Thorin felt like a weight had been taken off him. But the contract on his arm was starting to burn now. He rubbed at his arm. Why hadn't his confession worked?

"This is all a very lovely and touching family scene," Master Baggins barged into their midst, "but the sun is moments from coming over that hill and I still have no cloak! Cloaks! Now! Please!" He added politely.

Kili looked like he was about to retrieve them when Fili spoke up. "No."

"What?" "I beg your pardon?" Thorin and the vampire spoke over each other.

"The contract says 'you' can't kill him, Uncle. And he can't kill us. So, we can do it for you. And all we have to do... is nothing."
"It doesn't work that way, Fili. Give him the cloaks." His arm felt on fire now. "Quickly!" He rolled up his sleeve trying to find relief.

The boys startled at his shout and looked at his arm as he revealed it. The contract words were glowing a bright red.

"Uncle?" Kili was scared.

Fili grabbed his brother. "Kili! The cloaks!"

The sun was just starting to peek over the hill as Kili bolted for the horses and started to rip off the pack that he had buried the cloaks in.

Thorin's arm started to smoke as the flesh around the words was seared by the contract's heat. He grunted, grabbing his arm near the elbow trying to cut off the pain.

Master Baggins was looking a deathly pale. He huffed and mumbled something about the slowness of humans.

Fili was terrified and desperate now. "Uncle!"

Suddenly, the burning eased back into something more tolerable and Thorin heaved a sigh in relief. Kili was just running back with the cloaks and stopped next to Fili. They both gaped at him.

He was still breathing hard from the pain. "What? What is it?"

"Uncle," Fili started "Your coat." Kili finished.

Thorin looked down at himself. His coat was gone and so were all the weapons that he wore over it. He looked around. His weapons were all laying around his feet discarded. His gaze traveled out looking for his missing coat. He found it several feet away, dropped in a heap.

All three of them were staring at it in confusion. Thorin was wearing it just a moment ago. He remembered pulling up the sleeves so he could see his arm. And then he just . . . wasn't. He looked at his coat more closely. It was bulging more than it should have been. He looked around again, his nephews following his lead though they weren't quite sure what they were looking for.

The sun was visible over the horizon and there was no vampire in sight. He looked at his coat again. Was it possible? He knew vampires were fast, but to remove Thorin's weapons and coat so fast that he wasn't even aware it was happening. It happened in a blink of an eye. If the vampire could move that fast, he really never did have a chance.

His arm was back to just an irritating itch, thought his flesh was still tender from the scorching. He cautiously walked over to his coat. "Master Baggins?" he called softly.

At first there was no reply. But after he called again, the coat shifted. "The cloaks." Came a weak reply.

Thorin turned to look at his nephews. They seemed to have made the same connections and were staring in poorly concealed fear. He held out his hand, "The cloaks, Kili."

For a moment, his armed burned again as he watched hesitation and doubt cross his nephew's face. "If you kill him, you will kill me as well."

That seemed to make up his nephew's mind and he handed over the cloaks.
Thorin took the first one and fanned it out over the lump that was the vampire. It was a very large cloak, twice the size of his own coat, fur lined and oil treated to keep the weather out. It was definitely a winter cloak meant for a big man. He dropped the cloak and let it rest over the vampire.

After a few seconds, the vampire started shifting and moving under the cloaks. He finally seemed to get it situated to his satisfaction and stood up. It was huge on him. The sleeves down past his knees and the hood hung so low it overlapped with the top of the front of the cloak. He was holding it tightly closed. "One is enough." He picked up Thorin's now discarded coat and handed it back.

"How did you do that?" He asked. "I didn't even feel it coming off."

"Carefully." Came the short reply.

Thorin looked him over. He looked more like a wraith than a vampire now. He wasn't moving. He figured he wasn't going to get much out of him while the sun was up. He looked at his nephews. They were looking unsettled. He slid his coat back on and started putting his weapons back on. "We might as well keep moving." If the boys had questions they could talk while they were on the move.

His nephews jerked into motion, rounding up the horses. They re-mounted and started to head back to the road. Once they reached the road, Thorin turned around to check on the vampire.

He was moving now, but not as fast as he had. He followed behind their horses, gliding like a silent wraith. His cloak trailed behind him; no part of him was visible. It was like the cloak itself had come to life.

"Would you like a horse?" Thorin offered him.

"No." said the vampire wraith.

"Will you be able to keep up while the sun is up?"

"I'll manage." The sun seemed to make for grumpy vampires.

"All right, then let's move."

Thorin led them down the road at a steady trot. As he said he would, the vampire managed to keep pace just behind them. They rode on until several hours after noon before they came to a bridge. It was an old stone bridge, well maintained since this was a merchants road. It was much better than the one Thorin had crossed to get to the vampire's castle. That one had barely been holding together. He came to a stop just before the bridge. "We'll stop here for the day."

They moved down the river a bit before dismounting and pulling out their supplies and making a small camp. The boys had been quiet since the . . . incident, but Thorin knew it was only a matter of time before they started asking questions. They still had some fresh fruit and bread from Bree, so they sat down with some for a late lunch. They were eating quietly when the questions finally started.

"How does it work, Uncle?" Started Fili. "The contract."

"It's a blood contract. We wrote and sealed it in our blood. Breaking it . . . well . . . you've already seen its effects." He answered somberly.

"Yeah, but why does it apply to us too?"

"Normally, it wouldn't. But, apparently, since I failed to explain the situation well, you thought you
needed to do it for my sake, and I was held accountable for it."

Kili had been quietly listening, but finally spoke up. "What does the contract say exactly?"

Thorin reached into the inner pocket he had stashed the original copy of their contracts in and pulled it out. He handed it to them. "This is the original copy."

Fili took the rolled up paper, opened it and started to read over it. Kili was reading over his shoulder. "It seems . . . simple." Observed Kili.

"It's obviously more complicated than it looks." grumbled Thorin.

"Why does his say only 'serious or permanent' harm?" Fili asked looking up at his uncle.

"What?"

Fili handed the paper back to his uncle so he could look at it. "On yours it just says 'harm,' which seems to imply any harm, but on his it only says 'serious or permanent harm.' Does that mean he's allowed to cause harm as long as it's not serious or permanent?"

Thorin looked over the contracts again with fresh eyes. Fili was right. How had he missed that? He looked over at the vampire. He was standing a little ways away. He had stopped there when they had dismounted and hadn't moved since. He suspected he'd not get a real answer out of the vampire while the sun was up. "I don't know." He finally confessed.

"You don't know?" Kili was confused.

"I didn't notice the wording before. I'll have to ask him about it."

Fili was watching him. "Aren't you angry that he tricked you."

Thorin wasn't sure he had the right to be angry. It's not like the vampire had changed it on him. He just hadn't noticed the wording. "He didn't do anything wrong. It was my fault I didn't read it carefully enough. It doesn't change anything. He still can't kill any humans and he can't do any lasting damage."

Kili looked disgusted. "What? Did you just forgive vampires for everything they've done to you? To us?"

"Of course not." Thorin growled. "But we are stuck with him now. It does no good to be hostile."

The boys huffed. They didn't look convinced. "We don't trust him. But we trust you, Uncle, so we'll follow your lead. But don't expect us to like him." Fili spoke for the both of them.

"I would never ask you to trust or like him, just tolerate him."

The boys reluctantly nodded in agreement. "So," Kili started after a few minutes of silence. "How are we going to get him across the river."

"What?" Thorin wasn't sure why was that was an issue.

"Oh yeah, I forgot. Vampires can't cross running water." Fili caught on.

Thorin had forgotten about that. But he'd already crossed this river with the vampire once before. "Apparently, that's another thing that the Hunter's Collective got wrong. We crossed this river coming from the castle and it didn't seem to effect him any."
The boys looked at the vampire then back to their uncle in consideration.

"Uncle . . it seems like. . " Fili started. "That everything we know about vampires is wrong! How have we even managed to kill them up till now?!" Kili finished.

Thorin thought about that. They couldn't be wrong about everything or they wouldn't be able to kill them. "Master Baggins seems to indicate that their are different levels or standards for vampires. Some things may be completely wrong, but others may only apply to some of them. This is why it will be beneficial to have him with us. He has an in-depth understanding of vampires."

The boys were starting to look a little more resigned. "Wash up in the river then try to get some rest. We'll rest here for up to half the night before we start out again." Thorin instructed.

The boys nodded. They worked their way to the river where they washed up (horsed around) for a while before heading to their bed rolls. The hadn't got much sleep the night before, so they were able to fall asleep easily enough.

Thorin was exhausted himself, but he couldn't leave his nephews (or even the vampire) unguarded in their vulnerable states, so he stayed up to keep watch. He watched over them the rest of the day occasionally checking on their vampire companion. He hadn't seemed to move a muscle the whole rest of the day. Thorin was staring off into space, his exhaustion catching up with him, when he felt a presence sit down beside him.

He was too tired to be startled, but he looked over to see who it was. He was expecting one of his nephews, but instead he found the vampire. He looked up and around in brief confusion. He hadn't even noticed that the sun had gone down. He looked back over at the vampire. He looked tired and more subdued than his usual animated self. "I'd thought you would want to sleep the rest of the day."

"I did."

"Standing up?"

"Yes?" He threw a tired smirk at Thorin. His playfulness was starting to come back.

"Wouldn't it have been better to lay down?"

"A lot of things would have been better." The vampire sighed out. "Honestly, it hurt to move, so I just tried to keep the movement to a minimum. I was kind of half asleep all day anyway, so I just kind of shut down when I stopped moving. Lying down wouldn't have made enough of a difference to matter."

Thorin was conflicted. He shouldn't care if the vampire was in pain, and yet, he didn't like it.

"It's fine. It actually wasn't nearly as bad as I was expecting it to be." Master Baggins dismissed. "The cloak worked nicely. Your nephews did well choosing it." He praised.

Thorin's pride swelled. "They have a good eye for quality."

They were silent for a few minutes before the vampire spoke up again. "I know you have questions."

Thorin looked at him in question.

"I was sort of listening." He said as explanation. "But I think it might be best to wait until we get to an inn to talk. I won't be very talkative during the day and you need to get some sleep." He paused. "In fact, I have a proposition in regards to that."
"Not another blood contract?" Thorin gruffly teased side-eyeing him.

Master Baggins looked at him in surprise. "No, no. Just a friendly little agreement." He recovered with a playful smile.

"And what would that be?"

"I think it would be best to go back to your normal traveling patterns. I can't rest properly above ground, so it doesn't really matter if we are moving or not for me. And I know that you three will rest best at night. I will watch over you three at night while you rest, and you can keep an eye out for me during the day." He proposed.

Thorin knew it would be better for them to be able to rest at night, but wasn't sure how he felt about leaving their safety in a vampire's hands. "When will you sleep?"

"Vampires don't sleep for the same reasons as humans. Under ideal conditions, I can go years without sleeping. These are certainly not ideal conditions, but I can still last several weeks at a time. I will be fine until we make it to Ered Luin. There's no need for you to go without sleep for my sake."

Thorin thought it over. "You are asking me to trust you, with my life. . with my nephew's lives."

"I am proposing a mutual agreement based on what is best for both of us. You are better equipped for day watch and I am better equipped for night watch. As you told your nephews, you dying offers me no benefits."

"Nor any complications." Thorin accused.

"Neither does watching over you at night. The greatest risk it poses is boredom." Master Baggins countered. "Besides, I'm not asking you to do anything I'm not willing to do myself."

Thorin tried to mull over it, but was too tired to really focus.

Master Baggins must have noticed. "How about we use tonight as a trial run? Get some sleep. I'll keep watch." He got up and walked over to his bag pulling out his pipe and some pipe weed.

It went against everything Thorin believed, but, as with the previous night, he was too tired to worry too much over it. He laid down in his bedroll, but, despite his best efforts to keep an eye on the vampire a little longer, he drifted off to sleep within seconds.

Chapter End Notes

Ugh! They were supposed to make it to Ered Luin in this chapter! Oh, well. Definitely the next one. Maybe. As usual, after reading through it 4-5 times, I'm not really sure how good it is anymore. So, let me know what you think?
I had to go back and make some changes again. I've been studying a map of Middle Earth and, apparently Ered Luin (or Blue Mountains) is just the name of the mountain region. So, they are now headed to Belegost in Ered Luin.

If you want to check out a good Middle Earth map, I recommend this site: Map of Middle Earth

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Thorin woke up, it was about an hour before sunrise. He sat up sleepily surveying the camp. Everything was still as it was, the vampire hadn't turned on them at least.

"Good morning." He was greeted by said vampire, "It's about time you woke up. Your nephews have been glaring daggers at me for hours."

Thorin looked over at him. He was sitting only a couple feet away from Thorin's bedroll. "What did you do?" His voice was still rough from sleep.

The vampire stared at him, his pipe sitting between his lips. His expression was indiscernible, but Thorin could have sworn he saw the vamp's pupils dilate as he watched him.

"I think it's more about what I am rather than what I did." The vamp recovered. "But 'trapping' you with a blood contract probably didn't help my defense, though I doubt they would have cared for me anyway."

"No, I suspect they are more upset about what you did. Good luck with that, by the way." Before Thorin could ask what it was he did, the vampire got up and walked off.

Thorin stood up and stretched out all the kinks that come from sleeping on the ground. Before he could even get his bedroll packed up, his nephews were stalking over, still occasionally throwing scalding glares and the vamp.

"Uncle," Fili started. "We thought we were going to set out earlier."

"We were." He answered gruffly. "But Master Baggins assured me it makes no difference when we travel since he can't get underground to rest. So, we will be resuming our normal traveling patterns."

Kili scrunched up his nose at that. "Why does he need to be underground for that?"

"Because vampires need to be underground to rest properly."

The boys briefly considered that before Fili spoke up again. "Alright, but why did you let the vampire," he spit out the word, "keep watch. I thought you said we shouldn't trust him."

"I said, I would never ask you to trust him. I trust him to look out for his own interests and his current interest seems to be traveling with us, so it would go against his interests to see us come to harm."

Thorin tried to reason with them.
"And who's to say he wouldn't change his mind in the middle of the night?"

Thorin sighed. "Everything seems to be fine." He mumbled lacking any real defense to that.

"Why didn't you just wake us up? We could have taken over watch." Asked Kili.

"You mean like how you were watching the night when you lost the horses?"

"That happened months ago!" Kili defended loudly. "And it happened one time!" Fili added. "You've let us keep watch since then." Kili defended

"Yes, because I can't very well stay awake forever, can I?. That still doesn't mean you are qualified to judge someone else's reliability." He barked back at them.

The boys looked sufficiently chastised. "Now, eat quickly and get packed. We leave as soon as we're ready."

The boys were sulking, so the rest of the morning passed quietly. They packed up and Master Baggins retreated to under his cloak as the sun rose. Once they were ready, they set out on the road again.

They road on throughout the day without incident, Master Baggins following silently behind them. Thorin didn't push them as hard as he had the first day, knowing they had the whole day for travel. They ate lunch on horseback, so Thorin let them stop shortly before sundown to make dinner and camp for the night.

Later, after they had eaten and Master Baggins had rejoined them, Thorin sought out their resident vampire. He was sitting on a hill a little ways from the camp already enjoying a pipe.

"I accept your proposal." Thorin said without preamble.

Master Baggins looked up at him. He looked tired. "Alright." He answered mildly, but didn't offer any more in the way of conversation.

Thorin debated joining the vampire for a smoke before deciding against it and heading over to his bedroll for the night. His nephews looked uneasy, but followed his example.

The next two days followed the same pattern without any incidents. Thorin was feeling much better rested (or as well rested as one can be sleeping on the hard ground) now that he had several full nights of sleep.

He actually felt better than he had in a while when on the road, since he always had to keep watch or sleep lightly when it was just him and his nephews. For some reason, he had had no problem trusting their safety to the vampire for the nights. He wasn't quite willing to think too hard about why that was yet though.

Since he was feeling more rested, he decided he would approach Master Baggins with one of his many questions tonight before heading to his bedroll. So, after they had made camp and eaten dinner, he sought out the vampire again.

He sat down beside the smoking vampire and asked his question (without preamble, of course). "Why does your contract say only 'serious or permanent' harm?"

Master Baggins looked over and considered him. He had been looking more and more tired with each passing day and, subsequently been less and less talkative in the evenings.
"I still need to eat," He said with a shrug, "though it's really just for emergencies."

It took Thorin a moment to process what the vampire had just said. "You can feed without causing harm?" If that was the case, then why didn't all vampires do that.

"Of course not. That's way it says only 'serious or permanent' harm. A bite is a bite, but I don't have to kill to eat and I can heal a bite wound easily enough." He shrugged again.

"Won't that turn them into vampires?"

Master Baggins looked at him surprised. "Is that how you think it works? Good gracious no! If that was the case, there would be more vampires than you could keep up with!"

Thorin felt a flash of anger. "If vampires can feed without killing, then why don't they?"

"Many do!" The vampire responded defensively.

"But not all. Why do they kill when they don't have to?" Thorin felt justified in his anger. He knew what it was to lose loved ones to a vampire's appetite.

"Why do you?!?" The vampire challenged with equal volume.

The boys had noticed the spat by now and were surreptitiously listening in on them.

Thorin was taken aback. "I don't kill . . ."

"You're a hunter. You kill all the time." The vampire cut him off. "You just don't think they count because they aren't human. Well, if that's how it works than human lives don't count for vampires. In fact, to many vampires, humans are no different than cattle are for humans."

Thorin wanted to argue with that but couldn't think of a valid argument. "I do it to protect people." He replied even if it was a bit weak.

"Really? Then why did you come to my castle?" The vampire had lost his steam just as Thorin did. "I wasn't bothering anyone. Do I deserve to die simply because I have the potential to hurt someone in the future?"

Thorin wanted to say yes, but didn't everyone have that potential, even he could hurt and kill another human if he chose to. "You expect me to believe you have never killed a human?"

"Of course not. You expect me to believe that you've never killed a cow, or a deer, or a goat, or whatever it is humans fancy eating these days." He answered without heat and a wave of his hand.

"We kill to eat. We eat to live." Thorin replied before thinking through what he was saying.

The vampire raised an eyebrow at him. "So do we."

"You said you don't have to kill to eat though." He tried to argue.

"We don't, but neither do you. Humans can live without eating meat well enough. And humans don't only kill to eat, they kill for sport or profit often enough. You don't go around sentencing them to death do you?"

Thorin felt his argument was getting weaker and weaker. "It's still different. Humans are beings capable of reason. We are greater than mere animals."
"So, it's okay to kill something if you are better than it." Master Baggins said unimpressed. "You just justified all vampires, we are superior in almost every aspect."

Thorin was sure that was a matter of opinion. "Then you are saying it should be okay for vampires to kill humans as they please."

"I didn't say that. You did, based on your own reasoning. I never said I approved of those vampires who kill humans. I just think it's rather hypocritical for humans to judge us by standards they themselves fail to live up to."

"But you don't think humans should fight back or defend ourselves." Thorin challenged.

"I didn't say that either. If humans are being hunted and killed by a vampire, they have every right to defend themselves. Does that mean they have the right to label and sentence every vampire to death for the actions of one or a few? I think not."

Thorin reluctantly thought that over. Instinctively, he believed all vampires should die, but he knew he was biased against them.

"The truth of the matter is, there are a lot more vampires in the world than you realize. I can name several large covens off the top of my head. Most of the vampires you end up slaying have it coming. But most vampires live discreetly, whether they kill their victims or not."

"You're right. Most vampires think very little of killing humans. Even most who do not kill their victims only do so to avoid the inconvenience of being noticed. But, believe it or not, I know of at least one coven who condemns the killing of humans for any reason besides self-defense, and even that is frowned upon."

Thorin didn't believe it, but a part of him desperately wanted this vampire to be one of them. "And you? Where do you stand on it all?"

Master Baggins cleaned out his pipe. "I don't really have any business taking any kind of stand on the matter." He paused. "I don't . . . enjoy killing." He said softly. "But sometimes people, even vampires, have to do things they don't enjoy."

Thorin was torn between anger and sympathy. The vampire all but admitted he had killed humans, but, at the same time, he seemed so . . . sorrowed by it.

"Not that it makes any difference. Our blood contract prevents me from killing any humans, remember?" He reminded Thorin with forced cheer.

"Right." Thorin replied absently, caught up in his own confusing emotions.

Master Baggins got up and brushed himself off. "I'm going to scout around a bit, make sure the area is clear. You should go get some sleep."

When Thorin looked up to respond, the vampire was gone. After a few more minutes of processing everything they had talked about, he got up and headed over to his bedroll.

He suspected that, if he wasn't careful, this vampire would completely change the way he saw and understood things, but he wasn't ready to let go of his revenge just yet.

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They spent the next five days keeping up a steady pace. Thorin hadn't approached the vampire for
any more conversations. Partly because he was still coming to terms with the last one and partly because the vampire looked exhausted and not particularly up to talking.

The only incident of note they encountered along the way was the passing by of a trading caravan. Thorin had had to instruct the sleep-walking vampire to stay to the side behind their horses so as to attract as little attention as possible.

The vampire did as told and they got by the caravan with no problems. It was the fifth evening since Thorin's conversation with the vampire and they were maybe fifteen minutes away from Nogrod.

Nogrod was only a days ride south of Belegost, but as they couldn't make it to Belegost that night, they decided staying at an inn was preferable to sleeping on the ground.

Thorin stopped them just out of sight of the large town. "We will wait here until sundown."

"Why sundown?" Asked Kili.

"The vampire is too suspicious in that cloak, and it might be best that he be fully conscious when we enter he town." Thorin explained.

The boys looked skeptical, but kept silent. They rested and ate a bit while waiting for the sun to go down. About an hour later, they were rejoined by a conscious vampire.

"Nogrod is it?" He asked tiredly. "An inn then? Shall we be off?"

Thorin and the boys remounted and they headed for the town, the vampire easily keeping up. They slowed down to a walk as they approached the town limits to avoid suspicion (since the vampire was keeping pace with their horses).

They had no problems getting into town and, soon after, found a stable to house their horses for the night. Now on foot, they headed towards the business district of the town.

Though it was after dark, it still wasn't all that late, so there was still a good number of people out and about. Fortunately, travelers were nothing unusual, the Thorin's little group didn't attract any attention.

Thorin was leading the way, his nephews right behind him and the vampire a little ways back bringing up the rear. They were walking past a series of small shops, all closed up for the night, just passing a small alleyway, when Thorin faltered in confusion.

He could have sworn he had just brushed up against someone, but there was no one but his nephews anywhere near him.

Just then he heard a dull thump and string of curses. He looked around and noticed the vampire a little ways down the alley. He and the boys rushed over to see what was going on.

Master Baggins's hand was wrapped around the throat of a strange looking man and pushing him high against the shop wall so his feet were dangling in the air.

"Master Baggins!" Thorin barked in warning.

"Oh, relax. I'm not going to kill him." The vampire replied dismissively. "I just thought you might like your money back." He said as he reached into the man’s coat pocket and drew out Thorin's money pouch.
Thorin searched himself for his pouch in alarm while Master Baggins set the man back on his feet. Thorin glared at the thief, his search coming up empty and retrieved his money pouch from the vampire's outstretched hand.

"Hello, Nori. Up to the same old tricks, I see." Master Baggins said pleasantly.

"Well, if it ain't The Loner himself. What brings you to Nogrod?" Nori glanced at Thorin and his boys. "And with hunters no less."

"You know this thief?" Thorin interrupted, not sure how much Nori knew.

"Business. For your brothers. Both of them this time." The vampire answered Nori first to Thorin's annoyance. "I'm with them because . . well, reasons." Nori just raised a brow at that.

"This is Nori. Thief extraordinaire." Master Baggins introduced. "Nori, Mr. Oakenshield."

"The Oakenshield?" Nori raised both his braided brows, impressed.

"The very same." The vampire responded.

"And he's still alive?" Nori narrowed his eyes. "Does he know?"

"He knows about me, I haven't disclosed any other names . . yet." Master Baggins added quietly. "Walk with us? We were headed to an inn."

"The hunters' inn?"

"Of course," the vampire smiled audaciously, "where else would I stay?"

"And people think I live dangerously."

Thorin had had just about enough. Besides the fact that this 'Nori' was a thief, if the vampire knew him, then he must be a shady character. And he was stealing too much of the vampire's attention. What was there relationship anyway? "Why is he coming with us?"

"Because he's a walking 'most wanted' billboard. Nori's not just some petty thief. He deals chiefly with information. If you want to know what's going on, underworld or no, he's the one to talk to." Master Baggins explained.

Thorin wasn't impressed. "Then why is he stealing money pouches."

"For fun." Nori answered with a cheeky grin. "Hunters are always fun to mess with."

Thorin sent him another glare. "I don't remember seeing you anywhere near us."

Nori just widened his cheeky grin.

"Nori has some . . unique skills that are ideal for his . . 'career choice'." Master Baggins tried to explain politely, obviously withholding certain information. Thorin narrowed his eyes at the vampire suspiciously. "He is human . . right?"

Master Baggins nodded reassuringly, "He's human."

Nori just snickered like there was some inside joke no one else noticed.
Thorin was quite sure the vampire and his 'friend' were hiding something, but didn't push the issue since they were quickly approaching the hunter's inn.

To the hunters' surprise, it was Master Baggins who lead the way into the inn. He waltzed right up to the front door of the Staked Heart and let himself in as if he owned the place.

Nori was right behind the vampire in as if nothing was amiss. Thorin and his nephews followed after still baulking at the confidence of the vampire.

They stepped into a large bar and dining room filled with hunters and civilians alike just in time to see the vampire saunter up to the bar and ask for the innkeeper.

Nori was leaning against the wall by the door. Thorin sent him a glare as he went to stand behind the vampire. Just then a tallish rotund man walked up to the counter opposite the vampire.

"Bobby!" the vampire greeted energetically.

"Bilbo! I haven't seen you in these parts in a while. What brings you this way?" The innkeeper returned all friendliness.

Thorin's head was spinning (again). Master Baggins was a vampire. One who apparently stayed at hunters' inns like it was normal and knew the innkeepers on a first name basis. He listened in desperately trying to figure out this situation.

"Oh, you know. Business as usual." Master Baggins said with a nondescript wave of his hand. "I won't be in town long, possibly a day or two. I hope my room is available." He slid a gold coin discreetly across the counter to the innkeeper.

The innkeeper pocketed it just as discreetly. "Aye. Not many others who use it. Anything else I can get for you?" He said seemingly just noticing Thorin's oppressive presence hovering over the vampire.

"Ah, yes." Master Baggins answered as if he had forgotten about the hunter standing behind him. "A double room for my friends here, meals, and anything else they may need during their stay." He flicked the innkeeper another gold coin, mush less discreetly this time.

The innkeeper grabbed it out of the air and gave Thorin a wide welcoming grin, only belied by the suspicious glint in his eyes. "Any friend of Master Baggins is a friend of mine." He turned and grabbed a key off the wall before handing it to Thorin. "Welcome to the Staked Heart. Let me know if you need anything."

Thorin wondered at how much his world had turned upside down. He was traveling with a vampire. A vampire who had human connections (humans who knew what he was!) and stayed at inns meant for hunters, who knew innkeepers and had special rooms set aside for his use.

He was beginning to question everything he thought he knew about the world. He had only the polite, curly haired vampire to blame for it. But, even that didn't quite sit right.

Chapter End Notes

Notes: Backgrounds and Histories: Hunters' Inns

Background:
The hunters' inns are an unofficial chain of individually owned inns that target hunter patrons specifically. Hunters are considered to be dangerous, unruly, and/or troublemakers by many civilians and are thus often turned away from regular inns. Though hunters' inns will also service civilians, they were originally established to provide services for hunters who would otherwise be refused. They range in size and complexity from a simple, basic inn to a complex establishments offering multiple services, such as medical, repair, and stabling. They are easily identified by their hunting related names (The Staked Heart). All hunters' inns have at least two things in common: they are all hunter friendly and they all provide some kind of billboard for posting jobs for hunters. The size and complexity of an inn depends heavily on the size and traffic levels of the town its in.

History:
The first hunters' inn was established by an ex-hunter. Having lost his family to vampires, he dedicated his life to hunting and eradicating the beasts. When he became too old to hunt, he wanted to continue his legacy by supporting the younger hunters. As hunters were still very much looked down upon and feared at the time, he decided the best way to support them would be to start an inn where they would be welcomed and receive the services they needed. His inn soon became a hot spot for hunters and people looking to hire hunter's alike. A trend started and other enterprising individuals started opening hunters' inns in other towns, until all but the very smallest of settlements had a hunters' inn.
Thorin and his nephews stopped by their room to deposit their things before rejoined Master Baggins and Nori in the dining hall. They found the two huddled together quietly conversing over their drinks at a round corner table.

Thorin pointedly sat down beside Master Baggins, sending Nori a glare. The boys took up two of the remaining seats between Thorin and Nori.

Nori just grinned and snickered, finding Thorin's ire amusing, which only served to make Thorin even more irate.

"I hope your room was satisfactory. I'll raise a right stink if it wasn't for as much as I paid for it."

Master Baggins addressed Thorin.

"The room's great!" Kili piped up. "It has a bathtub and everything." He was clearly excited at the prospect.

"The room is fine," Thorin confirmed. "I didn't need you to pay for it." Thorin slid a gold coin over the table to the vampire, belatedly realizing he might have sounded ungrateful.

Master Baggins pocketed the coin without protest and, to Thorin's relief, didn't seem offended at all. "I know, but you'll get better service here if I pay for it." He took another sip of his tea.

A waitress came to their table and Thorin and his nephews ordered a hot meal. Thorin resumed their conversation after she left. "And the innkeeper? How do you know him?" Thorin felt foolish having to ask if the man was indeed a human, so he tried to get an answer by more round about questioning.

His efforts didn't seem to fool the vampire, since he chuckled and replied, "he's human. Just a human who loves money. And, yes, he knows or at least strongly suspects. But as long as I pay good and don't cause him any trouble, he's more than happy to pretend he doesn't."

Thorin almost couldn't believe what he was hearing. A human who willingly accommodated a vampire, just for the profit. Thorin knew the vampire wasn't here to hunt, but the innkeeper didn't. And at a hunters' inn, what was he thinking? Thorin started to tense in silent anger.

The vampire noticed. "It's not unusual. Many humans value profit over the safety of others. Just because someone is human, it doesn't mean they're good. One's race doesn't determine one's values or morals."

Thorin knew the vampire well enough now to hear the underlying message in his words. If humans weren't good just because they were human, then other beings weren't evil, just because they weren't human.

Thorin felt his anger diffuse as he considered that possibility. After all, there was no question as to whether there were evil humans. Did that mean there could be good vampires?

"So Nori, how are your brothers?" The vampire started conversationally.

"The usual. Dori's still nagging. Ori will be happy to see you."
"If I were you, I'd be concerned if Dori wasn't nagging." He paused. "I look forward to seeing Ori. I fear his talents get wasted for lack of recognition."

"That's cause you're the only one who has a clue what he's doing most the time. If people found out what he could do, they'd be breaking down our door on black magic charges."

Master Baggins nodded. "Well, I hope to give him the opportunity to use those talents. There are a few things that I need."

"He'll be excited about that."

"Has anyone been bothering you?"

Nori shrugged. "Just the usual. Blood suckers always think they're better than everyone else, no offense. And they like to make sure we know it."

"None taken. Anyone in particular?" Master Baggins asked with a dangerous sounding undertone.

"Nah, nothing you need to worry about." Nori shrugged off.

"I take it one of his brothers is your tailor." Thorin was tired of being left out of the conversation.

"Dori has a way with fabrics. His work is exquisite." The vampire praised.

"What about you?" Nori stole back the conversation. "No offense, but you look like death warmed over . . . no pun intended."

Thorin looked at the vampire in mild alarm. He didn't think he looked that bad, but looking at him now under the inn's light, he definitely looked a lot worse than he thought. He was very pale with large dark bags under his eyes. His whole being seemed to sag with exhaustion that wasn't there before.

"Yes, well. Traveling under the sun will do that to me apparently."

Nori started. "Why in Mahal's name are you traveling under the sun?! You could have made it here from your castle in one night easily." Nori scolded quietly trying not to attract attention. He looked at the vampire with narrowed eyes. "Is this some new form of self-torture?"

Master Baggins glared at him. "No, Nori. It's not self-torture. I agreed to travel with Mr. Oakenshield here and his nephews." He said gesturing respectively.

Nori didn't look convinced. "Why? You could have just met them here."

Before the vampire could answer Thorin interrupted. "It's none of your business." He said threateningly.

For the first time, Nori glared back.

"Drop it, Nori. I can make my own decisions." Master Baggins interceded.

Nori sat back in silence. The table was quiet until a waitress finally brought out their meals. He didn't look happy. "Fine. When you heading to Belegost?"

"Tomorrow morning." Thorin nearly growled.

Nori's glare turned more hostile. "Then I'll see you again in the morning." He said to the vampire
before getting up and stomping off.

"Don't mind him." Master Baggins tried to settle any ruffled feathers. "He'll get over it."

"You seem . . close." Thorin tried to mask the jealousy in his words.

"I've helped him and his brothers out a few times." The vampire shrugged. "I guess he feels indebted."

Thorin suspected there was more to it than that. There was fury in Nori's eyes. He wouldn't have gotten so worked up over mere obligation.

"When your done eating, I'll show you where my room is." Master Baggins said. "I doubt I'll be able to wake myself up in the morning, so I'll give you my key so you can come get me." He finished tiredly.

Thorin nodded and tried to rush through his dinner without being to obvious about it. The vampire had grown quiet and had long finished his tea. A few minutes later, he was following the vampire out of the dining hall.

The vampire led him down the hall towards the kitchen. He passed the kitchen and kept going. Soon they came to a heavy wooden door. The vampire opened it and proceed down the steps. He was leading Thorin into the cellar. He weaved through the shelves and barrels in the cellar until he came to another door.

This one was locked. Master Baggins pulled out a key and let himself in. The room was very small with only one small oil lamp hanging on the wall. The only piece of furniture was the bed, but it, at least, looked to have good quality bedding on it.

Master Baggins turned to him and handed him his key after lighting the lamp. "Lock it on the way out if you would, please."

Thorin nodded and hesitated before leaving. Something felt off about leaving the vampire down here alone, but he couldn't place what it was. "I'll be down in the morning."

The vampire nodded tiredly and Thorin turned to leave. He made sure to lock the door before returning to his nephews. Thorin asked some of the young working boys to fill their tub while the boys finished eating.

They all returned to their room, the boys excited about the bath. They took turns using the tub. Thorin let the boys go first, so it was cold by the time he got to it, but he didn't mind. He climbed into bed with a lot still on his mind, but fell asleep relatively fast regardless.

When he awoke the next morning, the boys were gone. Thorin found a note on their bed saying they had gone to breakfast. He was heading to the wash basin to freshen up when he heard the door close quietly.

He turned expecting to see his nephews, but saw no one. He suspiciously looked around the room. He was sure that he had heard the door. His gut told him he wasn't alone, but he couldn't see anything out of place.

He slowly turned back to the wash basin and started to wash up, every nerve prepared for an ambush. He wasn't disappointed, but neither was it quite what he was expecting.

"This is poisoned blade. One nick and you're dead, so I wouldn't move if I were you." A familiar
voice spoke quietly near his ear.

Thorin felt a thin line of a blade gently set against his neck and calmly froze. It would take patience to get out of this situation. "Nori, your parents ever teach you to knock?"

Nori chuckled darkly. "Funny. I didn't know you had a sense of humor."

Thorin wasn't sure why it was funny. "If you were here to kill me, we wouldn't be having this conversation. What do you want?"

"I want to know what you have on Master Baggins."

Thorin's stomach dropped. "What do you mean?"

"Don't play stupid with me." Nori growled a warning. "Many have entered that castle. Few have walked out. And none have seen his face and lived. Yet you, not only survive, but end up with a new vampire traveling buddy. Explain to me why that is."

Thorin hadn't known that, but it would explain why there was so little information about him. No one survived to tell the story. "I can't tell you what I don't know."

Thorin felt the blade get just a little bit closer to his skin. "What is that supposed to mean?" Nori nearly snapped.

Thorin took a calming breath. Nori better hope Thorin never got his hands on him. "It was his idea."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I don't care what you believe. Why don't you just ask him?"

"And why would he suggest such a thing."

"He said he was bored."

Nori went silent for a few seconds before huffing a breathy laugh. "Yeah, that does sound like him."

Thorin felt the blade against his throat disappear. He waited a second before slowly turning around to face the thief (no need to get himself killed by carelessness).

Nori was leaning against the opposite wall, playing with his dagger. "Why did you let him join you? I know about you. You hate nothing more than vampires."

Thorin had many excuses for his actions. But he couldn't help but feel like that was all they were. "I couldn't win."

Nori didn't look convinced. "So, you're saying it was your only option."

There was no way Thorin was going to tell him everything. "No, I could have died."

Nori studied him. "At least you know when your outdone. So, that's it. He lets you live, you let him travel with you."

Not really. There was a whole lot more to it than that, but Thorin didn't think his and the vampire's business was any of Nori's. "Pretty much."

"Funny." Nori said with no hint of amusement. "Cause you don't act like someone who's acting on
mere obligation."

Thorin could say the same of Nori. "What about you? Why do you care so much?"

"See! That there is what I'm talking about. You're radiating jealousy."

Thorin froze. Was he that transparent? Perhaps he had put on a bit of a show to ward Nori off, but he didn't think it would be translated as jealousy.

"At first, I thought it was the kind of jealousy a human might feel for a tool for making big money and that you were trying to ward me off to not risk your cash flow. Or there's the jealousy one feels for a rare and valuable object. But, I'm starting to get the feeling it's neither of those. Is it?"

Thorin sealed his lips and glared at Nori. He'd never admit it.

"In fact, it's starting to look an awful lot like the sort of jealousy one might have for a lover."

Thorin just crossed his arms and glared harder.

"I understand. He is awfully cute, one-of-a-kind, you might say. I'd be lying if I said I haven't had certain thoughts about him myself."

Thorin tensed in anger.

"But he's not some cute little lover you can drag around with you. He's a vampire. I would have expected you, of all people to remember that."

"I have forgotten nothing." Thorin growled back. "He's different than others."

"Why? Cause he's polite and drinks tea?" Nori scoffed.

Thorin bristled but didn't reply.

"Whatever. I don't care about your fantasies. And I'm not even sure you have an end game, but you hurt him and I'm gonna take it out of your hide." Nori threatened. "Now, I think you should take a day off and head out tomorrow morning. Let the vampire get some sleep." He strongly suggested.

"I don't take orders from you." Thorin threatened back.

"Whatever. Just remember what I said. I'll be watching." Just then he threw a dagger that went flying by mere inches from Thorin's head and imbedded in the wall.

Thorin shied away to dodge the knife and by the time he looked up again, Nori was gone. He looked around for him then turned to grab the dagger. That too was gone now. Thorin had had his doubts before, but now he was sure. There was no way that Nori was human.

He finished cleaning up and getting dressed, then headed down for breakfast. He mulled over everything that Nori had said while he ate. "I think we'll stay here for the day and leave tomorrow morning." He informed his nephews. "Take some time and see the town if you want." He knew his nephews didn't get much time for themselves, the break would be good for them too. "But stay together and keep your eyes and ears open."

The boys stared at him shocked, before breaking into smiles and taking off with a rushed "Yes Uncle!"

Thorin just shook his head at them. He finished eating and checked the jobs board. He didn't see
anything solid enough to warrant his attention. He went back to his room for a while, still thinking things over.

He had questions for the vampire, but he had decided to let him sleep. So he wandered around town instead. He and the boys went to bed early that night in order to get an early start the next morning.

Thorin woke up early and got his things around. It was still before sunrise, so he woke up the boys and got them moving, then he headed down to the cellar. He quietly let himself into the vampire's room.

It was pitch black and he fumbled to find the one lamp in the room. He finally found and lit it. When he turned around, he startled, he wasn't expecting to see the vampire sitting up looking at him.

"You're noisy."

"Sorry." Thorin grunted. The vampire seemed only a little better than last he saw him.

The vampire still looked half asleep. "It feels like it's been longer than one night."

"I decided to let the boys have a day off."

Master Baggins nodded and sleepily started to get up and redress. He had only taken off his outer cloths so they wouldn't wrinkle.

"Why did you lie to me?" He needed to get this off his chest. It's why he got up so early, he didn't want to wait until the sun went down again.

The vampire looked at him confused. "Pardon?"

"About Nori."

"What about Nori?" He still looked confused.

There was no way the vampire wouldn't know if Nori wasn't human. "You said that Nori was human."

"Ah." Understanding bloomed on his face. "What did he do now?"

"He paid me a visit."

"I hope he wasn't too unpleasant."

"He was very unpleasant, but that's not what I'm here about. You said he was human." He thought the vampire was above playing stupid.

"He is human."

"Humans don't disappear." He said with a little more force. Thorin was starting to get angry. He didn't think the vampire would outright lie to him either.

"He is also not human."

Thorin paused at that. "What does that mean? How can he be human and not human at the same time?"

"If I thought I could tell you without putting them at risk, I would."
"Why would telling me put them at risk?"

Master Baggins looked at him incredulous. "Because you're a hunter."

Thorin felt a little better knowing the vampire wasn't lying to him, but still worse that the vampire didn't rust him not to get trigger happy.

"Do you think I would hunt them before hearing you out?"

"The problem, Oakenshield, is that I don't know what you will do, even if you do hear me out." He sighed out. "If I knew no harm would come to them as a result of it, I'd have no problem telling you."

Thorin considered that. "If I gave you my word . . ."

"If we could trust each other's word, we'd have had no need for a blood contract." The vampire picked up his bag and raised a tired brow at the hunter.

Thorin should have known better than to ask for trust, but, for some reason, not being trusted by the vampire hurt. "Can you at least explain how some can be both human and not human?"

"He's half human." The vampire shrugged.

"Such beings exist?" Thorin had never heard of such a thing.

"Of course they do. Humans just don't see it that way. For humans, things are black and white, either fully human or not human at all." He explained.

Thorin couldn't argue with that. He knew it to be true. "So Nori is half human?"

The vampire nodded. "As evidenced by his many talents."

"And is he . . . good?" Thorin didn't like him, but he knew he was already biased.

The vampire raised his brow at him again. "What is good?"

Thorin was thrown off by the question. "Does he hurt people?"

"You mean humans." The vampire said unimpressed.

"Yes?" How else would one define good?

"I'm sure he does, sometimes. But humans tend to judge goodness to their own convenience."

Thorin suspected this was related to their last conversation. If so, it might be a lengthy conversation. "We'll have to talk about this some other time. We need to head out for now." He really did want to talk more about it. Even if he didn't agree with the vampire, he wanted to understand him more.

The vampire studied him, but finally nodded and gestured for Thorin to lead the way.

They handed in their keys at the counter and headed to the stable where their horses were being kept. They retrieved their horses and headed to the town's northern exit. When they got to the edge of the city, they found Nori waiting for them on the side of the road on his own horse.

"Nori." The vampire greeted as Nori fell in behind them. Thorin just sent him a glare as he passed which Nori returned with a self-satisfied grin.
"Figured I'd join you. I have to head back myself." Nori explained.

The vampire nodded at him, but Thorin just ignored him. It seemed he'd be putting up with even more in the future.

Notes: Backgrounds and Histories: Hunters' Collective

Background:
The Hunters' Collective is the official hunters information network designed to share information about dark and magical creatures between hunters to assist in the slaying of said creatures. Though predominately oral, several Hunters' Tomes do exist and are said to contain hundreds of years of information collected by hunters.

History:
No one knows when exactly the Hunters' Collective came into being, as it developed gradually over time. In the early days of hunters, no such network existed as each hunter jealously guarded their information. However, as the human population grew and encounters with dark and magical creatures increased, it became increasingly dangerous for hunters to work alone. With the rise of the hunters' inns, hunters began collaborating and sharing information more readily eventually leading to the officializing of the network and the naming of it as the Hunters' Collective.
They made it to the edge of Belegost before sunset, but again waited until after sundown to enter the city. Soon enough they had their horses stabled and were looking for lodging. They were heading in the direction of the Silver Bolt, the town's hunters' inn, when Nori finally decided to stir up trouble.

"Hey, Bilbo. I'm gonna head back first and let Dori know you're coming. He'll skin me if I don't give him time to get the room freshened up for you. You are staying with us, right?"

"Of course I am. Where else would I stay?" Bilbo answered back.

"What?" Thorin interrupted.

Nori just smirked victoriously at him.

"Stop stirring up trouble and go, Nori. I'll be along after I see these three situated." Bilbo ordered.

With that, Nori all but disappeared before their eyes, still wearing his smirk.

Thorin turned to the vampire. "You're staying with us." He tried to order.

Master Baggins raised a brow at him. "I don't have a room at this inn. I can't recover unless I'm underground. You know that. Dori keeps a cellar room for me for when I'm in town." He tried to reason quietly, since they were still out on the streets.

"Separating wasn't part of the agreement." Thorin argued back just as quietly.

"Neither was it forbidden." The vampire countered. "You know I can't hurt anyone. Do you really think I'm going to take off on you now? I could have done that any night instead of keeping watch."

Honestly, Thorin wasn't worried about any of that. He just didn't want the vampire to leave his side to go to where Nori was. "I know you won't."

Master Baggins looked a little surprised at that. "Then what is this really about?"

Thorin couldn't be entirely honest about this. "I don't like him."

"Him? You mean Nori? I'm sure you don't. He's been purposely trying to get under your hide since he first laid eyes on you."

Thorin was going to lose this if he didn't pull out a better argument. "I don't trust him."

"Of course you don't, because he's not 'like you.'" Master Baggins emphasized the word to convey his implications.

"That's not why. What if he... sells you out or something?" Thorin knew his argument was weak. The vampire had know Nori far longer than he knew Thorin.

Master Baggins studied Thorin with an unimpressed look, as if he knew that Thorin knew his argument was pathetic. "Are you jealous?"

"What?" Thorin's gut twisted.

"I'm not going to decide to stay here. I'm not going to ignore our agreement. I know you don't trust
me, but I promised you I would help you with your hunting. I'm not going to back out of it. But I won't be any good to you in this condition. I need to sleep, and I can't do that at the inn." He explained in quiet exasperation.

Thorin was both relieved and disappointed. At least the vampire hadn't come to the same conclusion as Nori, but that meant the he thought Thorin only saw him as a tool. Thorin knew he couldn't argue with that without giving himself away. Plus, he really didn't want to hinder the vampires recovery. Thorin gave a sigh of defeat. "You said you would come with us to the inn first?"

"Of course. I will feel better knowing where you are staying. And if I need to find you, for whatever reason, I won't have to waste time looking for you."

Thorin nodded. His nephews had been waiting patiently for the two of them and Thorin turned to start leading them towards the inn again. At least the vampire seemed as interested in keeping tabs on Thorin as Thorin did on the vampire.

They made it to the inn and got a room. After Thorin and the boys deposited their things in their room, the vampire pulled Thorin aside. Thorin told the boys to go ahead and get some dinner. Once the boys were gone, he looked at the vampire expectantly.

"I need to know when you expect me to return, or how often you need me to check in. I don't know how long I am going to need to sleep to catch up, and I don't want you deciding that I've run off."

"How long do you think we're going to be here?" Thorin asked.

"A couple weeks, at least. It will take some time to get everything I need made."

Thorin nodded, considering. "What are the chances that you will be unable to check in." Despite how powerful he knew the vampire was, he wanted to be sure that he would be safe.

Master Baggins looked confused at the question. "Zero, as long as I have Dori wake me."

"Are you sure you will be safe with them?" Thorin knew he might be revealing too much, but he needed to know.

The vampire only looked more confused before he seemed to come to an understanding. "Yes, I will be safe. I have been staying with the Ri brothers for many years. We are on good terms. They will not sell me out."

Thorin was somewhat appeased, though he would still prefer that the vampire stay with him. "I don't supposed you will tell me where you will be."

"I can't do that without their permission." Bilbo responded gently. "It's not a small matter revealing their home to a hunter."

Thorin nodded. He knew that would be the answer. "Alright. Check in every three nights. Are you getting ready to leave then?"

"There is . . one more thing." The vampire said hesitantly.

Thorin was instantly curious at what would make the vampire hesitant.

"If . . if you are agreeable to it, I would like you to wear this." Master Baggins held up a deep blood red tear-shaped gem on a sturdy chain.
Thorin took the gem in his hand, examining it. "What is it?"

"It's a blood gem. My blood specifically."

"What does it do?"

"It won't curse you or corrupt you, if that's what you're worried about. You can . . think of it as a protection charm." The vampire fidgeted.

"Are you worried about me?" Thorin gave the vampire a teasing smirk.

The vampire scoffed at him. "Consider it protecting my investments. It's not every day I find a hunter willing to put up with me. Who knows how long I will have to search before I can find another one. No, thank you. I'd prefer no one swooped in and made so much more work for me." Master Baggins cheeked back.

Thorin chuckled. He knew the vampire was teasing.

"I made some for your nephews as well, but I will leave getting them to wear them up to you." Bilbo offered two more gems on chains. "if you decide to, that is."

The vampire was clearly trying to look out for them but wasn't sure how he would be received. "I will see that they where them."

Master Baggins looked at him surprised, but seemed to recover himself quickly. "Good, good. Who knows what kind of trouble those nephews of yours will find."

Thorin couldn't argue with that.

"Alright, well then. I guess I will be off. I will see you in three nights." The vampire said before heading over to the window.

Thorin watched as the vampire opened the window then seemed to disappear into the air. He closed the window, before heading down to join his nephews.

"So, what did he want?" Fili tried to sound conversational rather than suspicious.

"To know when he needed to check in so I wouldn't come looking for him."

"What did you tell him?" Kili was curious as usual.

"He will check in every three nights."

"You actually let him go?" Fili was a bit taken aback.

"You say that like I could have forced him to stay." Thorin challenged his nephew.

Fili squirmed. "Maybe not, but he seems to listen to you. He might have stayed if you insisted."

"I didn't realize you wanted him to stay with us so much." Thorin edged. He suspected his nephew had ulterior motives.

Fili scoffed. "I don't want him with us. I just prefer it if we can keep an eye on him."

Thorin nodded. He understood the sentiment. After all, that was why the vampire agreed to travel with them in the first place rather than go on his own or catch up from behind. "I have a feeling it
wouldn't matter how closely we watched him, if he wanted to get away with something."

Fili sulked a bit.

"So, if he's checking in every three days, then how long are we going to be here?" Kili piped up.

"He said it would take at least several weeks to get everything done that he needs."

"What are we supposed to do?" Kili was obviously more concerned with being bored than the vampire.

"It's a big town. We'll take some jobs, stock up on supplies we can't normally get, and rest up. There should be plenty of small jobs in a town this big to keep us busy. Many dark creatures are drawn to high human populations."

"Did you confirm that with our 'friend,' cause everything else we know seems to be wrong." Kili groused sulkily.

Thorin shook his head. "That's not necessary. It has been the case with every large town or city we enter. And when you're not working, you can have some time off." He knew that would perk them up.

It did. the boys both seemed to sit up straighter. The boys were finished and were getting up to head back to their room when Thorin remembered the stones.

"Oh, here." He handed them each a chain with a blood stone on it.

They each examined their stones as he had. "It's pretty. What is it?" Kili asked.

"It's a protection stone." He said while slipping his own on so they would see he had one too. "Put it on."

Kili slipped his right on without question, but Fili hesitated. "Did the vampire give you these?"

"Just put it on, Fili. And don't take them off, either of you." He ordered giving them a warning stare.

Fili begrudgingly slipped his on and the boys went back to their room. Thorin followed once he finished his own dinner.

For the next three days, they managed to keep themselves busy. They restocked supplies, ordered some specialty hunting items, and tended to all of their weapons. They even eliminated several hobgoblins within the city.

Hobgoblin hunting was a task that many hunters felt was beneath them. They were small, weak goblins that liked to invade and inhabit homes. They liked causing trouble for the home owners and tenants and could become quite malicious at times.

They were easy to kill, but the hard part was finding them. They had excellent concealment magic and could hide themselves expertly. Thorin wasn't above any kind of hunt, and had hunted many hobgoblins in the past, making him quite adept at finding them.

They weren't big money hunts, since it was often the average citizens that were afflicted by hobgoblins. But, Thorin was content just being able to help people that other hunters would ignore. By the night that the vampire was to check in, he had at least made a good deal of pocket change.

Thorin and his boys were sitting in the dining hall of the Silver Bolt, eating a late dinner when Master
Baggins came in and sat down next to them. Thorin would never admit it, but he was relieved to see him.

"Good evening. I trust your stay has been fruitful." The vampire addressed them. He only looked marginally better than when Thorin had last seen him.

The boys just ignored the vampire, as usual.

"Fruitful enough. You don't look much better." Thorin was a little concerned. Was the vampire in worse shape than he thought.

Master Baggins just shrugged. "These aren't the best conditions for recovery. I'll be functional soon enough though." He ordered some tea from the serving girl.

Thorin waited for the girl to leave. "What's wrong with the conditions?" He thought that was why he was staying with the Ri brothers.

"We usually have a special designated place for intensive recovery. Mine is in my castle." The vampire explained.

"I thought you just had to be underground."

"I have to be underground to recover at all. Without my 'place of rest,' my recovery rate is dramatically reduced." Master Baggins further explained.

That would be an issue. Would it be like this every time they traveled? "I see."

The vampire sighed. "I'm hoping that Ori will be able to help me with this issue. If anyone can find a way to overcome it, he can."

The boys finished eating and left the table, leaving Thorin with the vampire.

"What about your tailor?" He said watching them leave.

"I've let him know what I need. He and Ori are going to work together to make something for me, though they may ask me to fetch a few things."

"What kind of things?"

"Oh, you know. Ingredients and materials and such." The vampires waved his hand vaguely. "Nothing that would concern you."

Thorin studied him before nodding. The vampire hadn't lied to him before, he would trust his word.

"Have you run into any trouble while I was gone?" The vampire asked casually.

"No. I've hunted some hobgoblins, but they're nothing to be concerned about." Thorin answered just as casually.

"Hobgoblins?" Master Baggins asked confused.

"Tiny goblins that like to invade homes and cause trouble." Thorin explained. He doubted the vampire wouldn't know about them, even normal people knew about hobgoblins.

The vampire thought a moment before making a sound of understanding. "My brain must be slow from the sun. You're talking about brownies."
Thorin had never heard of the term before. "What's a brownie?"

"What you've been slaying. They're not actually goblins at all. They're fairies."

That didn't make any sense. "How can they be fairies? Fairies are good, these ones cause trouble."

Master Baggins looked at him, exasperated. "You only think they aren't good because they're inconvenient. Humans are very ethnocentric when it comes to defining good and evil. When you like something, it's good, and when you don't, it's evil."

Thorin thought about that for a moment. "Then how would you define good and evil?"

"I wouldn't presume to be qualified to define good and evil, but I can tell you the difference between a fairy and a goblin."

"Aren't they entirely different creatures?" Fairies were believed to be beautiful and good, while goblins were ugly and evil.

"Technically, they aren't creatures at all."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Thorin sighed, he hated riddles.

"They are classifying terms. 'Fairy' and 'goblin' are really just broad terms used to designate all magical creatures into one of two groups depending in what kind of magic they use. It has nothing to do with their appearance or how they live."

"Goblins are creatures who either perform or are created by dark magic. Everything thing else is considered a fairy. There are also sub-classifications for both, but I won't go into that right now."

Thorin tried to wrap his mind around that. "So, 'brownies' don't use dark magic?" The vampire nodded. "Then why do they cause trouble?"

"The vast majority don't. Brownies are quite prolific in highly populated areas. In a city like this, probably one out of every three homes has a brownie." The vampire revealed before calmly sipping his tea.

Thorin couldn't believe there were that many. "If there are so many, how are they not noticed?"

Master Baggins shrugged. "Humans only notice them when they become troublesome. They are actually quite useful creatures. They are like the mice of the magical realm. They live off crumbs and insects and other things that humans won't miss, even rodents. A house with a brownie will never be plagued by pests."

"Are you saying that some of them just go bad then?" Thorin still didn't quite understand this vague idea of good and bad the vampire proposed.

The vampire shook his head. "Brownies aren't naturally malicious. They rely on coexisting with humans. Causing trouble for humans puts themselves at risk. If a brownie becomes a problem, there must be a reason for it."

"Like what?"

"Well, like any creature, they can strike out when they feel threatened or insulted, though, it has been my personal observation, most who 'go bad,' as you put it, are merely reflecting the nature of the home's owners."
What? "How does that work?" Did that mean he was helping people who didn't deserve it?

"Brownies are small, simple fairies. As such, they are easily effected by their surroundings. They tend to absorb some of the energy that humans emit. Energy that is filled with emotions, thoughts, intents, etc. So, when one lives with a malicious human long enough, they begin to reflect the same maliciousness."

Thorin's gut twisted. He thought he had been helping innocent people who were being afflicted by evil creatures. "Are you saying I've been helping the guilty at the expense of the innocent?"

The vampire stared at him. It wasn't accusing, but neither was it sympathetic. Finally he looked away and shrugged. "That's for you to decide."

Thorin was struggling to push back the guilt. "Can they change back? After they become malicious, can they change back?"

Master Baggins turned to stare at him again. This time there was a hint of accusation in his eyes, though Thorin didn't think it was meant for him specifically. "It's extremely difficult and only possible for someone with the right skills. Getting rid of them is always easier. Just another example of the corruption of humans." He took a calming sip of his tea.

Thorin was fully feeling the guilt now, though it's not as though he was the one who corrupted them. "I'm sorry. If I had known . . . "

"You'd have what? Let them live and continue hurting people?" The vampire interrupted with minimal heat.

Well, no. Thorin couldn't do that either.

Master Baggins sighed. "You did the right thing, or at least half of it. There are only a handful of people in the world that can reverse the corruption. Though the best solution would be to eliminate the humans of the house as well, I know you wouldn't do that. But, if you leave the brownie and new tenants were to take the house, then they would become at risk. Unfortunately, now a new brownie will likely move into that house and also be corrupted."

Thorin felt only marginally better. "Is there anyone to protect them?"

Bilbo looked at him like he had lost his mind. "What? Like a human hunter? Would you be okay with that? If one of us decided to start killing humans that were corrupting or threatening our kinds?"

"No, of course not." Thorin knew that was the 'right' answer. But he wasn't so blind that he couldn't see the hypocrisy and unfairness of it.

"Of course not." The vampire echoed with distaste. Thorin couldn't really blame him.

"Anyway, I asked if you had run into anything, because there seems to be some vampires hanging around the area. They are not moving alone. You might want to keep your eyes open." The vampire got up to leave. 'Well, I've checked in, if your done with me, I'm going to go back to bed."

Thorin didn't quite like how the vampire had put it, but he nodded and watched as the vampire left him alone at the table. Thorin had a lot to think about.
The next three days passed much the same. Thorin and his nephews continued taking small jobs here and there. Though Thorin was now much more observant when it came to dealing with the brownies.

Sometimes he could guess the cause of the troubled brownie. If he suspected the person hiring him was the cause of the errant behavior, he would penalize them by charging a little more than he normally would.

If there were innocents in the house though, like children, he would never refuse. The children likely suffered enough at the hands of whoever was the cause of the malicious brownie.

Still, he tried to be much more aware of his jobs and take note of the situations they involved. If nothing else, what he had learned from the vampire had served to make him far more aware of things.

Bilbo checked in briefly on the third night, but left just after finishing his tea. They had had a short chat but nothing significant. It wasn't until the day after Bilbo checked in the second time that things started to get interesting.

Thorin had returned to the inn for lunch. His nephews were still out about town so he was sitting by himself eating his lunch when he was joined by unwanted company. "Nori." He growled in greeting.

Nori grinned provocatively. "Hunter."

"What do you want?" There wasn't much Thorin could do in public.

"Hey now. Is that any way to treat an informant? I came here with valuable information as a favor, since you're such good 'friends' with Bilbo, but maybe I should take it to some other hunter. Though, honestly, I'm not sure just any hunter could handle this."

Thorin picked up on the subtle threat. If he didn't take the job, Nori would find someone else who would likely get themselves killed.

Thorin glared at him. "And what is this 'valuable information'?"

"There's a vamp in the area. Been picking off humans at the edge of town. Three people have gone missing just since you've been here."

"Then why are you just telling me this." Thorin growled at him.

Nori shrugged. "Took a while to pinpoint where it was hiding out." Nori obviously wasn't overly concerned with having a vamp in the area.

"And where is it?"

"It seems to be most active on the north-east edge of town. So, if I were a hunter, I would start with the forest in that area."

"And if I don't go." Thorin wanted to confirm the situation.
"Oh, I'm sure some other sap will if you won't." Nori grinned threateningly.

"Master Baggins didn't seem concerned when he was here last night." Thorin tested him.

"No need to get Bilbo involved when there are capable hunters around, right?" Nori deflected. "It's your job, why drag Bilbo into it . . . unless you can't handle it alone, of course."

Nori gave Thorin his answer. He hadn't told the vampire. Thorin was almost positive this was a trap, but it seemed he didn't have much of a choice in the matter. "Fine, I'll go tonight."

"That's a good hunter, though I expected you to be a little more excited at having a vampire to kill." Nori got up to leave but stopped just as he was turning to go. "Oh, one more thing. You might want to leave your valuables with your boys, they may need them when you're gone." Nori grinned a feral grin before leaving Thorin to finish his lunch.

Nori wasn't even being subtle about it. This was a trap and if Thorin didn't go, he would suck someone else into it. Thorin sighed and pushed away what was left of his lunch, no longer having much of an appetite.

Thorin went to his room and began preparing for a vamp hunt. He wondered if The vampire's arm was burning or if he'd even notice it in his deep sleep.

By the time his nephews got back that evening, he was ready to go.

"What are you doing?" Fili was immediately suspicious.

"Going hunting."

"What about us? You should've given us more time to get ready." Kili was scrambling to get his gear around.

"You're not coming." There was no way he was leading his nephews into a trap.

"What? Why?" Kili asked. Fili hadn't moved and was still studying his uncle. "Is it Master Baggins?"

"No, I don't believe he's involved."

"Then why can't we come?" Kili whined.

"Because it's a trap."

"If you know it's a trap, then why are you going?" Fili asked.

"Because if I don't, someone else will."

His nephews knew better than to argue with him about that. The only thing Thorin desired as strongly as his revenge was to protect people. "So, we're just going to sit here and wait for you again." Fili sounded very displeased.

"Yes. If I am successful, I should be back by morning." Thorin paused and thought for a minute. "If I'm not back by the time Master Baggins checks in, let him know what happened.

"Why? You honestly think he'll care?" Fili said skeptically.

Thorin kind of hoped he would. "Just do as I ask, please." He wasn't even sure the vampire would
survive if he failed with how the blood contract worked. As far as he knew, Nori didn't know about
the blood contract.

Fili nodded sullenly.

Thorin hugged each of them and told them he was proud of them. It was routine whenever he wasn't
sure he would be coming back. He never left without letting his nephews know he loved them.

Then he headed out. He meandered north-east through the town. When he crossed the city limits, he
started heading into the forest at the edge of the town.

The sun was just going down. He regretted not getting out there sooner so he could set traps, but
there was no way he could have left his boys without saying goodbye.

He wandered around the woods in the rapidly growing dark, waiting for the trap to spring. It was
nearly an hour later before anything actually happened though.

"So this is the great Oakenshield?" A voice spoke casually behind him.

Thorin spun around to face his opponent. He was tall and dark skinned, his hair pulled back in many
tight little braids and he wore a long black cloak.

Thorin bypassed his crossbow in favor of his sword and daggers. He had a feeling the fight was
going to be up close and personal.

"He's attractive enough, but he hardly looks like much of a challenge" Another voice sounded
behind him, this one much more feminine.

He cautiously turned to the side, keeping the first vampire in sight while scanning for the new one.
She had fiery curly red hair that swayed loose with the wind. He had only encountered female
vampires a handful of times as they were not nearly as common as male vampires.

"You may have bad taste, but at least you have good eyes." A third voice, this one male, spoke
behind him, addressing the female vampire.

Thorin rolled his eyes in resignation and turned to face the newest addition to this ambush, there was
no way he was going to be able to keep three of them in sight at once. This one was shorter than the
first, light skinned and scruffy looking.

Of course Thorin was just now remembering what Master Baggins had said about some vampires in
the area not working alone.

"What's that say about you, love?" The female vampire retorted to the third.

"You must have had a moment of good judgement when you chose me." He flirted back with a
wink.

"Get a coffin, you two, but later. We have business with this Hunter right now." The first one
redirected.

"Are you so weak that it's going to take all three of you to kill me!" Thorin jeered. He needed them
to let down their gaurds.

The woman just laughed, but the second male growled at him. "I say we just kill him and get it over
with."
"Now, now. Don't be hasty. We have a reputation we're trying to build." The dark male reminded.

"Reputation? Aren't you just a bunch of nobodies?" Thorin suspected the scruffy guy would be the first to lose it.

"Not for long." The woman responded. "We are The Three."

"The three what? Stooges?" Thorin kept an eye on the second male. It was only a matter of time before he lost it; he was already growling like a rabid dog.

"Just The Three." The dark man responded calmly. "You see all powerful vampires are known by a namesake. We are a coven of three, and as such we will build our reputation.

Thorin chuckled. "So, what you're saying is that you are all so weak, you only have a chance of earning a name by working together." He said with a smirk.

"We're more than enough to kill you!" The scruffy one stepped forward and swung at Thorin's head with his claws.

Thorin dodged the swing and retaliated with his silver dagger, slicing the vampire's arm open.

Either he was being greatly underestimated, or this vampire was more about strength than speed.

The vampire hissed at the cut on his arm but otherwise disregarded it. His eyes were pitch black as he took another swing at Thorin, this time a little faster.

Thorin only barely dodged it this time and only because he had anticipated it. He backed out of range quickly.

If we're just going to kill him, you should let me drink him. No point in wasting good blood." The red-head tried to convince the scruffy one.

The vampire paused in his advance to turn to the woman. "You will not touch this filth! I will kill him and mount his head on a pike after I spill his blood on the ground."

Thorin as definitely being underestimated and it would be the last thing the scruffy vampire ever did. Thorin took advantage of the vampire's distraction and swooped in and burried a wooden stake deep into the vampires heart.

He immediately stepped back out of range and took up his gaurd. The scruffy vampire pulled out the stake and threw it down laughing. "You think some silly stake is gonna kill me?"

The woman was laughing now too and the tall one smirked in amusement. Thorin didn't say anything. I moment later the signs he was looking for finally happened. The scruffy vampire swayed and held his chest in pain.

"Don't tell me a little stake got to you." The woman teased her mate.

The scruffy one just moaned, lifting up his shirt to see why he was in pain. Burning red tendrils where radiating from the hole left in his chest from the stake. He growled before moaning and sinking to the ground as the burning veins spread across his chest.

The red-head dashed to her mate's side as little more than a blur to Thorin's eyes.

At least they weren't as fast as Master Baggins, Thorin spared a brief thought of comparison.
"What did you do to him?!" She growled at him, teeth bared in a snarl.

The tall vampire casually walked over and picked up the stake Thorin had used to examine it. "Silver dust. Very clever. Nori said you would be more fun than our usual prey. I was becoming skeptical, but it seems he was right."

The scruffy vampire fell over on the ground with a moan, the burning veins now spreading up his neck.

Thorin noticed the woman move, but wasn't able to brace himself before she slammed into him, launching him through the air, colliding heavily with a tree. He gasped trying to pull back in the air he lost around his several cracked ribs.

She stalked around him, clearly having no intention of killing him quickly.

He pulled himself up, still trying to get back his breath. There was no way he was getting out of this unscathed. It'd be near a miracle if he even got out alive. He briefly wondered if Master Baggins would survive since it was Nori who set him up.

She came at him again just as he managed to step away from the tree and sent him flying through the air again, this time landing on the forest floor. He had a feeling that if she had slammed him back into that tree, it would have been the end of him.

He struggled to get himself upright again, taking in big gulps of air after having had it knocked out yet again. He was feeling a little shaky on his feet. He had to think fast. If he was going down, he needed to take as many of them with him as he could.

She was smirking at him condescendingly, while the tall, dark one just watched.

Her fighting style was problematic. She only got close enough for him to hit when she was rushing him, but he could barely see her when she did. He was going to need perfect timing to land a blow . . . which meant he was going to have to take a few more hits.

He scoffed at her. "You sure you're a vampire? You hit like a girl."

She hissed and charged at him again, sending him another twenty-feet through the air this time. He landed hard with a groan, he hadn't managed to miss all the trees that time. But he had calculated the timing from take off and impact. Now he just needed to check it again.

Thorin pulled his silver-edged sword out. "That scruffy one over there wasn't your boyfriend, was he? He was kind of pathetic, I think you can do better than that."

"He's my mate! How dare you touch him!" She screamed, charging him again.

Throin picked himself up again, wiping the blood from his mouth. He felt like all of his ribs were cracked, at least, if not broken. There was no telling what other internal damage he had. What little hope he had of surviving this fight was snuffed out with that thought.

He had to take at least one of them out. The scruffy one could still recover, so it was going to have to be this one. At least he was ready for her this time. "So, what are you gonna call yourselves when he's dead then? The Two sounds even more lame than The Three."

She screamed in rage and charged at him again. But as soon as he had finished talking he had lifted his sword-less arm up as if to ward her off to disguise the thrust of his sword that followed right after it.
Crude as it was, his strategy worked. He didn't go flying this time as the female vampire skewered herself through the chest as he thrust out his sword to meet her. She stopped, gaping like she couldn't believe what had just happened before the silver started seeping into her flesh.

He pulled his sword out roughly with a jerk. The silver that coated the edge was designed to flake of and embed itself inside his target. The veins of burning poison were already spreading. He swung his sword to behead her, but his sword merely swooshed through the air.

The last vampire was finally interfering. He had pulled the woman away before Thorin could finish her and set her down out of reach.

Thorin suspected this one was even more powerful than the last two and he was in no shape to have any chance of even surviving this encounter.

"I have to admit, I'm impressed. Even if you are a decent hunter, I didn't expect you to to best either of them. Not that they are all that powerful, but her speed always gives you hunters a problem."

"I've seen faster." Thorin grunted. He was barely standing, he wouldn't last much longer. Why did vampires have to be so chatty?

The vampire raised a brow. "And you're still alive?"

Thorin just shrugged with a wince.

"As fascinated as I am, I'm afraid I can't let you live any longer. After all, what kind of leader would I be if I just stood by and watched you slay my coven?" He slowly slipped off his cloak.

Thorin knew there was going to be no drawing out the fight this time, but was still surprised when the vampire appeared in front of him and slashed him open diagonally from hip to shoulder.

Thorin staggered back. His leather and chain-mail had done nothing to hinder the vampire's claws and hung open from the gash. Thorin leaned heavily against a nearby tree. He would never go down without a fight.

He swung his sword weakly, but the vampire just casually dodged it. Before he could left his arm again, the vampire shoved his hand through Thorin's stomach, just below his rib cage.

The vampire's eyes were pitch black as he sneered down at Thorin. Just then the vampire's eyes landed on the blood-stone around his neck. Thorin watched as the vampires eyes grew wide and focused on the gem.

He dropped his sword and reached for the two silver daggers strapped to his sides.

"Where did you get this?" The vampire was transfixed on the stone.

Thorin took the opportunity and brought his daggers up to the vampire's neck and, in a scissor-like motion, hacked off his head with the last of his strength.

The vampire's head landed on the ground with a dull thump and was quickly followed by the vampire's body.

Thorin groaned at the now gaping hole in his stomach. He couldn't die yet. The vampire at his feet had turned to dust, but the other two could still recover.

He tried to take a step forward, but his body didn't even move. Perhaps he would have to settle for
killing the strongest one of the three, which certainly wasn't so bad.

He slid down the tree at his back, groaning as he settled onto the forest floor. Obviously, the vampire intended to let him bleed out, since he purposely avoided his vital organs.

He knew he was a dead man. Even if he could get treatment right away, he didn't think it would matter at this point. As it was, he was well outside of town. There was no way he was walking back and no one was going to come looking for him.

Thorin thought about his regrets. Not his nephews, he had done everything he could for them. Strangely enough the vampire was his biggest regret. He still had questions, and now even more since talking to these vampires.

He didn't know vampires took mates. Did Bilbo ever have a mate? What was Bilbo's namesake? He must have one as powerful as he was. Why had he even wanted to travel with Thorin in the first place? What was that look of desire he sometimes saw in the vampire's eyes?

Thorin still had so many questions. He regretted not spending more time getting to know the enigmatic vampire. Perhaps he even regretted not allowing himself to feel anything more than curiosity for the vampire.

As he mused to himself, the world slowly faded away. When he came to again, it was to a violent cracking noise. When he dragged his head up to look, his eyes were met with familiar pitch black eyes.

He thought one of other vampires must have recovered enough to come finish him off until he noticed the head of curls framing said eyes.

Thorin had never been so happy to see a vampire in his entire life. "Master Baggins." he tried to croak, failing miserably.

"Quiet you fool!" the vampire scolded softly. Bilbo manhandled him until he had Thorin lying flat on the ground and started checking his wounds.

Thorin groaned, wondering how he was still alive and how much time he had left. "My nephews . . ."

"I said be quiet you big oaf. If you have the energy to talk, save it for healing." Master Baggins ordered.

Thorin smirked at the cheeky vampire. "Too late."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize I was talking to a corpse. Here, drink this." The vampire lifted a vial filled with black-red liquid to his lips.

Thorin looked at it suspiciously.

"Drink it or I'm going to pour it down your throat." The vampire threatened.

Thorin glared at the vampire weakly before obediently swallowing it down. It tasted foul but moments later he felt a surge run through him. He strangled a moan as his ribs cracked back into place.

His chest and stomach itched terribly as they started to scab over and Master Baggins had to pin Thorin's arms down to keep him from scratching the wounds back open.
Thorin lay there panting from fighting against the vampire's hold on his arms. The vampire was practically laying over top of him in order to reach both of his arms. "Was that . .?"

"Vampire's blood? Yes. Mine, though, so you don't need to worry about side effects." Master Baggins confirmed, easing off of Thorin.

"What side effects?" Thorin knew vampire's blood was a cure-all, but he had never heard of any side effects.

"I'll explain it some other time."

Thorin slowly eased himself up, just now noticing that there seemed to be body parts strewn everywhere. "What. .?"

Before Thorin could even finish his question, Bilbo picked up an arm and snapped it into three pieces as if it were a twig, before throwing it back down again.

Well, that explained the loud cracking noises.

"They aren't technically dead yet, but now they won't be able to put themselves back together before dawn, even if they do happen to get help." The vampire answered his unspoken question as he continued to find larger pieces and break them down.

"How are you feeling?" He walked back over to Thorin.

"Lightheaded" and like he'd been run over by a herd of horses.

Bilbo nodded understandingly before holding a hand out to Thorin.

Thorin glanced at his hand before looking up at the vampire. The vampire who had checked in only yesterday and was supposed to be sleeping. The vampire who came for him and saved his life, despite knowing how much Thorin hated his kind.

Master Baggins read his pause as hesitation. "If you think you can make it back to the inn on your own, be my guest, but if you want my help we need to get there before sunrise. I didn't bring my cloak."

Thorin grabbed his hand and let the vampire pull him to his feet. Master Baggins swung Thorin's arm around his shoulders, easily bearing Thorin's weight. With Bilbo supporting him, they started hobbling back to town.

Chapter End Notes

Ooooh. Finally some action. :)  
Bet you can't guess who I based The Three on. XD (Just kidding, it's probably pretty obvious.)
Possession

Bilbo helped Thorin get back to the inn, but, despite Kili and Fili's protests, couldn't stick around any longer because the sun was almost up.

"What happened?" Fili asked frustrated that the vampire wouldn't answer his questions as he gently helped Thorin ease into a bed.

"It was a trap." Thorin figured that should have explained his condition.

"What kind of trap?" Kili pushed.

Thorin groaned as he lay back on the bed, propped up on some pillows. "Three vampires."

"Three?!" Kili nearly yelled.

"Working together?" Fili had heard of covens, but they had never encountered one before.

"Yes," Thorin grunted.

"And you killed all of them?" Kili asked impressed.

"I killed one, and only because he was distracted." Thorin confessed. "They were more powerful then the vampires we have hunted before."

"Then how are you still alive?" Fili wondered out loud.

"I shouldn't be. Master Baggins had me drink some of his blood, otherwise I would be dead by now." Thorin carefully started stripping his ripped armor and clothing.

"He saved you?" Kili was baffled by the thought.

"I thought you said he wasn't involved." Mentioning the vampire only made Fili more suspicious.

"He wasn't." Thorin defended. "He finished off the other two vampires and helped me."

Kili looked thoughtful, but Fili just looked skeptical. "How do you know it wasn't all just an act to get you to trust him?"

Cause it wasn't necessary, Thorin thought to himself. "It wasn't."

"How do you know that?" Fili pushed. He wanted a real answer. "He was late coming to help you. He should have come to help you before you got this hurt!"

"Because he was sleeping. He came when he realized something was wrong."

"How do you know?!"

"Because I asked him!" Thorin groaned at the effort it took to yell. His ribs were still terribly sore.

He had talked with the vampire a little bit on the way to the inn, but Master Baggins hadn't been in the mood to respond much. Thorin had gotten the impression that the vampire wasn't very happy about the situation.

"So you just took his word for it?" Fili toned it down, feeling guilty for getting his uncle worked up.
"Yes, he's never lied to me before." Thorin finally revealed his trust in the vampire.

Fili looked like he didn't like it, but nodded.

His nephews helped him into a clean shirt before fetching him something to eat from the kitchen. After he had eaten, he settled in to get some rest.

~Nori~

Nori didn't get scared often, considering his particular talents, but when he found himself suddenly slammed up against the stone wall of their dining room with an angry vampire's hand around his throat, hissing in furry, well, he was man enough to admit that he might have been a little scared.

"Nori!" Bilbo eyes were coal black and his fangs were fully extended. The gentle, polite creature he usually appeared as was nowhere in sight. "What have you done?!"

Nori saw a speck of light flicker in Bilbo's coal black eyes. The vampire wasn't angry, he was livid! Nori glanced at Dori on the other side of the room for help, but Dori knew better than to interfere with the vampire and probably figured Nori most likely deserved it.

"He's just a hunter." Nori wheezed through the grip on his throat. "I sent him to hunt."

"You sent him to a trap!" Bilbo was nearly shaking from the effort it took not to snap Nori's neck like a twig.

"So? He's just a hunter. You've killed dozens of hunters. You can always find a new one to mess with." Nori tried to plead his defense.

"He is my hunter!" Bilbo snarled. "You will not touch him!!" He spit out possessively.

Nori paled. Oh, he was definitely scared now. Vampires were notoriously possessive and extremely aggressive about what they felt was theirs.

"I didn't know." He breathed out, breathless from the revelation as well as Bilbo's grip. Even Dori was starting to look concerned now.

"I told you not to cause trouble!" Bilbo rebutted.

"I didn't know he was yours. I just thought you were having some fun with him." Nori wheezed out.

"Then why did you try to kill him?" Bilbo hissed.

"He's just using you to make a profit. He knows what you are. Keeping him alive puts you at risk. I was just looking out for you." Bilbo had released his hold just enough for Nori to get a bit more air.

Bilbo seemed mildly pacified by Nori's confessions. "You know I can take care of myself. Why did you really do it?"

Nori squirmed in his grip, fighting with how much he should tell. "I don't like the way he looks at you."

Bilbo just raised a skeptical brow, unimpressed by the answer.

"He acts like he owns you, like your a possession."

"So?" Bilbo didn't seem to see a problem with that.
Nori must have forgotten he was talking to a vampire. Vampires were possessive by nature. Of course he'd see no problem with it. "I just don't like it."

"So, you tried to kill him because you were jealous." Bilbo concluded.

Nori started spluttering at the accusation. "I was just looking out for you!"

Bilbo dropped Nori unceremoniously. His eyes were still black, but his teeth had retracted and he was no longer snarling or hissing. "This is your last warning, Nori. You do anything to hurt him again and I will kill you, damn the consequences!"

With that, Bilbo vanished. Most likely returning to his chamber to go back to sleep for the day. Nori rubbed his sore neck, which was no doubt sprouting some colorful bruises.

"That was a stupid stunt to pull, even for you, Nori." Dori scolded. "Now we shall have to make it up to the hunter to get back into Bilbo's good graces." He said before stomping out of the room.

Nori sunk down to the floor, rubbing his sore neck in thought. There were very few things that Bilbo ever got possessive over. And none of them were people. Nori couldn't help but feel that there was something else going on here that he was missing.

Something must have caused Bilbo to decide to join the hunter, let alone spare him in the first place. Nori was going to find out, but he would have to tread carefully for a while.

~Thorin~

It was almost lunch time when Thorin was woken by a knocking on the door. Having barely survived his near death experience, his senses were on high alert as he jolted awake.

His nephews looked at each other in silent communication. Fili went to answer the door, pulling out a dagger and hiding it behind his back. He cautiously opened it, while his brother closed in as backup.

The man at the door was well dressed and had elaborately braids done up all over his head of prematurely gray hair. He looked at Fili and raised an eyebrow. "You look rather young to be the hunter Oakenshield."

"Oakenshield is my uncle. Who are you and what do you want?" Fili made no attempt at politeness.

The man raised both brows at that. "My name is Dori and I've come to speak with your uncle on behalf of the Ri family."

"Dori, like Nori?"

"Let him in, Fili." Thorin ordered before Fili could turn the man away. Thorin pushed himself up into a better sitting position as Fili hesitantly opened the door to let the man in.

"Oakenshield." Dori greeted with a curt bow. "I've come to extend an invitation to stay with my brothers and I as repayment for the trouble that my brother has caused you. We will provide you food and lodging and do our best to help you with any other needs you may have."

It was Thorin's turn to raise a brow. "You want us to come stay in the home of the one who almost got me killed?"

"Master Bilbo was . . . very displeased with Nori's actions against you and has . . . shown him the error
of his ways. He will not bother you again." Dori revealed diplomatically.

Thorin had the feeling that Dori was putting a fine glaze on the situation, but didn't say anything. He wondered what could have really happened.

"You will be closer to Master Bilbo." Dori added when an answer didn't seem forthcoming.

Thorin perked up at the thought, but pretended to think about it for appearance's sake. "We accept."

Both his boys looked at him in surprise.

"It will be more convenient for everyone." He tried to explain.

Dori just smirked knowingly. "Excellent, I will wait downstairs for you to get your things around."

Dori left and the boys looked at each other, then to their uncle, uncertainly.

"You heard him, get your things around." Thorin started to carefully push himself off the bed.

"Are you sure this is a good idea? Wasn't Nori the one who tried to kill you?" Fili tried to talk his uncle out of it.

"He did it behind Master Baggins' back. I doubt he will try anything if we are under the same roof as the vampire." Thorin reasoned.

Fili would have argued more, but Thorin was already packing up his things and Kili had joined him. He sighed and began doing the same.

They met with Dori downstairs who led them outside to a carriage he had hired. After they were dropped off, they had only a short walk to the home of the Ri brothers.

It was a two story building built into the side of the mountain near the northern edge of town. Dori led them through the front which advertised Dori's Tailor Shop and led them through the shop into the back.

Once they got past the shop, the house seemed to open up much larger than it looked on the outside. In fact, most of the home was actually built into the mountain. Dori led them through several corridors before stopping at a door and opening it up to them. "This guest room should be large enough for you. I'll bring lunch up to you shortly, so you can get settled."

The room was large, with three beds and its own wash room. The beds and covers were good quality and there was even a desk and a couple wardrobes. It was definitely fancier than anything they would find at an inn.

The boys each claimed a bed, excited that they wouldn't have to share as Thorin sat down on the nearest one. His body still ached fiercely and the trip over hadn't helped.

Kili went to investigate the washroom. His shout of surprise had his brother dashing in after him to check on him. "Look at this!! This water pumps itself!!" He said as he turned the handle that turned the water on.

"How does it do that?!" Fili asked in wonder.

Kili started playing with another handle which seemed to make him even more excited. "It even heats itself!!" He said nearly jumping with excitement.
Fili gaped in disbelief before dashing over to see if the bathtub had the same features.

After that, all Thorin heard was giddy laughter and excitement. He just shook his head. He was starting to get an idea of why Bilbo had sought out the Ri brothers’ talents.

The boys were still in the washroom marveling over the plumbing when Dori walked in with a laden rolling tray table. "Is everything alright?" He asked at the excited whoops and hollers coming from the washroom.

Thorin just shook his head. "My nephews are just excited about your self-pumping/heating water."

"Ah, yes." Dori nodded. "One of Ori's most useful inventions. Though we couldn't have put it in through all this rock without Master Bilbo's help."

The boys were just coming back out of the washroom, sensing food nearby. "Why do you call him that?" Kili asked curious. "Master Bilbo. Why not just call him by Bilbo, if he lets you use his name?"

"Respect. There are few like Master Bilbo, and none of them are like Master Bilbo." Dori answered cryptically. He left the room leaving the food covered tray and a room full of baffled hunters behind.

Fili scoffed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Kili just brushed it all off in favor of food. "Who knows? Let's eat!"

After they ate, Thorin settled in to rest a bit more with his nephews keeping close guard over him. When dinner rolled around, there was a knock on the door.

Kili answered it this time. "Nori?"

Thorin sat up too fast and had to strangle the resulting groan. Fili jumped up to offer support for his brother.

"Dori told me to fetch you for dinner."

The boys glared at him suspiciously while Thorin just raised a brow at the change in demeanor. "Alright." He grunted pushing himself off the bed.

Nori quietly led them to a large dining room set just off the kitchen.

"Go ahead and have a seat, everything will be done here in a minute." Dori called out from the kitchen.

Thorin gingerly took a seat with his nephews flanking him on either side. Nori sat down a few seats away, keeping a respectful distance.

"You're in better shape than I expected. He must have got to you pretty fast." Nori said scanning Thorin for injuries.

"Actually, Bilbo didn't get to him until after the fight was done, Uncle fought them off himself!" Kili bragged.

"Kili!" Thorin scolded. "You will refer to him as Master Baggins."

Kili just shrugged.
"That's impossible. There's no way you could of fended off all three of them. You'd be dead." Nori corrected.

"I nearly was, thanks to you, Master Baggins found me before I bled out."

Nori wavered in disbelief. "You killed all three of them?"

"I killed the leader and incapacitated the others. Master Baggins finished them off."

Nori ran a critical eye over Thorin, much more intense in his examination this time. "You killed the leader and stopped the other two?" He asked skeptically.

Thorin raised an unimpressed brow at him rather than answer his question again.

"How are you not dead?" Nori asked mystified.

Thorin wasn't planning to answer, but he didn't have to since Kili spoke up again. "Master Baggins let Uncle drink his blood, or he would have died. He had a hole in his stomach!"

"Kili." Thorin growled. Kili would tell Nori everything if he thought it was worth bragging about.

Nori's eyebrows nearly reached his hairline as he studied Thorin one more time, but didn't say anything. Just then Dori started bringing dishes out to set on the table.

As Dori was piling the table up, a loud boom shook through the house, seemingly coming from below. Thorin and the boys braced against the table in alarm.

"That boy! I thought I told you to fetch him for dinner." Dori scolded Nori.

"I did!"

Dori continued loading the table and a few minutes later a young man rushed into the room, covered in soot and still smoking a bit. "Am I late?" He went to sit at the table but was grabbed and redirected.

"You will be, by the time you get changed and cleaned up. Go!" Dori demanded.

The young man, whom Thorin figured must be Ori, shuffled off sheepishly to clean off.

"What happened to him?" Kili asked fascinated.

"Ori's a brilliant inventor, but sometimes his processes are a little . . explosive," Explained Dori. "Go ahead and eat, it's his own fault for being late." He said as he sat down himself.

They started filling their plates. This was much better than anything they would get at an inn.

Ori finally came back, still wearing his oversized goggles but at least they were cleaned off. He briefly introduced himself before sitting and loading his own plate. "So you must be Bilbo's hunters." Ori directed at Thorin and his nephews.

"'Bilbo's' hunters?" Fili asked disgusted.

Ori looked uncertain at his reaction. "Aren't you? He nearly snapped Nori's neck over you."

"Ori!" His brothers scolded him simultaneously.
"Sorry." Ori said contritely before returning to his dinner with gusto.

Thorin a good look at a Nori and, sure enough, there were violent looking bruises sprouting all around his neck.

"Woah! Master Baggins did that?!!" Kili must have also noticed the bruises.

"I'm sure Dori already told you he was upset." Nori was ready to drop the subject.

Ori scoffed. "More like furious. You're lucky he's such a good person. Any other vampire would have killed you as soon as look at you for what you did."

Nori glared at his brother, willing him to shut up.

"He's lucky that Bilbo has a will of mithril and self-control out of this world." Dori corrected. "As angry as he was, I'm surprised he didn't kill you on accident."

Kili was baffled by the whole conversation. "Why was he so angry. We're just hunters. He came along for the fun of it."

"What? You're not just anything. You're . . ." Ori started to say something but was interrupted by a face full of mashed potatoes.

"Nori!!" Dori scolded while Ori wiped the potatoes off his face. Nori sent Ori a warning glare.

"I'll tell you why he was so upset." Fili spoke up garnering the attention of the whole table. "He's upset because you almost offed him by almost killing Uncle. They have a blood contract. If Uncle dies because of the vampire, the vampire dies too."

Thorin should have interrupted before Fili could finished but his mouth was full and Fili's announcement sent him choking on it. "Fili!" Thorin admonished when he had finally recovered.

The Ri brothers were all gaping at them now. Thorin wondered if this was going to turn into a situation.

"He did what?!" Nori nearly erupted from his seat, or at least he tried, but was stopped by the unmovable force of a vampire's hands on his shoulders.

"Nori." Bilbo greeted with a menacing smile that matched the threat in his eyes.

All three of the Ri brother's went tense.

Nori paled under the vampire's touch. "It was Dori's idea." He immediately reflected.

Bilbo turned his gaze to Dori for confirmation.

"I thought offering your . . 'friends' free lodging and meals was the least we could do for our family's offense." Dori explained. "And I thought you might like having them closer." He shrewdly added, appealing to the vampire's possessive instincts.

"Nonsense. I don't hold the whole family accountable for the actions of one." Bilbo said amiably, though Nori's flinch indicated exactly who he was holding accountable.

He released Nori and went to sit next to Ori. Dori had Bilbo's tea prepared for him before he even got settled in his chair. "How are you feeling?" The vampire directed at Thorin.
"I'm fine." He lied. "You? Shouldn't you be sleeping? Why are you up?"

Dori tutted at Thorin's disrespectful tone, but Bilbo just ignored it.

Bilbo shrugged. "I had to leave in a hurry this morning. I wanted to make sure you hadn't died on me." He said as though it was of only little interest to him.

"I'm still here." Thorin confirmed.

Bilbo smirked at him. "Clearly."

That was pretty much the end of their conversation. Bilbo chatted with Ori about whatever he was working on, but retired back to his room as soon as his tea was done. He briefly sent Nori a warning glare as he left, leaving Thorin and his nephews in the hands of the Ri brothers.
Staying with the Ri brothers was . . interesting. Between the constant noise coming from Ori's workshop, Nori's constant skulking around and Dori's persistent mother henning, things were never quiet or dull.

Though Thorin had to admit, some of the contraptions they had set up in the house were as ingenious as they were inventive. Besides the water, which pumped and heated itself, the tub and even the toilet were self draining.

Thorin hadn't enjoyed a hot bath in who knows how long, since he always let his nephews go first, but now he could draw up a nice hot bath just for himself. He had taken several already, since the hot water did wonders for his aching muscles.

He was feeling much better. They had been staying with the Ri brothers for three days now, and, between Dori's medicinal tea and the hot baths, Thorin only had a little bit of stiffness left to work out.

Thought they typically joined the Ri's for dinner, there was still a distinct line of separation between their two groups. Obviously, despite letting them stay, the Ri's didn't trust them any more then they trusted the Ri's.

Thorin was still trying to figure out exactly what they were. He assumed, since Nori was half-human, that they were all half-human, but, so far, only Nori had displayed any truly super-human qualities.

As much as Thorin wanted to ask the vampire about it, he already knew what the answer would be. Speaking of the vampire, he wondered if they would be seeing him tonight. It was the third night since they had last seen him, though he didn't technically need to check in, since they were staying in the same place. Yet, Thorin still hoped he'd get to see him.

~Nori~

Nori had been pulling out every trick in the book to spy on the hunters, unbeknownst to them, and figure out what was going on between the hunters and the vampire. The more he found, the more irritated (and concerned) he was getting.

Not only had the Bilbo let the hunter live, decide to go romping about with him, and formed a blood contract with him, he'd also given them blood stones. All three of them!! Was the bloody vampire bloody mad?!

Vampires didn't just go around giving away blood stones! Only the oldest and most powerful vampires could even make a blood stone! And Bilbo made not one, not two, but three perfectly complete blood stones and handed them over to a group of humans . . hunters even!

No wonder the vampire was so drained. Nori had thought it strange that the vampire hadn't been recovering much, but it made perfect sense now. Nori had never heard of any vampire making, or even owning three blood stones, and certainly not all at once.

Even Nori didn't know the full extent of a blood stone's power, and he made it his business to know everything. Most vampires seemed to know about them and be drawn to them instinctively, but few really knew anything about them other than that they coveted them.

Nori could make excuses for most of the things that Bilbo had done; boredom, interest, freedom, but
nothing explained the outrageousness of giving away three blood stones to mere humans.

Well . . there was one thing that would explain Bilbo's excessive behavior, but there was no way it could be that. Even if it was, Thorin would have been dead the moment he stepped in the old vampire's castle, if not before.

No, Nori was sure it couldn't be that. Bilbo was super old. Maybe he finally got tired of living as a vampire and was just looking for an interesting way to end it. Or maybe he simply lost his bloody mind being locked up in that old castle alone for so long.

Whatever it was, it certainly didn't seem healthy. If he couldn't stop whatever it was, Nori was going to have to find a way to get him through it. Bilbo was too good and too powerful to be lost to some strange new impulses.

~Thorin~

That evening Bilbo did join them for dinner, though he still looked as haggard as before. As relieved as Thorin was to see him, he didn't like that the vampire was showing no signs of improvement.

"Are you sure that sleeping is helping you? It's been over a week and you don't really seem any better." Thorin asked, trying to mask the concern in his voice.

"When was the last time you ate?" Nori interrupted before Bilbo could respond.

"Shut up, Nori." Bilbo sent him a glare.

"It's a valid question, Master Bilbo. You won't recover if you aren't eating." Dori intervened.

Bilbo sighed. "I don't remember."

"Vampires don't forget . . anything," Nori corrected.

Bilbo sent him a scathing glare. "It's been awhile."

"That's easy enough to fix. What you in the mood for?" Nori asked suggestively with a wag of his eyebrows.

"He's not allowed to eat. The contract forbids him from harming humans." Fili dutifully corrected.

A flash of anger passed quickly over Nori's face before it vanished, happening so fast Thorin was the only hunter to catch it. "Then it's a good thing Bilbo doesn't cause any harm when he eats."

"Shut up, Nori." Bilbo intervened. "Ori, how are the things you've been working on coming?"

"Mmmm!" Ori quickly swallowed his mouthful before answering. "I've got one of them almost done, I'm just waiting on Nori to get me the last piece I need for it."

"No need. I managed to find just what you're looking for today." Nori announced flipping a large blood red gem unto the table.

Bilbo's eyes widened. "A blood ruby." He said in near awe as he picked it up, turning it over to examine it.

"Blood rubies are the second most coveted stones by vampires. They seem to have a unique power enhancing effect on them. I've just got to mount this piece and then it will be ready for you." Ori explained.
Bilbo looked at Ori a crooked grin growing on his face. "You're giving me a blood ruby?"

"Well, technically, you're paying for it." Ori said blushing, embarrassed by the vampire's affectionate gaze.

Bilbo held out the stone and dropped it into Ori's waiting hand. "Your trust in me astounds me sometimes."

Ori just gave him a shy smile, fully aware of the kind of control it took the vampire to relinquish the jewel. "I only give what you deserve."

Thorin watched the exchange carefully, trying to decipher the relationship the vampire had with these brothers. So far, Ori seemed to be Master Baggins' favorite.

"And how are the other things I asked you for coming." Bilbo asked conversationally.

"Well, I still need a lot of materials for most of what I have in mind for you, but I have finished some designs for the hunter gear you asked me to make. I'm out of silver though, so I'm waiting on that too. I can show you what I've got so far after dinner." Ori invited.

"That would be lovely." Master Baggins accepted.

"What hunter gear?" Thorin wasn't aware Ori had been asked to make anything of the sort.

"I've asked Ori to make you and your nephews some upgraded gear. I hope you don't mind." Master Baggins answered.

"What's wrong with our gear?!" Kili piped up offended.

"Nothing's wrong with it. In fact, it's quiet impressive for what's currently on the market. But Ori can make you gear that won't be on the market for another good decade, at least." The vampire reasoned

"We appreciate it, but we can't afford to pay for any silver weapons or extra gear right now." Thorin tried to refuse.

"Oh, no! Bilbo's already paid for it." Ori reassured them.

"What?" Kili asked in disbelief

The hunters all stared at Bilbo.

Bilbo just shrugged. "Maybe I just like giving Ori things to work on. It's not like I'm short on money either. How are you on mythril, Ori? Have you run out of that too?"

"Not yet, but I will soon with all these weapons you are having me make."

All three of the hunters just gaped at the two discussing mythril like you could just go pick some up at the market. Mythril was known as the purest metal, but was insanely expensive and hard to come by.

None of their weapons contained any mythril. Silver was considered a far second, but was much cheaper and easily acquired. Only the wealthiest people in the world could afford mythril. And the vampire was having it applied to their weapons like it was standard?

Bilbo nodded at Ori's revelation. "Then I suppose a material run is in order."
"Not until you eat something. The hunter toys can wait." Dori interfered.

Bilbo lifted a challenging brow at him, as if Dori could enforce such a statement.

"Maybe he can do both." Nori proposed. "I've got a couple of jobs your friends might be interested in."

Everyone looked at Nori skeptically. "What? These are real jobs!"

"We'll talk about them later. If your done, Ori, why don't you show me some of these 'hunter toys' you've designed." Bilbo suggested with a wink since Ori had finished.

As Bilbo and Ori were getting up to leave, Kili jumped up. "Can we come?"

"Kili!" Thorin rebuked.

Ori just shrugged. "Sure."

"Ori!" His brothers echoed.

"What?" Ori and Kili both asked their guardians.

"We don't trust them." Nori answered. The sentiment was the same for Thorin's side.

"No, but I trust Bilbo." Ori countered.

Kili gestured to Ori. "Exactly!"

"We don't trust the vampire." Fili disagreed.

"No, You don't trust him. Uncle does. That's good enough for me." Kili turned to Thorin. "Please, Uncle?"

Thorin looked at Master Baggins who returned his gaze blankly. He rose from his seat. "As long as Master Ori is fine with it."

Bilbo raised a brow at him as Ori spluttered next to him from being called 'Master.' Ori just nodded, being momentarily tongue-tied.

Bilbo shook his head. "You've all lost your minds. I'm the last person in this room who should be trusted." He mumbled to himself as he moved to follow Ori.

"What?! What about me?" Fili tried not to yelp at the prospect of being left alone with the remaining Ri brothers.

"You can go back to our room, if you don't want to come." Thorin answered as he and Kili followed the vampire out.

Fili gaped for a moment, glancing at Dori and Nori, before taking off to catch up with his uncle and brother.

They followed Ori down several long corridors, gradually heading deeper into the mountain.

"We had to build Ori's shop deep in the mountain since he has a tendency to . . blow things up." Bilbo explained.
"We?" Thorin asked. The vampire seemed to have quite a history with the Ri's.

Bilbo nodded. "I've known the Ri brothers quite some time. Whenever I'd get . . unbearably bored, I would come and help them out with . . this and that."

Ori scoffed. "Bilbo almost single handedly designed and built this place for us. The front shop is all we really started with."

Thorin raised a brow at the vampire.

Master Baggins shrugged. "I was bored."

Ori snorted as if he knew better.

Bilbo huffed and gently flicked the inventor's goggles strap causing them to fall down his face.

Ori squawked in superficial offence.

Finally, they came to a set of heavy, reinforced double doors. Ori hit a switch on the wall which triggered a series of popping and grinding sounds as the doors swung open inward.

They opened up into a large room filled with all kinds of strange devices and trinkets. It was a mess. Things seemed to be thrown everywhere randomly. The walls, ceilings, and floors were all charred black from frequent explosions.

His 'workshop' was extensive and had several more doors leading out of the main room. Ori was leading them to one of these doors when Bilbo suddenly grabbed Kili's questing hand by the wrist.

"No touching. We don't need you blowing yourself up." He gave Kili a stern look.

Kili returned it with a sheepish smile.

The vampire rolled his eyes and huffed good naturedly at the teen.

The room that Ori led them to seemed to be his drawing room. Every wall was covered with sectional boxes holding scrolls and tomes alike. There was a table in the center of the room covered in recent drawings. Nori leaned against the door, having followed the group down.

"These are what I've finished so far. I've been coming up with some new things I'd like to try, but it might take some time to perfect them." He motioned to the table.

Bilbo and the hunters each started looking over the designs. Though Thorin would admit he couldn't make out any of the scribbles that lined the pictures, the designs themselves were excellent. Both in artistic quality and structural design.

"Oh, Ori. These are brilliant!" The vampire praised.

Ori blushed at the compliment. "Oh, here are some of the designs I've come up with for you, Bilbo. It's a little harder, cause I don't normally work with dark magic effects, but I have some ideas." He said handing a stack of papers to the vampire.

While Bilbo looked through them, the hunters continued to study their future weapons and gear.

"These are fantastic!" Kili exclaimed.

"Kili is right; these are exceptional." Thorin praised.
Ori squirmed from the compliments. Bilbo sent a studying glance at a Thorin but returned to examining the papers in his hands before anyone but Thorin noticed.

"Oh! Is this for me? Please, please say yes! It's awesome!" Kili gushed as he held up a page covered in a design for a bow and arrows.

Fili scoffed at it. "How is that a hunter weapon? It's just a bow. A vampire's not gonna sit there and give you time to draw an arrow."

"Well, it's better than a normal bow. It's for long range shots. And the reload time's actually better than a crossbow." Ori explained humbly.

"It's always nice to have a long range weapon. The crossbow is really more of a midrange." Bilbo confirmed.

"Hey, Uncle! Look at this! It's looks like some kind of crossbow." Kili held up another page for Thorin.

It was indeed a crossbow, but Thorin couldn't figure out what all the extra bits were supposed to be.

"It's an automatic crossbow. It reloads itself. So you don't have to take the time to do it." Ori explained.

Thorin gaped at him. Such a thing would cut down on response time dramatically. "That's ingenious."

"Well, it sounds good on paper. I still have to make it work in reality." Ori admitted humbly.

Thorin was beginning to think there wasn't much the inventor couldn't make. "I'm sure you'll figure it out."

Ori seemed encouraged by the hunter's vote of confidence. Bilbo and Nori both sent Thorin glances, though Nori's was far more suspicious.

A few minutes later, Bilbo handed the papers back. "So, where is this piece that you almost have finished?"

"Oh! This way. He walked back out of the room as Bilbo and the hunters all moved to follow. Ori led them to another room. This one was full of much more delicate tools and contraptions.

"Give me a minute and I'll set the blood ruby." Ori said walking over to a work table.

Bilbo waited patiently with the hunters and a couple of minutes later Ori walked over holding a wide framed necklace. The beads were tall and double strung; they started narrow but became wider in the front. In the very center was the blood ruby set in a black casing.

Other than being polished to a shine, there was nothing fancy about the beads themselves and they looked to be made from some kind of stone.

Bilbo's eyes turned black as he gently took the necklace, staring in awe of the piece. "This is . . . this is magnificent." He said breathlessly.

"I'm glad you like it." Ori smiled shyly.

"It feels so . . . homey. What is it made out of?" The vampire asked in wonderment.
“Well, the wire and setting is dark iron, and you know about the blood ruby, but the stone is from the deepest tomb from the oldest crypts in Belegost.” Ori revealed matter-of-factly.

Bilbo didn't even flinch but just continued to admire the inventor's work. The hunters' heads all shot up, though, at that bit of information. "You desecrated a grave just to make a piece of jewelry?” Fili asked incredulously.

"Of course not." Ori fidgeted. "Nori did it. I only asked him to grab what I needed while he was there."

The hunters all turned their gaze to Nori.

"What? Thief." He said gesturing to himself.

"And grave robber apparently.” Thorin mumbled.

"Just another form of thievery really." The vampire said a little spacey. His thumb was gently caressing the blood ruby in his hands.

Thorin watched him. He didn't know that vampires had a thing for stones, though it did explain how he was able to finish off the leader of The Three.

"Would you like to put it on?" He asked the vampire, breaking him out of his daze.

Instantly, the necklace was gone.

"Huh? Where'd it go?" Kili asked looking around.

Ori giggled. "He put it on, of course."

Thorin looked the vampire over, and, sure enough, some of his color seemed to be coming back, though he was still a long shot from back to normal.

"How's it feel?" Ori asked.

"Amazing. I could kiss you, but then Nori would get jealous. He seems to be getting jealous a lot lately."

Ori blushed shyly while Nori spluttered. Thorin just sent Nori a glare.

Bilbo rolled his shoulders, adjusting to the new feel. "Alright. Now tell me what you need for the rest of your projects."

"Well, as you know, I need silver and mythril. I'll also need dark iron, blood rubies, opals. How do you feel about moonstone?"

Bilbo shrugged. "That's a werewolf fetich."

"Right. Well, I'll also need some ash and oak wood. Maybe I should just make you a list. I would really like to get my hands on some arkenstone . ." Ori froze realizing what he just said. " . . but I don't need it. It's just a fascination."

"There is only one arkenstone mine in the world," Thorin said darkly. "And there's a dragon sitting on it."

Nori pushed himself upright from the wall and he and Ori both eyed the vampire warily.
Bilbo had gone stiff from tension. His face was blank, but his eyes were dark and his hands were shaking. "If it's what you need, Ori." He sounded eerily monotone and empty.

"Sorry, Bilbo, I shouldn't have said anything. I really don't need it. Honest!" Ori tried to reassure the vampire.

Thorin was fascinated (and somewhat concerned) by the vampire's reaction. Perhaps he shouldn't be surprised that the vampire, as powerful as he was, was still afraid of a dragon.

Bilbo had yet to relax out of his tension and Ori sent a pleading look to his brother.

"I think that's enough for today." Nori cautiously approached the vampire. "Why don't we hit Dori up for some tea and you can have a nice smoke before heading back to bed." He coaxed.

Bilbo's eyes began to focus again as he eased out of some of his tension. "That sounds lovely." He sounded weary but more like himself. "Why don't you make me a list, Ori, and we'll talk about it tomorrow night." He suggested as he turned to follow Nori out.

Ori nodded and followed them all out just far enough to go back to his drawing room.

Thorin and his boys followed Nori and Bilbo back up, baffled by the whole thing but smart enough not to aggravate the situation. Thorin sent the boys back to their room, once they got back to the main house.

Dori set Bilbo up with some tea and a smoke in the main sitting room and Thorin could almost see the tension seep out of him. By the time he finished, his eyes were heavy lidded and his body lax.

Thorin suspected there was a little more to his tea and smoke than usual, but knew asking wouldn't get him any answers.

Finally Dori came in and coaxed the vampire into heading to bed. Dori steadied the vampire as he led him out. Thorin raised a questioning eyebrow at Nori who had been silently watching over Bilbo. Nori just shrugged and followed after his brother and Bilbo.

Thorin wasn't sure what to make of the whole thing. Just a few more questions to add to his collection he figured as he headed back to his room for the night.
Dispite the vampire's intentions, he didn't show up again for another two nights. He joined them for dinner just as they were finishing up, sending Dori a mild glare while Dori just feigned ignorance. Bilbo huffed at him, accepting his tea.

"Sorry, I'm late. I hadn't intended to sleep so long." He apologized sending a significant look at Dori.

"It's fine." Thorin dismissed, he didn't particularly mind if the vampire got some much needed sleep.

"Well, I suppose it only puts us a day behind. Do you have a list for me, Ori?"

Ori nodded, fishing a piece of paper out of his loose knit jacket. Dori began clearing the table away and Bilbo sent Nori for a map.

Ori handed the list over and Bilbo began to scan over it. "A smith? I'm not a dating service, Ori." He said with a playful smirk.

"Not for that!" Ori squawked in embarrassment. "You know smithing's not really my thing. I can do enough to get by for my inventions, but you should get a real smith for the weapons, preferably a really good one." He explained quickly trying to ward off his brothers' involvement in the conversation.

"Ah, of course. I see now." Bilbo chuckled. He couldn't help messing with him just a bit. He knew Ori did actually like the strong types but didn't want his brothers to know.

Nori spread a map over the table after Dori got it cleaned off. Bilbo gestured Thorin over to join him. Thorin settled next to him and, if he was a little too close, well, that wasn't anyone else's business.

"Silver is easy to come by, we can pick that up in just about every town we pass though. Gems are also plentiful, especially at mining towns. The only things we really need to go out of our way for are dark iron and mythril." Bilbo explained as he scanned over the map.

"The only mythril mine is in Moria and it's infested with all sorts of fowl creatures." Thorin contributed.

"Ah, of course. I see now." Bilbo chuckled. He couldn't help messing with him just a bit. He knew Ori did actually like the strong types but didn't want his brothers to know.

"Which is why I'll be going in alone." The vampire clarified.

"Alone?" Thorin was mildly alarmed at that bit of information, powerful vampire or not.

"Yes. It won't be the first time and there are things down there that even I don't really want to mess with. I need to go alone so I can get in and out before I'm noticed."

"But mythril is toxic to you? How are you going to get it without being infected?" Kili piped up.

"I won't say I'm immune, but I'm not as affected as other vampires. Plus, Ori has made me a handy dark iron lined collection bag for transporting the stuff."

"You're a vampire, how can you not be affected by mythril?" Fili asked incredulous and possibly a little concerned. "Does that mean you're not affected by silver either?"

"I said I wasn't as affected." Bilbo corrected. "And no silver doesn't bother me all that much."

"How is that possible?" Fili gaped. Even Thorin was flabbergasted. Could vampires grow out of
their vulnerability to pure substances?

Bilbo just shrugged, not interested in divulging anymore.

"For dark iron, we'll have to go up north. The biggest veins are in Gundabad, but there are veins scattered throughout those mountains as long as you know where to look for them. And I do, so we shouldn't have to cross the Misty's." He continued, disregarding Fili's question.

"That's a wide arc to travel just for supplies." Thorin mused.

"Doesn't mean it can't be productive." Cut in Nori. "There are several towns between here and the northern mountains. All the big ones are mining towns which will suit your purposes just fine. Plus, the north doesn't get as many hunters, plenty of work to be done up there."

"I suppose you've heard of some jobs in that region then." Bilbo prompted.

"Oh, sure. Every major town between here and the northern mountains has some kind of monster related ailment. Add in the smaller settlements along the way, and there should be more than enough to keep you busy."

"What kind of monsters?" Thorin couldn't help but not trust the thief.


Bilbo hissed in distaste, startling the hunters around the table.

"What's a lamia?" Kili ventured, curious about the vampire's reaction.

"A goblin who looks like an old hag and eats babies to regain its youth." Bilbo nearly spit out in disgust.

The boys were shocked speechless. Even Thorin was surprised, he had never heard of such a creature. "I thought only changelings stole babies."

The tension in the room seemed to thicken at Thorin's statement. He looked around wondering at the change.

"Changelings do not steal children; they swap them. Lamias and Changelings are entirely different." The vampire clarified.

"They're both goblins and they both take babies. How are they different?" Fili challenged.

"They are different for many reasons. First of all, changelings are not goblins; they are fairies, as such they are natural magical beings. Lamias are more like vampires; they were originally humans who were transformed by black magic."

"I thought changelings were really ugly." Kili contributed.

Bilbo sighed. "Beauty, or lack of it, does not determine ones nature or origin. Not all fairies are beautiful and not all goblins are ugly."

Thorin glanced at Bilbo. Wasn't that the truth. If he was judging by looks, he would have never figured Master Baggins as a vampire. He returned his gaze to studying the Ri brothers. They had all become very quiet and the tension seemed to thicken with the conversation.
"Changelings are unfortunately lacking in good looks, which is why they must resort to baby swapping." Bilbo consented.

"Why is that?" Thorin pursued when it seemed like the vampire was going to drop the subject.

"Because changelings feed on the love of humans."

"What?" Kili voiced the confusion of all three hunters.

Bilbo sighed again, as if he felt he was instructing hard-headed children. "Many fairies are dependent on humans for life or livelihood, like brownies. Changelings feed on human love, but, being as . . . visually unappealing as they are, you can see how that might be a problem. Unfortunately, they also have very weak glamor magic, so they can't even conceal themselves behind a pretty face."

"Yet, without human love, they will die. They solve this dilemma by swapping out their own children with human children. Their glamor magic is only strong enough to mask a small child for a limited amount of time. They swap in the hope that their child will be accepted by the human mother before the glamor wears off."

"They then take the human child and raise it as their own. This way the mother feeds on the love of a human child and the infant feeds on the love of a human mother. Everyone lives, no one is harmed. Unless of course, the human mother happens to notice and rejects the changeling infant. In which case, the changeling infant will die, but the mother and human infant will still survive."

"They do what they do out of necessity, not desire or malicious intent. Lamias, on the other hand, are completely different. They steal and devour infants for the sole purpose of feeding their own greed and vanity."

The hunters were silently absorbing the information and the Ri brothers had yet to contribute anything to the conversation.

"You said lamias were like vampires. Yet, you act as if all lamias are evil and unredeemable." Thorin wasn't used to such prejudice coming from the vampire.

Bilbo shook his head. "We are the same in that we were both originally human and that we are both made from dark magic. But the methods of our creations are entirely different." Bilbo continued, sensing Thorin's question. "Vampires are relatively easily made and a human can be turned into a vampire against his will and still be bound to the curse. A lamia cannot be made unless the will of the human contains enough greed, vanity, and hatred to fuel the curse and can only be made by someone with advanced dark magical knowledge. Without these things the curse will not hold and the host will fade or die."

"So, by its very nature, a lamia desires to kill and devour infants to fulfill its own greed, and possessed the willingness to do so even before its transformation." Bilbo explained patiently.

Thorin took a moment to absorb the information, not sure what concerned him the most. That their were people who would willing feed on infants just for their own immortality, or that there were vampires who may have never wanted to be vampires in the first place. Thorin had never seen any indication from any of the vampires he had killed that they hadn't wanted to be vampires.

Before he could ask his next question, Kili spoke up. "So, what happens to the children after they're swapped, then?"

Bilbo shrugged. "The changeling grows up wearing a weak glamor. If you've ever see someone who wasn't exactly the best looking person or child you've ever seen and felt like there was something off
about them but couldn't place it, then you were probably looking at a changeling. They are generally very pleasant and good natured though. They depend on that to endear themselves to humans."

"They do their best to endear themselves to their human parents and males will usually stay with them for as long as possible, even taking care of them in their old age. Females usually break away after the birth of their first child, and rely on the love of their swapped infant."

"The human infants are nursed and raised by their changeling mother, causing them to become . . half-blooded in nature. Though they are technically human, they typically develop some . . superhuman qualities associated with being half-blooded." The vampire was treading carefully around his explanation.

The significance was lost on the boys, but Thorin picked up on it. Humans who aren't human, half-bloods, the tension caused by the conversation. Thorin examined each of the Ri brothers suspiciously.

Ori was fidgeting nervously, Nori was very focused on cleaning his nails with a dagger, and Dori was carefully examining his clothes for any sign of lint. All clearly avoiding the conversation.

Thorin decided to keep his observations to himself for now. He needed time to digest his discovery. "And how does one stop a lamia?"

"Same way you stop any dark creature. You kill it." The vampire answered mercilessly.

"But you're gonna have to find it first." Nori interjected. "There's a lot of crazy stuff going on up north, there always is. Most hunters don't like going up that way. It's hard to pinpoint what's where."

"We'll find it. I'll not suffer a lamia in my region." Bilbo hissed territorially.

"Your region?" Fili asked skeptically. "What? Are you like a lord or something?" He asked sarcastically.

Bilbo just a raised an eyebrow at him, but the Ri's were near gaping.

"You really don't know who he is, do you?" Ori asked in disbelief.

"Vampires have territories. Most of Eriador is mine." Bilbo interjected before they could explore Ori's question. "I don't like sharing it with . . certain characters."

"So, you . . protect it?" Kili asked. "Like a guardian?"

"I wouldn't say that. I try not to interfere overly much, but I won't tolerate certain . . creatures on it. They disgust me; I won't have it." Bilbo said with finality.

Thorin decided to try to get them back on track. "So, we head north get the dark iron, follow the Misty's south, grab some mythril," He still couldn't believe he was saying it like it was nothing. "then loop back around and head back here?"

"Almost. We'll stop at my castle on our way back. I have quite a stash there, we'll grab whatever we still need on Ori's list." The vampire corrected.

Thorin looked at him confused. "Where?"

Now Bilbo was confused. "Where what?"

"Where do you keep it? I didn't see anything of value in that castle." Thorin clarified.
Bilbo scoffed. "That's because you were looking above ground."

Of course. Bilbo's living quarters would have been in the basement, which was sealed and locked up tight. No wonder he couldn't find anything. But, then what was that locked room upstairs.

"We can leave whenever you're ready. The sooner we go and get back, the sooner we can get our goodies made." Bilbo continued. "And I suppose we should try to find a smith while we're out." He winked at Ori who blushed.

"What about you? We came here to get something to make traveling easier for you?" Thorin asked.

Bilbo shrugged. "Need materials to make things. The neck band Ori made me should help and I believe Dori finished some adjustments to my cloaks. It should be better than before."

Dori nodded. "You're clothes are finished as well. I won't have you going about in those faded old clothes."

Bilbo hummed pleased. "Thank you, Dori."

"If you're sure you're fine, we can leave in the morning. We'll pick up food supplies on our way out of town." Thorin started planning.

"Sounds good. Why don't you and the boys go get some sleep? Enjoy having a bed for another night. I'll get my things around and get what we'll need from Ori. In the morning, we'll grab the rest of what we'll need on our way out, as you said."

Thorin nodded in agreement before ushering his boys back to their room. They woke up early the next morning and packed up. When they headed to the kitchen to grab a quick breakfast, they were greeted by a variety of delicious aromas.

They walked into the dining room to find a table full of bags stuffed with dried and travel type foods. When the hunters poked their head into the kitchen, they weren't sure what they were seeing. It was like a whirlwind, only things seemed to move with a sense of order rather than chaos.

Suddenly, everything seemed to stop and Bilbo appeared in the middle of the kitchen. "Is it that time already?" He asked wiping his hands on his apron. "Time sure flies when you're busy, doesn't it? Just give me a few more minutes."

With that Bilbo vanished and things started moving again. In just under a minute, the kitchen was in spotless order and the last bits of his work were neatly packed and bagged sitting on the island in the center of the kitchen.

Bilbo reappeared, grabbing the last few bags and walking towards them to the dining room. The hunters moved aside letting him through. "Did you do all this?" Thorin asked in amazement.

"Pretty much. I had Dori teach me some travel food recipes, and I took the liberty of picking us up some dried foods and nuts. I know you were planning to just buy them, but really, I'm sure this will taste much better and I had nothing else to do with my time. Of course, if there's something else you wanted, you can still pick it up on our way out." Bilbo added the last bag to the collection on the table.

"How are we supposed to carry all this to the stables?" Thorin wondered out loud, not really wanting to leave any of it behind. It smelled delicious.

"I already sent Nori to retrieve your horses. We'll load up when he gets here." Bilbo explained.
"Give me one more minute, and I'll go get my things." He said before vanishing. This time he returned only seconds later, but had clearly stopped to change in his absence.

Thorin looked him over appreciating the new clothes. They looked like the same clothes he was wearing only bright and new. Thorin was sure he was wearing his new neck band, but it was hidden under his cravat. "Aren't they pretty much just like the old ones you were wearing?"

Bilbo looked down at himself. "I sure hope so. Dori knows what I like."

"Why don't you try something different?" Kili wondered innocently.

Bilbo shrugged. "This is what I like."

"Where are your shoes?" Fili wondered out loud.

Bilbo raised a brow at him. "I don't wear shoes."

"Like, ever?" Kili seemed to also just notice the vampire's shoelessness.

Bilbo turned his gaze to Thorin and raised his brow in rebuke.

Thorin huffed. "Don't look at me like that. I'm not a miracle worker."

"Wait. Are you saying you haven't been wearing shoes this whole time?" Kili asked in disbelief.

Bilbo wiggled his toes. "Yep."

Both the boys gaped at him. "How did we miss that?" Fili couldn't believe he had missed such an obvious detail.

Bilbo just shrugged before momentarily disappearing. He reappeared seconds later while they were starting to look around for him.

"Where'd you go?" Kili spotted him first.

"I moved our bags to the front shop. We should get going." He said before turning and heading out at human speed, donning his improved cloak.

Sure enough, when the hunters turned around, the table had been cleared. They hurried after the vampire. Their bags had all been set by the shop door and, as they stepped out, Nori and the stable keeper could be seen just coming up the way to the shop.

The stable keeper brought the horses right up to Thorin, he wasn't the most attractive fellow, but he was friendly enough. "Mr. Oakenshield. I got yer horses right here for ya. Nori said you was wantin' 'em and I said I wouldn't let 'me go till I saws you had 'em."

"Thank you. Your extra effort is much appreciated." Thorin said as he pulled out some coins to pay the man, throwing in a few extra for the delivery. "Thank you for tending them."

Kili was watching the man like a hawk, looking him over carefully. Thorin handed the man his pay and the stable keeper bowed shortly in thanks before turning to head back to his stable.

Before the man was even out of sight, Kili grabbed Bilbo and started shaking him with excitement. "That man's a changling!" Kili whispered loudly.

Thorin turned to look at the duo in surprise. Was he really and Thorin hadn't even noticed? Were
Bilbo was taking Kili's man-handling good naturally, but otherwise looked unimpressed. Thorin stifled a chuckle but couldn't contain a small grin.

Kili was already taller than the vampire and bigger overall. Clearly the vampire had a soft spot for children, considering his reaction to the lamia and even when Thorin had first told him the ages of his nephews. His patience with them seemed absolute not even wavering when Fili tried to make jabs at him.

"Yes, Kili. He's a changling, they often take average jobs to help them fit in." Bilbo sighed and smoothed out his clothes once Kili finally let him go.

"Wow! I can't believe they were always right in front of us and we never noticed!" Kili gushed excited at his new perception.

"Actually, you have very good eyes. That one's glamor was pretty good for a changling." Bilbo commented, still straightening out his cloak. Dori had made him some new gloves that went well past his elbows, allowing him to reach outside his cloak.

Kili puffed up at the compliment. Thorin was getting the feeling that Kili had pretty much adopted the vampire now.

They loaded each of their horses up, putting as much as they could on the spare horse, when Thorin realized they had one too many horses. Nori was loading up right along with them. "What are you doing?"

Nori looked at him. "What's it look like? I'm coming with you."

"Oh no, you're not." Thorin countered. There was no way he was going to put up with the little thief for this whole trip.

"You gonna stop me hunter?" Nori challenged.

Before Thorin could reply, Bilbo stepped up and grabbed Nori by his ear, pulling him down to his level. "If you cause trouble, Nori, you will regret it." Nori nodded in compliance and Bilbo let him go.

"If you don't let him come, he'll just follow us and then you won't be able to keep and eye on him." The vampire advised from under his hood. Whatever Ori and Dori did must be working because the vampire was functioning far better under his cloak, despite the sun. Though, Thorin could tell he was still putting a lot of effort into it.

"Fine, but he better not be a problem." Thorin consented.

"I'll deal with him myself if he is." The vampire promised.

Thorin nodded, accepting his word. Shortly they were all packed up. Ori and Dori came out to see them off. After their goodbyes, they headed for the east gate, deciding they didn't really need to stop for anything, and started off towards the first town.
They traveled east along one of the lesser used paths towards the first major town on their chosen path. It was Adnuminas. A large mining town situated between the southern Hills of Evindim and the Lake of Evindim.

Rather than taking the main merchant’s road and doubling back around the hills, their plan was to take the path through the hills and directly to the town. It was a more dangerous, less-traveled path, but could easily save them several days travel.

So far the trip had been easy enough. Even Nori hadn’t caused any problems beyond his general mouthiness. They had traveled nearly a week so far and were just coming up to their first crossing over the Lune River.

They reached the river just as the sun was going down, so decided to stop for the night. They set up camp, building a small fire and pulling out their dinner.

Bilbo sat at the edge of their camp, smoking his pipe and watching the river. Thorin hadn’t noticed it before, but it was obvious now that Nori was with them. Bilbo seemed to always segregate himself from the rest of them.

He always sat a little ways away from their camp. Nori always choose to stay close to the vampire over the hunters, which is what made Thorin notice the distinct separation that the vampire was keeping.

Now that he knew what it was, it was starting to bother him. He had thought his relationship with the vampire was, at least, decent enough that he wouldn’t feel the need to keep his distance.

He sat contemplating the vampire, though he probably should have been making a plan to cross the river, when Kili got up, walked over and plopped himself down next to the vampire. Thorin momentarily envied Kili’s openness.

“It’s sure moving pretty fast.” Kili commented about the river. The recent rains had swollen it with muddy gushing currents.

Bilbo hummed in affirmations but kept his eyes transfixed on the water.

Kili didn’t give up. “Do vampires not like water? I mean, I know you can cross it, obviously, but that belief had to come from somewhere, right?”

Bilbo chuckled softly. “Did it ever occur to you that there could be vampires masquerading as hunters in order to feed you false information?”

Kili gaped at the vampire. Thorin couldn’t help himself any longer. He went over and sat down next to Kili. “Is that true?”

Bilbo nodded. “I knew a fellow way back who would get his kicks by going around pretending to be a hunter. He fed your lot all kinds of nonsense.” He said with an amused smirk.

“Where is he now?” Kili asked.

Bilbo shrugged, the smile falling off his face. “He’s not around anymore. I guess, someone found out. It was always a dangerous game he played.”
“Then why did he do it?” Thorin didn’t think the kicks would be worth the risk.

Bilbo shrugged again. “Life gets boring when you’ve been around awhile. It drives some to take bigger and bigger risks just to drive away the boredom.”

“Is that what you’re doing?” Thorin asked searchingly.

Bilbo finally turned to look at him, though his face was blank. “No.” He answered after a few seconds before turning back to watch the river.

“So, you never answered my question.” Kili cut in, sensing a subject change was needed. “Do vampires not like water? Or maybe it’s just you?”

Bilbo raised a brow and sent Kili a quick glance. “What makes you think I don’t like it.” He asked around his pipe.

“Well, you’re staring at it like it’s a foe to be vanquished.” Kili pointed out.

Bilbo chuckled. “I’m sure that’s an exaggeration. I don’t particularly like or dislike it. Vampires aren’t harmed by water, but we can’t swim either. We sink like a rock.” He revealed.

“Oh, so how do you cross if there’s no bridge. Do you just have to walk across on the bottom?” Kili theorized.

Bilbo made a face of disgust. “I suppose that’s an exaggeration. I don’t particularly like or dislike it. Vampires aren’t harmed by water, but we can’t swim either. We sink like a rock.” He revealed.

“Oh, so how do you cross if there’s no bridge. Do you just have to walk across on the bottom?” Kili theorized.

Bilbo made a face of disgust. “I suppose that would work, but it’s highly unnecessary and I’m certainly not walking through that muddy river. I just got these new clothes.”

“Then how are you going to get across?” Kili asked befuddled.

“I’m going to jump it, obviously.”

Kili and Thorin looked at the river then back to the vampire, wondering if it was some kind of joke. This was the main body of the river. It wasn’t a small river, and it was even wider from all the rain up north.

“Are you serious?” Kili ventured when it didn’t seem like the vampire was pulling a joke.

Bilbo looked at them confused. “Of course, I’m serious. I’m not touching that.” He pointed at the muddy river.

“But, it’s . . .” Kili trailed off too amazed to finish.

“Not that far.” Bilbo finished for him. “I’ve jumped farther.” He said with a shrug. “Though, theoretically, I could probably just run across it with my speed, but I’ve never done it before and I’m not about to practice on this mud puddle.”

Thorin and Kili were both gaping now. What couldn’t the vampire do?

When he finally recovered, Kili realized he still hadn’t gotten an answer. He squinted at the vampire suspiciously. “So, why are you looking at the water like that if you’re just gonna jump it?”

Bilbo’s eyes never left the water. “I guess it just stirs up memories.” He answered distractedly.

“Oh.” Just when Thorin thought his nephew was going to let it go, he continued. “What kind of memories? Bad ones?”
“Old ones.” The vampire answered simply. His eyes were unfocused as he gazed out at nothing in particular. Finally his focus broke and he started cleaning out his pipe. “When a person is . . infected with the vampire curse, the majority of their memories from before the infection rapidly fade away into nothing.” He explained. “The only memories that remain are the most vivid and ingrained ones and even those become faint.”

“So, the river reminds you of a memory from before you were a vampire?” Kili slowly deciphered.

Bilbo nodded blankly, not particularly interested in explaining any more.

But Kili couldn’t help himself. “What’s the memory about?” He asked, curious enough to push his luck for an answer.

“Drowning.” The vampire answered matter-of-factly before getting up, signaling the end of the conversation. “I’m going to scan the area.” He said before vanishing.

Kili sat in silence, kind of regretting he had pushed for an answer.

“I thought you said vampires never forget.” Thorin directed at the thief sitting nearby.

“They don’t. Not anything from after their change anyway. Most don’t remember much about their human lives.” Nori shrugged.

Thorin ruminated on that for a while. Could that be part of the reason why vampires don’t fight what they are? They forget what it was like to be human? Thorin had so many questions now he doubted he’d ever get them all answered.

Thorin nudged his nephew and they both returned to their bedrolls for the night. Thorin awoke suddenly a little before dawn to a loud whinny from one of their horses. He lept to his feet grabbing his sword looking for an attacker.

When he looked around, he saw nothing. A lot of nothing, in fact. No supplies, no vampire, no thief, and no supply horse. His nephews were looking around, dazed from the sudden wake up call.

Thorin’s first instinct was to blame the thief, but suddenly a vampire landed in their midst coming from the river.

“You’re awake. Sorry about that. The horses aren’t really keen on flying.” Master Baggins explained.

The hunters looked at him dumbly, trying to make sense of what he was saying.

“Well, I can see you’re still waking up, so I’ll just take another horse over and, maybe by the time I get back, you’ll have caught up.” With that, he walked over to Thorin’s horse and wrapped a cloth around the horse’s eyes.

In a blink, he had the horse all strapped up in some weird leather straps. Right in front of the hunters, he held out his arms under the horse pulling the straps tight, picked it up, and took two steps with the horse in hand before launching himself over the river.

By the time he landed back on their side, the hunters were all still gaping at him. When no response was forthcoming, he just shrugged and went over to repeat the process with Fili’s horse.

By the time he got back this time, they had finally started to shake off their daze.
“What are you doing?” Fili asked incredulously.

“I’m getting your things across the river. Unless, of course, you would rather risk losing them in the water.” He said stopping and raising a brow at him.

Fili didn’t answer. It’s not like he was looking forward to crossing the muddy river.

“Wait! What about us?” Kili asked.

“I can take you as well, if you’d like. I already hopped Nori over.” Bilbo answered as he wrapped up Kili’s horse.

“Yes!” Kili yelled excited. Thorin wasn’t sure how he felt about it, and Fili looked a little sick at the thought.

Bilbo just nodded before taking off with Kili’s horse. A couple minutes later and he was back. Everything but the hunters and their personal bags, was now on the other side of the river.

“So, who’s first?” The vampire asked as he walked over to them.

“Me!!” Kili yelled over no one. He was clearly enthusiastic about the ride.

“Yes, yes. But pick up your things first.” Bilbo gestured to his bedroll still on the ground. He had had Nori put the fire out and had already cleaned up and packed most of the camp.

Kili cleaned up his stuff, quickly stuffing it into his bag, seemingly afraid one of the others would beat him. In a matter of seconds, he was ready and rearing to go.

“Alright, alright.” Bilbo chuckled at Kili’s eagerness. Bilbo quickly wrapped his straps around Kili to support his weight more evenly. “Alright, you’re gonna have to ride on my back. Keep your head down until we’re up in the air, then you can look around. The take off is a little sudden, I don’t want you getting whiplash.”

“Okay!” Kili tied his bag to him and took his position behind Bilbo wrapping his arms around Bilbo’s chest.

Bilbo pulled the straps tight, picking up Kili’s weight. “Pick your feet up. I’m going to do a running start so I don’t jolt you so much.” Bilbo ordered.

When Kili did as he was told, the vampire started out at a human speed run, gradually gettin faster until he jumped just before the edge of the river.

Kili kept his head down until they were in the air, as he was ordered, but lifted it as soon and the pressure lifted. He whooped and hollered the whole way, clearly thinking it was some kind of joy ride.

A few minutes later he was back for Fili and Thorin. “Who’s next?” Bilbo raises a brow at them when there were no volenteers.

Thorin pointed to his nephew. “Take Fili first.”

“What?! No!” Fili protested.

“Would you rather swim across?” Bilbo asked him, not sounding the least bit patronizing.

Fili looked at the river. It was still rushing and swollen. He swallowed nervously before shaking his
head no.

Bilbo walked up and started strapping him more slowly than he had Kili. “Do you remember what I told Kili?” He asked as he stood in front of Fili and pulled the straps tight.

Fili nodded, but didn’t trust his voice enough to say anything.

“Keep your head down and hold on. It will be over quickly. I promise.” The vampire soothed before taking off at a slow run again. There was no whooping or hollering this time.

A few minutes later and Bilbo was back for Thorin. “Are you ready?”

“Are the straps necessary?” Thorin asked, his pride getting the better of him.

“To get you to the other side? No. To do it with out risking hurting or killing you in the process? Yes.” Bilbo answered.

Thorin hesitantly nodded in consent and the vampire stepped forward and began to strap him. He was clearly taking his time as it took him twice as long as it took him to strap up Fili. Finally he stopped in front of Thorin giving him a smirk.

Thorin just raised a brow at him. “Are you having fun?”

“Leather straps is a good look for you.” Bilbo winked at him before turning around and waiting for Thorin to grab on.

Thorin’s eyebrows shot up. It had been awhile since the vampire had flirted with him. He was beginning to think he had gotten past it. He wrapped his arms around Bilbo’s chest and leaned into his ear. “I think they’d look far better on you.”

Thorin heard a sigh of breath leave the vampire before he yanked the straps tight, grinding Thorin’s front into his back. “I can’t say I’d be entirely opposed to it.” Master Baggins confessed before starting into a slow run. Bilbo sped up and took off as he did with the others.

When the pressure was gone from Thorin’s neck, he lifted his head. They were soaring over the river. They might have well have been flying the way everything sped past under them. It was amazing and breathtaking.

It only lasted a few seconds before they were landing on the other side. The vampire took the majority of the force of their landing and was quickly un-strapping Thorin in seconds.

“How was it, Uncle?! Wasn’t it the coolest thing ever?! It’s like we were flying!!” Kili gushed, clearly having enjoyed his trip. Fili, on the other hand, was still looking a bit green.

“It was amazing.” Thorin confessed. “And saved us a lot of time, effort and, likely, supplies. Thank you.” He directed at the vampire.

Bilbo just shrugged, pulling out and donning his cloak. They had all made it over only minutes before the sun came up.

Nori had the horses all set to go, so they pulled out a quick breakfast to munch on as they rode on. After a full days riding, they made it to their second point of crossing. It was much shallower and narrower here. This part of the river came off the Evindim Hills and fed the main river.

It was also much cleaner and calmer. Deciding to stop and cross it in the morning, they figured it was
also a good spot to get washed up. The boys were stripped and in the water before the camp was
even fully made.

Nori, Bilbo, and Thorin finished setting up the camp and preparing dinner without them. Eventually,
Bilbo went to sit and smoke near the edge of the river were he could watch the boys.

“Hey, Bilbo!” Kili yelled before directing a large splash in the vampire’s direction. The water fell
harmlessly before ever making it to him, much to Kili’s bafflement.

“Kili! What have I told you?” Scolded Thorin.

“Sorry, Master Baggins.”

“‘Bilbo’ is fine, Kili.” The vampire allowed.

“Okay!” Kili answered back before sending another wave of water at the vampire. This one also fell
harmlessly before ever reaching him. “How are you doing that?” Kili asked with a mix of frustration
and awe.

“The same way I do this.” The vampire held out a hand and suddenly the boys were hit by a small
wave.

They spluttered, wiping the water from their faces. “But how?” Kili nearly whined.

Bilbo chuckled. “I’m just batting the air. I’m just doing it fast and hard enough to effect the water.”
He explained.

“That’s no fair!” Kili whined.

Bilbo just chuckled and shrugged, not overly concerned by the fairness of unfairness of it.

Kili spent the rest of his swim time trying to catch the vampire off guard and even got his brother in
on the game. Bilbo foiled their every attempt and just chuckled as he sent several waves crashing
over their heads.

Thorin called an end to the splashing when he finally came down to the river to wash up, and it
lasted for maybe five minutes before Kili sent a large splash at his Uncle. Well, that devolved into a
water brawl between him and his nephews.

Bilbo watched in amusement and Nori just cleaned up near the edge, staying well clear of the family
feud. Just when it seemed like Thorin and his boys were about to come to a truce, Bilbo whipped his
hand out, sending a huge wave over the squawking hunters.

When they resurfaced spluttering and throwing curses at him, he laughed. Really laughed. The
hunters all stopped their spluttering in awe, having never heard the vampire truly laugh before. Even
Nori was near gaping at him.

Thorin was sure he had never heard such a beautiful sound.

Bilbo cleaned out his pipe still chuckling to himself. “Come on. It’s getting dark. You lot should be
getting some sleep.” He called them out.

They snapped out of their dazes as they started heading towards the shore. They got dressed and sat
down for a quick dinner before Thorin sent the boys to bed.

Bilbo sat a little ways from the camp, as usual, with Nori settling into his bedroll nearby. With the
boys and Nori all settled in for the night, Thorin figured he wouldn’t get a better opportunity while on the road to talk to the vampire.

He ambled over and sat down next the vampire. Bilbo gave him an almost imperceptible nod of recognition.

"So, the Ri’s are changelings." Thorin began quietly.

Bilbo side-eyed him, waiting for Thorin to continue.

"Or, at least, they were raised by one." Thorin concluded.

Bilbo just nodded, turning his eyes forward again.

“And that’s why Nori can disappear.” Thorin concluded further.

“Nori is a Skulk. He has the ability to make himself almost completely undetectable by most creatures.” Bilbo explained.

“Is that a different kind of fairy?”

“It’s a general term for anyone with his kind of abilities.”

“And the others.”

Bilbo shrugged. “Ori’s an intellect. Dori’s a Powerhouse.”

“I get the intellect, but what’s a Powerhouse?”

“A Powerhouse is gifted with immense strength, just as an Intellect is gifted with superior smarts.” Bilbo explained.

Thorin thought about that for a few minutes. “Are they even truly related?”

“Not by blood.” The vampire answered quietly. “Changelings never take from the same family twice.”

Thorin nodded. “You seem to be close with them. How did you meet them?” Thorin asked, risking sounding like he was prying.

“Changelings are . . low on the food chain, you might say. They are often picked on and abused by stronger magical beings. I . . interfered in an unpleasant situation for them and in exchange they offered me their services. I protect their family, and they take care of any needs I might have.”

Thorin nodded. Clearly a friendship had formed from the agreement. “Like tea leaves and pipeweed?” He said with a playful smirk.

“Exactly.” Bilbo nodded emphatically. “Very hard things to get a hold of as a vampire. If you want the good stuff, anyway.”

Thorin couldn’t quite help the responding smile. “I’ll keep their secret, though I can’t promise the boys won’t find out.”

“I don’t think the boys will be much of a problem.” Bilbo confided.

Thorin nodded. Kili had already adopted a vampire and Fili’s resistance seemed to be breaking.
“Well, I guess I’ll head to bed. See you in the morning.”

Bilbo just nodded in response and continued smoking his pipe.

Thorin settled into his bedroll, content that he had gotten at least a few questions answered.
I'm posting this to let my readers know that there will be no chapters posted for the month of July. We are getting ready to make a really big move (from west coast almost to east coast), so I am going to be really busy getting ready, not to mention the week it is gonna take us to get there.

I am NOT dropping my stories. I just don't need the added pressure of getting chapters done and posted on time while all this is going on. So, I'm just going to take the month of July off from weekly posts. Our plan is to be moved and resettled by the end of July, so, if everything goes according to plan, weekly chapter posts will continue in August.

I will still be writing during whatever spare time I get and I will still be active on the site as much as I can, so feel free to ask questions. I’m sorry for making you all wait (I know. I hate waiting too.) but I hope you’ll be patient with me.

If anything changes, I’ll let you know as soon as I can. The chapters for this week will be or have been posted.

I also just want to say I really appreciate all my readers. Your support and comments always help to encourage and inspire me as I write. I always consider your requests for my stories and try to fit them in the best I can. I hate making you wait and really hope I'll be able to continue posting for you by the start of August.

Thank you so much for your support and patience! I’m so glad you’ve been enjoying my stories! <3 <3 <3:D
I have good news and bad news.

Bad news first. Things have not gone as planned. We are just now getting ready to move and will be leaving on the 30th. We thought we had a house at the beginning of the month, but it fell through and we had to start over. So, I will be taking the month of August off as well so we can get moved and settled. I know! I am so sorry!

The good news is I am posting the next chapter for each of my current works AND a BONUS first chapter of a new future work I plan to write. It is the whole first chapter, not just a summary. I will add the summary for it below. You will find it in “Future Works.” It is chapter 4 and is titled “Bride of the Demon King.” My ideas seem to be coming to me in the form of whole first chapters lately, so I have to write them so I don’t forget. Anyway, if you’re interested, check it out and let me know what you think.

P.S. I am also working on writing out the first chapters for the other works in "Future Works" that are just summaries.

{Bride of the Demon King -- Bilbo/Thorin}

Thorin is King of the demons, a beast-like race feared by humans. Ever since the demons and humans formed a truce years ago, the humans have sent a young human every year as a tribute to the King of demons. Thorin is tired of having to deal with the tribute that has long since lost its meaning. The only tribute he’d be interested in is the boy he met fifteen years ago on the border of the demon and human realms. Despite his fantasies, Thorin knows the chances of ever seeing the boy again are slim to none, until they're not.

When the hunters woke up the next morning, again all of their supplies had been transferred across the river. Though, this time the horses remained with them. Bilbo ambled over to explain.

“I took the supplies over, there’s no need for them to get wet. But, as for you and the horses, I think you should cross normally. The waters not too deep or fast here. Jumping over might actually be more stressful for the horses,” he glanced a Fili, “and some hunters.” He advised.

“But our clothes will get wet!” Kili complained. He must have been hoping for another ride.

“But then take them off. I’ll hop your things over so they stay dry while you and the horses wade over.” Bilbo returned unapologetically.

Kili pouted, but they did as the vampire said. He took their clothes and delivered them to the other side as Nori and the hunters all waded over with their horses. Nori had already waded over with the supply horse. Clearly Bilbo was trying to keep the thief busy by putting him to work.

They redressed on the other side after wading across, grabbed a quick breakfast while they resaddled
their supplies, and started out for the day. They road on peacefully for two days, not running into any problems. By the end of the second day, they had just started crossing over the hills.

On the third day, they learned why this path was so rarely traveled. It was shortly after midday, when they encountered their first spot of trouble.

“What’s that noise?” Fili suddenly asked as they were making their way through a valley between two hills.

Everyone stopped and strained to listen. Kili may have had the best eyes of the bunch, but Fili had the best ears.

“I don’t . . .” suddenly a loud shriek cut Thorin off and startled the horses.

“Nori!” Bilbo yelled as Nori was cussing up a storm while trying to get off his dancing horse.

“Yeah, yeah! I know!” He yelled back, finally slipping off his horse.

“What is it?” Thorin yelled over the distressed horses as he and his nephews followed Nori’s example.

“Harpies!” Nori yelled back, just as another screach sounded off followed by several others. “Give Bilbo the horses!”

Soon, Bilbo was holding the reigns of all the horses in an unyielding grip. Since the sun was up, he couldn’t go jumping around too much, but he could at least make sure they didn’t lose their horses.

Nori and the hunters readied their weapons as the shrieks got closer. “Weaknesses?!?” Thorin yelled over the increasing volume of screeches.

“Chest! Aim for the chest!!” Nori yelled back.

Within minutes, a flock of the biggest, ugliest birds the hunters had ever seen crested over the hill and descended on them, shrieking all the while.

They were vile creatures. Their bodies were like large carrion birds, with ugly dull feathers and large sharp talons. Their heads were like those of old hags with sharp jagged teeth, stringy hair and beak like noses. But, their most disconcerting aspect were the large sagging breasts on their chests.

Thorin took up his crossbow and started picking them off as his boys covered him, doing his best to follow the erratic movements of the vile creatures. They would swoop and dive in turns, lunging at them with sharp claws.

Despite the boys doing their best to cover their uncle, there wasn’t much they could do against attacks from above. Thorin was gradually thinning them out with the aid of Nori, who was nowhere to be seen, and his throwing daggers.

Suddenly, they let up from their attacks on the hunters and every one of them started aiming for the horses.

“The horses.” Thorin rallied as the harpies ignored them in favor of the horses. There was no way they were going to make it in time. As he was trying to rush back to defend Bilbo and the horses, he noticed that the vampire had positioned himself between the harpies and the horses.

Suddenly, there was a massive shriek as around half of the remaining harpies fell heavily to the
ground. The rest instantly veered up and away from the vampire, fleeing over the hill behind them.

The hunters watched baffled as the harpies disappeared over the hill. “What just happened?!” Kili seemed to be the first to find his bearings.

Nori was already going around making sure the ones that were felled were good and dead. "Did ya really think Bilbo needed yer protection?" He said as he cut the tongue out of one.

"Well . . but . . the sun's up." Kili floundered. Fili was looking around trying to figure out how the vampire killed so many at once.

Thorin ignored the conversation as he approached the vampire. "Are you alright?" He asked lowly. He knew that the vampire was the least likely to get injured but couldn't help his concern.

"I'm fine. Are you alright? What about the boys?" The vampire inquired back.

"We're fine." Fili walked over with Kili right behind him. "How did you do that? You don't even have a weapon." Fili asked again in bafflement.

Bilbo just held out his gloved hand and let a handful of pebbles spill from it.

The hunters just stared, not registering the significance.

"Just about anything can be a weapon if ya throw it hard enough." Nori explained as he retrieved his horse. "Too bad the sun's up, ya could have finished 'em off with that swing. Now they might come back with reinforcements."

"If their smart, they won’t be coming back." Bilbo said as the hunters were finally putting the pieces together.

"Wait. You . . threw rocks at them?" Kili asked in disbelief.

“More like . . pebbles, really.” Fili commented in mild awe as he scooped up the small rocks.

Bilbo shrugged. “Like Nori said, just got to throw it hard enough.” He said as he handed out reigns to their proper owners. “We should get moving. Harpies aren’t known for their intelligence.”

“Does that mean they’ll be showing up again?” Thorin asked as he climbed up on his horse.

“Possibly, but they’ll round up their neighbors first. And they’ll be more careful next time.” Bilbo answered unconcerned.

“Great.” Thorin responded sarcastically.

“Keep yer fingers crossed. If we’re lucky, they won’t make it back before nightfall.” Nori added as they started off again.

“How would that be lucky? They’re hard enough to deal with when we can see them plain as day!” Fili retorted.

Nori raised a brow at him. “Have ya forgotten we have a vampire with us?”

“Oh yeah! I bet Bilbo could handle them no problem with the sun down!” Kili cheered.

Thorin spared a glance for their vampire companion as he ran along beside them, but couldn’t tell much with his hood down over his face. At least he wasn’t denying it.
They kept to a faster pace for the rest of the day, eager to get through the hills as soon as possible. They made it most the day without anymore interruptions, but, just as the sun was starting to go down, they heard a cacophony of screeches in the distance.

“Dismount!” Thorin ordered his nephews as they all scrambled to reign in their horses.

This time Nori took the horses, anticipating that the vampire would be more useful this time around.

Soon a large flock of harpies came into view. They had only faced about a dozen of them last time, but now there had to be over three dozen.

The boys fidgeted in their stances with concern and even Thorin took a step back in the face of the odds.

Instead of flying at them directly, the harpies circled high over their heads. They were too high for Thorin’s crossbow and most other long range weapons.

“What are they doing?” Fili asked, frustrated with not being able to do anything.

Suddenly, one of the harpies turned down and started diving straight at them and was soon followed by several more.

“Move!” Thorin shouted realizing they were about to be blitz attacked.

The hunters dove for cover behind any boulder or crag they could find, while Nori tried to lead the horses to a more secure spot.

The harpies screeched as the hunters avoided their talons by mere inches, slashing at the ground before veering back up into the sky. With the hunters on the run, some of the harpies felt confident enough to land and chase them on foot.

Thorin and the boys fended them off the best they could while playing a deadly game of keep away, but the harpies were too fast to allow serious damage to their faces and managed to keep the rest of their bodies out of reach with their elongated necks.

Suddenly, the harpies on the ground froze and Thorin felt a chill run down his spine at the same cold feeling that they were no doubt responding too.

As one, the harpies slowly twisted their heads around to the figure standing in their midst. They didn’t even flinch when Thorin felled the one in front of him with a stab to the chest.

Thorin stayed low and looked around, trying to ignore the tremble that was growing in his hands. He located his nephews. They seemed to be fine, though they were cowering in fear. Nori and the horses were out of sight, but there, smack in the middle of easily over a dozen harpies, was Bilbo.

Thorin stared in awe. He had thrown off his outer, day wear. Despite his small stature, he looked giant as he stood proud and tall, radiating a cold and oppressive power.

The vampire spoke in the dark language, his voice booming and echoing off the hills eerily. Thorin couldn’t understand the words, but he could feel the condemnation in them and it sent a chill running through him.

There was a loud crack and every one of the harpies on the ground fell lifeless. Before Thorin could figure out what happened, they were surrounded by the heavy thuds of the remaining harpies falling from the sky.
Within moments, the thudding had stopped and Bilbo had pulled back the oppressive force he had been releasing, allowing the hunters to move freely again. Thorin slowly stood up, looking around to assess the situation.

Over three dozen harpies lay dead, scattered around them. He turned to Bilbo who still stood in the midst of the devastation.

Bilbo met his gaze, his face carefully blank yet tense at the same time. Thorin got the feeling he was waiting for a reaction.

Thorin gave him a nod of silent thanks.

Bilbo face flooded with surprise at the recognition before returning to a more neutral expression. Clearly he was expecting a different reaction. He gave a short nod back before turning his attention back to the harpies at his feet.

Thorin sheathed his sword as he navigated the fallen harpies to get to his nephews. “Are you all right?” He asked as he pulled them out of their hiding spots.

“Ye-yeah.” “Yeah.” They answered in turn looking around in awe.

Bilbo had disappeared but returned shortly with Nori and the horses in tow.

“Sweet!” Nori exclaimed upon seeing the number of harpies laying around. He shoved the mess of reigns into Bilbo’s hands and started cutting out the tongue of every felled harpy and collecting it into a sack.

“The thief has weird hobbies.” Thorin commented after making his way over to the vampire, watching Nori in part curiosity and part disgust.

"Ya won't be complaining when we get to Adnuminas.” Nori called over his shoulder. "The town authorities there offer a cash reward for every harpy ya kill but require their tongues as proof.”

Thorin raised a brow. He hadn't known that.

"What happened to them?” Kili asked referring to the dead harpies lying around his feet.

"Their necks are broken." Fili answered, standing up from his investigation of one. "Did you do this?” He directed at the vampire.

"Obviously.” Bilbo maintained a neutral expression. "They didn't keel over on their own.”

"All of them? . . at once?” Kili asked in awe.

“Best to kill them all at once, that way none get away.” Bilbo explained almost monotone as he handed the horses over to Thorin.

Suddenly, Kili’s arms were wrapped around the vampire from behind as he picked him up and spinned him around. “That's sooo awesome!! I knew you were powerful, but I didn’t know you were that powerful!!”

“Put me down, Kili!” Bilbo squawked indignantly as Kili continued to swing him around.

“Mahal! You’re so light! Where does all that power come from?” Kili marveled, ignoring the vampire’s protests.
“One’s power does not come from one’s weight. Now put me down!”

When they both heard a snigger, they looked up. Fili was gaping at them and Nori was frozen with his hand outstretched like he hand intended to interfere, but was shocked motionless.

It was Thorin who was doing his best not to laugh but couldn’t contain the occasional snicker that escaped. He couldn’t help it. The big bad vampire was being cuddled like a giant teddy bear and his feet weren’t even touching the ground.

“Thorin~.” Bilbo’s voice was thick with warning as he glared at him.

Thorin cleared his throat and did his best to keep a straight face. “Kili, put the vampire down.” He ordered, unable to prevent the edge of his mouth from curling just a bit.

“Aww~! But he’s so cuddly!” He said giving the vampire a squeeze.

“Kili! If you damage my clothes, so help me, I’ll never fly you anywhere ever again!” Bilbo scolded.

Kili set the irate vampire down immediately. “Sorry. They’re just clothes. You can always have Dori make you new ones.”

“These are the only clothes I have right now. I don’t have spares like you lot. If they get ruined, I have to keep wearing them for the whole trip.” Bilbo explained shortly as he tried to brush out the wrinkles. “Wrinkles are bad enough.” He grumbled quietly.

“Sorry. We can get some new ones when we get to town.” Kili suggested a bit more contritely.

“These are specially made for me, Kili.” The vampire explained loosing his steam. “That’s why Dori has to make them.”

“Oh.” Kili responded sounding more repentant. “Then how am I supposed to hug you?”

Bilbo looked at him suspiciously as he shuffled a few steps away. “Why on middle earth would you want to?”

“Cause we’re friends.” Kili shrugged. “And your cute and cuddly.”

Bilbo looked thoroughly unimpressed. “I’m a vampire, Kili. We cannot be friends.”

“Then I’ll just be your friend.” Kili shrugged undeterred.

“And I’m not cuddly or cute.” He grumped.

“Sure you are! Just ask them!” Kili pointed to the others.

They both stared at the others awaiting a reply. Thorin cleared his throat trying to avoid being asked.


Thorin cleared his throat again. “You are . . kinda . . yeah.” He confessed haltingly.

Fili nodded in confirmation and Nori just shrugged with a smirk and a wink.

“You’ve all lost your minds!” Bilbo waved them all off. “I’m too old and powerful to be cute.” He grumbled to himself as he turned away and continued to straighten out the wrinkles Kili put in his
clothes.

Besides Kili, Thorin was the only one close enough to make out his grumbles and couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Aw, it’s okay Bilbo.” Kili tried to encourage. “You like guys anyways right? So, it’s okay if you’re cute.”

Bilbo sighed at the teen. “Not all guys who like guys, like cute guys, Kili.”

“Oh, yeah. But Uncle likes ‘em cute, so you’re good!” Kili revealed as his uncle spluttered.

Bilbo raised a brow at the older hunter. “Well, I guess that explains a lot, doesn’t it?” He said with a smirk.

Thorin huffed. “I thought you were too old and powerful to be cute.”

“Yes, well, apparently I’m the only one who thinks so.” The vampire complained.

“Hey! If you two are done flirtin’, we should make camp before it gets too dark!” Nori jeered at them.

“Shut it, Nori.” Bilbo called back with little heat making Nori laugh.

“We’re not making camp . . here . . are we?” Fili asked, glancing at all the dead harpies around them.

“I’ll get rid of them. You wouldn’t be able to make it far enough away tonight to really make a difference.” Bilbo volunteered.

As the hunters found a good spot to make camp, the vampire made short work disposing of the harpies, throwing their carcasses over the opposite hill. After Nori secured all their tongues, of course.

That night as they sat around the fire, Bilbo stayed closer to their camp, but still sat a good distance from the fire and facing away from it.

“Hey . . Bilbo?” Fili started hesitantly, not sure if he had the privilege of using the Vampire’s first name.

“Yes, Fili?” The vampire responded somewhat distractedly as he smoked his pipe.

“How did you reach the ones in the sky?” He asked relieved by Bilbo’s casual response.

“I used a spell.” He answered plainly.

“What kind of spell?” Kili asked curiously.

“A simple one. It only works on simple minds not protected by magic. As long as they could hear my voice, they were within range.”

“A spell that breaks necks?” Fili asked dubiously. “A dark magic spell then?”

“The spell didn’t break their necks. They did.” Bilbo explained. “The spell forced them to obey my commands. And I commanded them to break their necks. And yes, to overrule one’s will to live requires dark magic.” He finished darkly.
“So, harpies are’t magical then.” Kili deduced.

“They are created with dark magic, but they possess no magic of their own.”

“And how do you . . make a harpy?” Fili asked slightly disgusted at the thought.

“Any dark sorcerer with the necessary skills and power can make one. It is a curse that works best on bad tempered, contentious women. It was one of several ways dark sorcerers have devised to imitate the power of the great eagles.” The vampire explained.

“There seem to be quite a few of them in this area.” Thorin contributed.

Bilbo shrugged. “It’s a hill region. All harpies are drawn to the hills after their creation unless a dark will is overpowering their instincts. When they are released, they congregate in the hills.”

“Is there no redeeming them?” This seemed to be becoming Thorin’s default question when learning about new creatures.

The vampire shrugged again. “They’re little more than beasts, really. I suppose, if I was willing to keep them under my control all the time, they’d be harmless enough. But left on their own, they behave like foul tempered beasts.”

Thorin nodded. He continued to surreptitiously watch the vampire. He was sure Bilbo was expecting rejection or even a violent lashing out from his display of power. It was definitely intimidating and downright scary, but it was also carefully controlled and performed for their sake.

His behavior with Kili afterward though was just further proof of his control and lack of desire to do them any harm.

Nori was right. The vampire was a dangerous existence. But the most dangerous of beings were also the most powerful allies.

Thorin lay down for the night, actually feeling safer for having the vampire nearby.
I’m back! . . Mostly. We are finally moved, but I am still trying to get the house all put together. BUT I will be resuming weekly posts for each story . . . For now. I was able to get ahead in a couple of my stories, but I am a little behind in HoD. So, I’m going to do my best to catch up and keep up with my weekly posts. If I can’t keep up I may have to switch to posting every other week, but I will let you know before it happens.

BONUS CHAPTER!!!
I’m posting another first chapter for a new work. This one is called ‘Wolf and Rabbit’ and you can find it in ‘Future Works.’ Read the summary below. Check it out if you like and let me know what you think. :)  

Wolf and Rabbit:  
Bilbo was content with his life as a surgeon. True, the hours were crazy and he didn't have much of social life, but the pay was good and he got to help a lot of people. Then one day he just had to go and help a wounded gangster he found in an alley. Now that same gangster is hanging around the hospital where Bilbo works looking for his saving angel 'Bella.' As much as he wants to clear up the misunderstanding, he's afraid of what the big grumpy gangster will do to him when he finds out his 'angel' is a guy. How is this his life?!

Bilbo/Thorin  
Straight Thorin, Straight Bilbo

After another day of hard riding, they had cleared the hills and reached the mining road that ran along side the hill range. That night, they camped along the deserted mining road.

“I was expecting to see more activity on the mining routes. It seems strangely empty.” Thorin commented as he looked around suspiciously.

“It’s cause of the harpies. The rise in harpy numbers lately has made it more difficult for miners to do their jobs. That’s why they’re offering cash rewards for harpy kills.” Nori revealed.

“Why are they bothering miners?” Kili wondered.

Nori just shrugged. “They’re meat eaters and there’s nothing big enough or plentiful enough in the hills to sustain their numbers. So, they attack and eat humans when given the opportunity. The problem with mining is you have to be in or around the hills to do it.”

“Well, that should make plenty of work for us then. Think some miners will be up for a hunter escort?” Fili predicted.

“Regardless, there are several dozen less harpies for them to worry about.” Thorin concluded.

Fili rubbed at his chin thoughtfully. “You said their numbers are rising? Why would that be?”

Nori shrugged and directed his gaze to their resident vampire. “You’d have to ask someone smarter
They all turned to the vampire who seemed to be more spaced out than usual. He was still facing away from the fire, but at least he wasn't keeping as much of a distance from them anymore. He continued to stare off into space as he smoked his pipe.

“What do you think, Bilbo?” Fili asked.

When the vampire still didn’t respond, Kili tried getting his attention. “Hey, Bilbo!” When Bilbo still didn’t answer, he turned to his uncle.

“Master Baggins.” Thorin rumbled at a casual volume.

Bilbo shook himself out of his daze. “I’m sorry, what is it?” He asked as he refilled his pipe.

“Are you alright?” Thorin asked.

“Yes, yes. I’m fine. What was the question?”

“How do you know it was a question?” Kili asked mischievously.

“It’s always a question, Kili.”

“We wanted to know why you think the harpies are increasing?” Fili cut in before Kili could continue.

“Because someone is making them, obviously.”

“Here? Now?” Thorin asked alarm. We’re they getting ready to face off against a dark sorcerer?

The vampire shrugged. “Anywhere, anytime. Depends on why they are being made. If someone’s just making them to cause trouble they could be coming from anywhere. They travel from range to range in search of food like any other animal. If someone’s trying to build an army, they are likely in the area.”

“Which do you think it is?” Kili asked expectantly.

“If there’s a sorcerer in the area, then they have astounding concealment magic since I don’t feel anything. More than likely there’s just someone out there somewhere who’s going around turning random mean-spirited women into harpies for the fun of it.”

“What kind of person would find that fun?” Fili wondered out loud.

“Someone who’s old, bored, and doesn’t think much of killing humans.” Bilbo answered distractedly.

“So, a vampire?” Thorin confirmed.

“Vampires aren’t the only ones who live longer than is advisable, but, yes, it’s possible. The Monster Maker earned his namesake for that very behavior. He enjoyed making all sorts of vile creatures. It seemed more of a mission than a hobby though.” The vampire mumbled towards the end.

“Namesake? Hunters can earn a namesake. Do vampires too?” Fili asked ready to soak up the information.

“Not all vampires have namesakes. Only the most powerful or noteworthy are able to earn one.”
The Three came to Thorin’s mind. “That’s right. The vampires I faced at Belegost we’re trying to earn a namesake. But they were trying to do it as a group. Does it really work that way?”

“Occasionally, a coven can earn a collective namesake, but only for something truly outstanding. They were naive if they thought they could earn a namesake just from working together.” The vampire judged condescendingly.

“So what’s your namesake?” Kili asked curiously. “You must have one since you’re so powerful.”

The vampire tensed at the question, but kept silent.

“Is it bad?” Kili asked when no answer was forthcoming.

“Namesakes are like nicknames,” Nori intercepted when the vampire still refused to answer. “Ya don’t always get to choose yer own and ya don’t always get one ya like. Bilbo’s not real fond of his.”

“Is it that bad?” Now Fili was curious.

Nori shrugged not willing to divulge the vampire's secret. “Us small fries just call him ‘The Loner.’”

“‘The Loner?’ What’s so special about that?” Kili asked disappointed. He was obviously expecting something more flashy.

“It’s a pretty big deal for vampires. Vampires really aren’t solitary creatures. They typically form covens, take mates, sire new vampires or stay with their own sires. It’s extremely rare to find a vampire who leads a consistently solitary lifestyle.” Nori explained, effectively diverting attention from the vampire.

“Vampires have mates?” “What’s a sire?” Kili and Fili asked at the same time.

“Of course, they have mates. Bloodlust isn’t the only lust they’re susceptible too.” Nori answered with a suggestive grin and wink. “A sire is the vampire that turns ya. Every vampire has a sire.”

Thorin was only half listening to the conversation as he watched the vampire puff on his pipe. He was starting to pick up on Bilbo's subtle body language more lately and could tell that he was agitated by the conversation, which would explain why the thief was talking so much.

The Ri brothers were protective of the vampire in their own way. They obviously knew his triggers and how best to deal with them. Thorin couldn’t help the jealousy that flared in his chest. Why did it have to be Nori that the vampire relied on?

If Thorin knew more, he could support him more. But how could he learn if the vampire clamped up every time they started talking about something significant? “That’s enough. Let’s get some sleep.” He ordered moodily, ending his nephews’ chatter.

They kept up a slightly faster pace the next day, alternating between trotting and walking the horses. Their goal was to reach Adnuminas before stopping for the night.

Bilbo had remained quiet all through the morning and had yet to utter a single word.

They were currently walking the horses to let them rest. It was late afternoon and they planned to eat a late dinner after getting to town.

“Gah!!” Kili suddenly shouted holding his palms against his eyes dramatically. The sudden noise
startled the rest of the group and their horses.

“What’s wrong, Kili?!” Fili asked in alarm.

“I think I’m turning gay! Uncle please guide me.” He whimpered dramatically.

“What in Mahal’s name are you going on about?!” Thorin barked at the overly dramatic teen.

“It’s just... every time I think about the harpies I remember their huge sagging breasts. And every
time I think about women and breasts I remember those disgusting hag faces! What if I can’t ever see
a pair of breasts without seeing those hags in my head?!” He wailed in despair.

Thorin just rolled his eyes at his nephew’s antics. “You’re young. You’ll get over it.”

Bilbo patted Kili’s leg reassuringly having worked his way over to Kili’s side. “Your Uncle’s right.
The images will fade in time. If you truly prefer women, a few harpies won’t be enough to put you
off for long.” He chuckled.

Kili gazed down at the hooded vampire in thought. “Well, I guess it wouldn’t be so bad if I didn’t
recover. At least I’d have you and Uncle around to guide me.” He ended cheerfully, seemingly
having forgotten his despair from only a few minutes ago. “Hey, Bilbo. Nori said vampires have
mates. Have you ever had one?”

“No. And I don’t ever plan to either.” The vampire answered coldly.

“Oh.” Was all Kili could say in his surprise.

Bilbo shifted back over to the side of the road keeping up along side of the group.

Thorin glanced back over at the vampire. Bilbo’s answer was more upsetting than it should have been.
Why would he be so against taking a mate? Why did he insist on being so alone, for that matter?
Thorin sighed. More questions that he may never know the answers to.

The rest of the ride was quiet, but they did make it to town a couple hours after sundown. They
immediately found a stable for their horses before making their way to the hunters’ inn.

Adnuminas was a low traffic area for hunters, so the hunters’ inn was on the smaller side and
actually serviced more miners than hunters.

They reached The Holy Water and booked a room before ordering a late dinner. Thorin instantly
found himself the center of attention. The dining hall was full of miners and the majority of them
were eyeing Thorin and his group.

The boys shifted nervously as they ate, unused to being subject to so much attention. Thorin and
Nori were both keeping a wary eye out, but Bilbo was being unusually quiet. He seemed to be lost in
a daze, staring at nothing in particular as he silently sipped his tea.

Thorin glanced at the quiet vampire. It wasn’t like him to be so broody, at least not when he was
surrounded by people. When he looked back up, he was met with Kili’s own concerned gaze.
Obviously, Thorin wasn’t the only one concerned by the vampire’s silence.

They ate quickly and headed to their room under the curious gazes of the resident miners. The room
they got was a large one with four separate beds. Typical for a mining town where miners would
split the cost for a room to save money.
Thorin and Nori each claimed a bed and the boys were prepared to share a bed so Bilbo could have the last one.

“That’s not necessary.” Bilbo finally spoke when he noticed the boys getting ready to share a bed. “I don’t need a bed for the night, I’ll just borrow somebody’s bed tomorrow when the sun is up.”

“Oh, okay.” Kili said as he went to claim the last bed. “Hey, Bilbo?”

“Hmm?” The vampire responded distractedly as he pulled a chair over to the window.

“Are you okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

Kili shrugged. “Well, you’ve been really quiet lately. Did I . . say something wrong?” He asked uncertainly.

Bilbo’s head shot up and focused on Kili in what felt like the first time in a while that he focused on anyone. “Kili, you haven’t said or done anything wrong.”

“Then why are you being so quiet? It started last night when we were talking about namesakes.” Kili challenged.

“I’m listening and it started before that, if you will recall.” The vampire sighed at the accusation.

“Listening to what?” Thorin intercepted.

The vampire’s eyes glazed over and lost focus as he lifted his pipe to his lips. “I don’t know yet.” He snapped back into focus. “I’m going to rest tomorrow. Do me a favor, Nori, and snoop around, would you?”

“Was gonna anyways.” Nori answered.

The next morning, Bilbo slipped into Nori’s bed, much to Thorin’s annoyance, as soon as the thief got up. The four of them headed to the dining hall for breakfast.

“Hey. I need you to take the tongues in for me.” Nori started as they were eating.

“Why?” Thorin asked suspiciously.

“Cause I don’t exactly look like a hunter. It’ll be more convincing if you take them in. Plus, it will generate some work for ya when the miners get wind of it.” Nori schemed.

“You’re letting me claim your money?” Thorin was skeptical.

Nori scoffed. “Maybe you haven’t noticed, but I’m not a thief because I’m hard pressed for money. I do it cause enjoy it. Sides, it’s really more Bilbo’s money than anything, since he’s the one who killed most of ‘em.”

Thorin couldn’t really argue with that. “And what will you be doing today?”

“Snooping, like I was asked, of course.” Nori said with a mischievous grin.

Thorin shook his head at the thief. Except for the occasional jealousy towards Nori’s closeness with Bilbo, he wasn’t overly bothered by having the thief around anymore. He was useful enough.

“Whatever. Just don’t cause any trouble.”
“Sure, sure.” Nori answered cheekily before he got up and headed out.

“What about us, Uncle?” Fili asked as they got up from their table.

“You can take the day to rest or look around, but be wary and stay together.” He ordered before releasing them.

Kili whooped cheerfully as they bolted out the door.

Thorin rolled his eyes at his nephews as he headed back to their room for the sack of tongues. He stopped and spared a glance at the lump that was a sleeping vampire on Nori’s bed.

He grabbed the sack and headed back out. He found out through the inn keeper where he needed to go to collect the reward. As with many mining towns, the mining guild officials for the town were in charge.

He made his way to the headquarters of the town’s mining guild, receiving more than his share of curious and suspicious stares on his way. He let himself into the building and approached the nearest occupied desk. “I was told this is where I collect the reward for killing harpies.”

“That’s right, but we require a tongue to represent each kill. How many do you have today?” The man was thin and clearly a pencil-pusher. He addressed Thorin with little interest, not even bothering to look up.

Thorin didn’t like being taken lightly. He plopped the full, ripe smelling bag on the man’s desk, startling him. “I haven’t counted them yet.”

The man stared at the sack in shock before slowly raising his eyes to meet Thorin’s unimpressed glare. He swallowed nervously as he stood up slowly. “Let me just go get one of the officials to confirm your kills.” He said shakily before he turned and headed into the back.

Thorin crosses his arms and waited impatiently. Fortunately, he didn’t have to wait long since a couple minutes later a fat, well-dressed man came barging in followed by the pencil-pusher and two other big men.

“I hear you’ve come to collect quite a large reward. I hope you don’t mind if we confirm with our own eyes the authenticity of your claim.” He announced as he sent his two men to check the contents of the bag.

The two men pulled out and laid out every tongue for a total of forty-six harpy tongues. Thorin just stood by with his arms crossed waiting for them to give him his money so he could go. The fat man looked him over warily.

“They look real enough. Did you kill them all yourself?”

“Some of them. They were all killed by members of my company, though. I’m here to collect on their behalf as well.” Thorin answered.

“And how many are in this company of yours?” The fat man asked with interest.

“Five.” Though in reality most of the kills were the vampire’s, It would certainly be suspicious to say so.

“Five? And you and your company have been out hunting harpies, have you?” The man asked suspiciously.
“Not really. We came over the hill pass from Belegost and we were attacked, so we killed them.”

“You came over the hill pass . . with just five?” One of the man’s guards asked in wonder.

“That’s right.” Thorin was just ready to be out of there. He hated dealing with officials.

The fat man sized him up cunningly. “And how long will you be staying in our humble town?”

“For as long as I have business here.” He answered shortly, disgusted by the greedy gaze he was being regarded with.

“Oh, I’m sure we can provide you with plenty of business to keep you occupied. With the harpies increasing, a hunter escort would be most helpful for our mining teams.”

“I’ll keep it in mind. Now where’s my reward for these harpies.” Thorin said with a somewhat threatening tone. He suspected the man didn’t really want to dish out that much cash all at once.

“Of course.” The man said somewhat disappointed.

Thorin was out of there as soon as he collected the reward. If he was going to work for someone, he’d much rather work for the miners themselves.

The reward was quite impressive for forty-six harpies and Thorin decided he better drop it off to their room rather than carry it around. When he got back, he set the reward money down next to Nori’s bed where the vampire was.

He stared at the lump again. It didn’t seem like Bilbo had moved. Thorin thought for a bit before deciding there wasn’t really anything he needed to do today. He went down and requested a hot bath be prepared for him in their room.

He sat on his bed and tended to his weapons as the working boys brought in and filled a wash tub with buckets of hot water. He kept a careful eye on the vampire, not entirely sure how he would react if he awoke to find other people in the room.

He needent have worried. Bilbo didn’t so much as shift under his blankets. When the bath was full and the boys were gone, he undressed and lowered himself into the tub. He took his time washing up, enjoying the quiet privacy.

He sat and soaked for a while when he had finished, staring at the vampire lump in contemplation. The vampire was still a mystery. The more Thorin learned the more questions he had. And despite his best efforts, his attachment to the vampire was growing.

As much as he wanted to, he couldn’t deny it. He shouldn’t feel anything but hatred for the vampire, but something about Bilbo just made it impossible. He couldn’t even stop himself from worrying about the vampire.

Thorin sighed at himself despairingly. Of all the creatures in middle earth to strike his fancy, why did it have to be a vampire? And more than that, a vampire who wasn’t even interested in having a mate. Then again, could vampires even have human mates?

Thorin pulled himself out of the tub and dried off before getting dressed in fresh clothes. He would need to hire a washer to get their things washed.

No, it was one thing to be friendly with the vampire, or even to admire him from afar, but Thorin could not afford to let it go any farther than that. Getting involved with a vampire couldn’t result in
anything but trouble. Even just a casual tumble in the sheets could turn out disastrous, he was sure of it.

Thorin spent the rest of the day tending to and assessing his and his nephews’ gear and supplies. They would need to get some repairs done before they left for the next town, not to mention resupplying.

If he was sticking around to watch over the vampire, well, no one else needed to know that.
River Fairy

Thorin went down to retrieve dinner and brought it back up to their room. He figured the boys would be back soon, so he ordered enough for everyone. Yes, even the thief. Even though his presence still grated on Thorin from time to time, he seemed to look out for the vampire and was useful enough.

Just as he predicted, the boys burst in over top of each other before he had even gotten the first bite in his mouth.

“Uncle, have you heard? The whole town’s talking about us!” Fili started.

“It’s like we’re celebrities!” Kili continued enthusiastically.

“Everyone’s talking about how we braved the hill pass and faced down an army of harpies!”

“Though, technically, Bilbo killed most of them.” Kili corrected.

“But they don’t need to know that. Uncle, this is perfect! They’ll practically be fighting over who gets to hire us! We could be here for weeks and have work every day!” Fili’s strategic mind planned.

“What’s all this racket about?” The hunters all focused on Nori’s bed at the sleepy sound of a waking vampire. He emerged from his burrow of blankets wearing only his underclothes and his neck band. His curls were sticking up wildly in every direction.

They stared at the sleepy vampire and he drowsily raised a brow at their silence.

Kili launched himself at Bilbo, wrapping his arms around him and knocking him flat on the bed. Bilbo yelped at the impact and went down without any resistance.

“Mahal! You’re so adorable!” Kili squeezed the vampire.

“Kili! That was dangerous! And stop squeezing me like I’m some stuffed animal!” Bilbo rebuked without any heat.

“Why? You wouldn’t do anything to hurt me.” Kili rubbed his cheek against Bilbo’s curls. “Your hair is so soft!”

“Gah! I don’t have to do anything!” The vampire squirmed in Kili’s grasp, but didn’t try to pry himself away. “If I had simply not relaxed soon enough, it would’ve been like launching yourself into a tree!”

Thorin watched with an annoyed twitch in his brow. Why did Kili get to be so touchy with the vampire?

“But you did, so it’s okay.” Kili said cheerfully.

“Alright, now let go of me.”

“Why? You don’t have to worry about wrinkles or getting your clothes ruined.” Kili rebutted with another squeeze.

“Maybe I just don’t like hugs. Did that ever occur to you?”

“Oh, come on. Everybody likes hugs. Even Uncle likes hugs. Some people just have a hard time
admitting it. You’ll get used to it.” Kili said as he cuddled the vampire.

The vampire huffed a sigh and crossed his arms in disgruntled defeat.

“Hey, did you have a bath, Uncle?” Fili noticed and subsequently freed the vampire when Kili jumped up seemingly forgetting his victim. “Hey! No fair!”

Bilbo took the opportunity to escape and was instantly out of reach. He brushed the wrinkles out of his undershirt before getting redressed.

“I want a bath. The waters all cold by now!” Kili whined.

“You can call one up tomorrow.” Thorin answered distractedly as he discreetly watched the vampire get dressed.

“Or not, we could be booked solid everyday if the miners ask us for help.” Fili speculated, illiciting another whine from Kili.

“Oh, will you be helping the miners then?” Bilbo asked conversationally.

“Possibly. They seem desperate and, as long as we’re here, we should take some work.” Thorin turned to the vampire no longer needing to be discreet.

“You know, of course, I won’t be able to help you during the day. My apparel will be too suspicious.” Bilbo said as he tried to wrangle his unruly curls.

“Obviously. How long do you think we’ll be stopping here?”

The vampire hummed thoughtfully. “There seems to be something here that needs my attention. I probably shouldn’t leave until I figure it out. It shouldn’t take too long though. I need to see what Nori found out today. Otherwise, it should be up to you really.”

As if he was summoned, Nori ambled in through the door. “Ooh. I see you ordered dinner.” He immediately homed in on the food, grabbing his share.

The boys too noticed, swooping in to grab their plates as if someone else might grab them.


“Well, first off, congratulations.” He directed at the hunters. “Yer the talk of the town. Ya should have no problems getting work while yer here.”

“Did you manage to find out anything that we don’t know yet?” Bilbo cut him short.

“Yeah, yeah. Calm down. It seems this town has two major problems: the harpies, obviously, and something on the lakefront. Seems there’s something stirring up trouble for the fishermen. No casualties yet, but a lot of fishing gear and loads of fish have been ruined or lost.”

The vampire listened carefully. “What kind of damage specifically?”

“Ripped nets, overturned boats, tools gone missing, anything in, on, or near the water seems to be targeted.” Nori listed.

“But no humans.” Bilbo contemplated out loud.

“Not yet anyway.” Nori confirmed.
“Do you know when the trouble started?”

“Not to the date, but it seems to have started a few months ago and has gradually gotten worse.”

Bilbo nodded. He seemed to be done with his inquiry as he started to stare off in a daze.

“What do you think it could be?” Thorin asked pulling the vampire back to his senses.

Bilbo shook off the daze. “Could be a number of things. There are many creatures that live in water. Whatever it is, it sounds more disgruntled than malicious. Property damage is typical when creatures can’t or are afraid to communicate with humans. It’s their way of saying that something needs to change. Unfortunately, humans just see it as an inconvenience and try to eliminate the cause.”

“So you don’t think it’s dangerous?” Kili asked with his mouth full.

“I said it doesn’t sound malicious, not that it wasn’t dangerous. Anything can be dangerous when pushed too far, but not everything is intent on causing harm from the start.” Bilbo corrected.

“So what are you going to do?” Fili asked.

“I’m going to visit the lake. Once I know what it is, I’ll know how to deal with it.”

“Hey, don’t deal with it without us though, okay. I wanna see it.” Kili demanded.

“That will depend on what it is, but I’ll think about it.” Bilbo agreed.

“That’s where you’ll be tonight then?” Nori asked as he guzzled down the last of his drink.

“Yes, I need to take care of this so I can get this humming out of my ears. I’ll be back before sunrise though. Will you be taking work tomorrow?” He directed at Thorin.

“I guess that depends on if anyone’s brave enough to ask.”

“Alright. I should only need two or three days to finish my business, hopefully, so whether we stay here any longer or not will be up to you.” The vampire said as he headed for the door. “I’ll be back by morning.” And with that he was gone.

“Hmm. I wonder what it is.” Kili wondered out loud as he cleaned his plate.

The hunters settled in for the night, though Nori disappeared at some point. Thorin knew if they were going to work with the miners tomorrow, they were going to need to get an early start.

Just like he said, when Thorin and his boys woke up before sunrise the next morning, Bilbo was already there. He had made himself comfortable on Nori’s unoccupied bed.

“What’d you find out?” Thorin rumbled curiously as he got himself around.

“It’s an easy fix. I’ll be taking care of it tomorrow night. You can join me if you wish, but the weapons will have to stay behind.” He invited.

“Why not tonight?” Fili wondered.

“Because I need to make contact with it first. I’ll have to find it tonight.”

“Will you be resting again today?” Thorin rumbled.
“Perhaps, I haven’t decided yet.” The vampire answered casually. “The sun isn’t up yet, I suppose I’ll join you for breakfast first.”

They all headed to the dining hall for an early breakfast. It was already full of miners and almost as soon as they sat down their table was surrounded.

“Are you the hunters the whole town has been talkin’ ‘bout?” Asked a big miner in the front. He looked over Thorin and his boys critically.

“Probably.” Thorin answered with a raised brow.

“These two are but kids.” The big man concluded, making the twins protest indignantly. “And you, are you supposed to be a hunter?” He directed at the vampire sipping his tea.

“Me?! Good heavens no! I’m just a wealthy traveler with a taste for adventure. I hired these good hunters here to see me safely through my travels, which they’ve done a marvelous job of so far. I was certain I was going to be a goner when all those harpies ambushed us in the hills.” The vampire dramatically played his part. “I shouldn’t need them so much here in town, so, if they wish to take some work on the side, they needent hesitate on my account.”

All three hunters stared at the vampire. Thorin raised an inquisitive brow while the boys’ faces scrunched in confusion. Thorin had to admit, considering the vampire’s looks, it was the perfect cover. He looked every bit the wealthy eccentric.

“All that so?” Thorin turned back at the sound of the man’s voice. “Name’s Henry. Me an’ some of the boys was wonderin’ if you was up for a job today. It’s a simple one, we mine, you cover us. We’ll be back by tonight. You’ll get a cut of the load.” The big man proposed.

Thorin chugged down the last of his drink as his nephews inhaled the last of their breakfast. “Lead the way.” He said as he sat down his mug and stood to get up.

“Be safe! There aren’t any more hunters around here for me to hire.” Bilbo called after them with a mischievous glint in his eye as they followed the miners out.

Thorin and his boys spent the day standing guard outside one of the mines closer to town while the miners worked. Despite the miners’ unease, no harpies made an appearance. Late that evening as they were returning to town, Thorin grabbed a single uncut gem as their pay, stating it was plenty.

When they made it back to the inn that night, Bilbo was already gone. They turned in knowing they’d likely see him in the morning. The next morning the got up early again but didn’t see the vampire until they went down for breakfast.

He was sitting at a table sipping his tea, surrounded by a bunch of rough and tough miners. Thorin got the distinct feeling that they were flirting with the vampire, much to his annoyance.

Bilbo spotted them and cheerily excused himself from his table to come sit with his hunters. Thorin was sure he heard at least three distinct disappointed whines as he glared at the table of miners.

“Morning gentlemen.” Bilbo greeted as he sat down with them. “Anything fun happen yesterday?”

“Not particularly.” Thorin answered a bit moodily.

“No, it was boring. All we did was stand around all day.” Kili whined.

“And that’s probably all we’ll be doing tonight.” Added Fili.
“That’s just cause you’re staying close to town. If you were willing to travel out a day to one of the farther mines, you’d be more likely to get some excitement.” The vampire advised.

“Do we have time for such a thing?” Thorin asked.

Bilbo shrugged. “That’s up to you. I don’t mind hanging around a few days if you want to help them out a bit. Honestly though, we’ve probably already taken out the majority of harpies that lived around the town.”

Thorin nodded. Perhaps he should agree to one trip out to the farther mines to make sure they weren’t as likely to be attacked.

“Unless you want to live here, you won’t be able to help them out forever. We’ve already done the town a huge service by killing the ones we did.” The vampire reasoned.

He was right, of course. Thorin wasn’t planning to stick around forever. “What of tonight?”

“It’s still on, but I can wait until you get back, if you like.”

Thorin just nodded as he finished his breakfast.

“I’ll wait for you in our room then.” The vampire said as he got up to head back to their room.

The hunters spent another uneventful day keeping guard over the miners. Despite the long day, the boys were getting hyped up as they returned to the inn. They found the vampire waiting in their room just like he said.

“No harpies.” Thorin answered the vampire’s expectant look.

“Just as well.” Bilbo returned. “We should get going so you can get some sleep tonight. Weapons off.” He ordered.

The hunters relieved themselves of their weapons with little complaint. They all knew by now that Bilbo was far more dangerous than anything they were likely to meet.

When he was satisfied, Bilbo led them back out of the inn and towards the lake. They walked through the quiet town as they approached the fishing docks.

“So, what is it, Bilbo. What did you have to find?” Kili asked excitedly, unable to wait any longer.

“Well, now,” the vampire chuckled. “If I just told you, that wouldn’t be any fun. How about a hint?”

“We’re listening.” Fili was only doing marginally better than his brother at suppressing his excitement.

“Well, for starters, it’s a river dweller.” Bilbo gave them the first hint.

“River dweller? But this is a lake.” Kili’s face scrunched in confusion.

“But, if it’s displaced, that would explain why it’s disgruntled.” Fili pointed out.

“Very good, Fili!” The vampire praised with an approving look, making the teen puff up proudly. “You are absolutely correct. When creatures stray from their natural habitat it often causes problems, even more so it it happens to be into human populated areas.”

“So, what are you going to do about it then? If you were going to kill it, you wouldn’t have made us
leave our weapons behind.” Kili asked.

“Wait. Is it a goblin or a fairy?” Fili interrupted.

“It’s a fairy.”

“So, it’s some kind of river fairy that has wandered into the lake. Why doesn’t it just return to the river?” Thorin joined in.

Bilbo shrugged. “Could be lost. Could be there’s some kind of obstacle in the way. The bottom line is it doesn’t want to be here and the humans don’t want it here. I’ll escourt it back home and everyone will be happy.”

“Oooh. A river fairy. Is it like one of those beautiful river maidens?” Kili asked after some thought.

“Not quite.” The vampire chuckled.

Fili hummed thoughtfully. “I don’t really know much about river fairies.”

“Well, most fairies have decent concealment magic. It’s how they protect themselves. In fact, you’d be surprised how many different kind of fairies are out there. Although, this one usually relies on good old fashioned camouflage to avoid detection.”

They made their way around the docks and down to the edge of the lake a little ways a way where it would be difficult for any passerby’s to see what they were doing.

“So, it looks like something that you would see in a river.” Fili concluded thoughtfully.

“Ugh! I don’t know! I don’t know enough about fairies! How do you even know we even know about whatever it is?” Kili whined.

“Quiet!” The vampire rebuked in a loud whisper. “I’ll give you one more hint.” He said just as a figure started to emerge from the water. “It has a bowl shaped growth for holding water on its head.”

The hunters gaped as the strange creature as it cautiously made its way up the bank towards them. It had a body and tail like a turtle’s but its legs and arms were long and frog-like with webbed fingers and toes. It’s head was reptilian with a turtle like beak and large reptilian eyes. And, of course, it had a bowl shaped crest on its head.

“A kappa?” Thorin marveled curiously.

“I thought kappas were goblins.” Fili whispered to his uncle.

“They’re fairies.” Bilbo correct as he walked up to and knelt down in front of the squatting kappa.

The hunters watched fascinated as the vampire and kappa exchanged a series of strange clicks and noises.

When Bilbo straightened back up, he took off his jacket, weskit, and outer shirt. “I’m going to carry him down the river a ways do he doesn’t wind up back in the lake.” He explained as he handed his clothes off to Thorin.

Thorin just raised a brow in response as Bilbo walked over and gently picked up the kappa. It wrapped its limbs around the vampire, clinging with long webbed fingers, and set it’s chin on his shoulder.
Bilbo walked back over to the hunters. “You can see him before I take him. He’s a young one. Not quite a child, more like a young adult, but that would explain how he got lost.”

The kappa studied the hunters with wide reptilian eyes as they studied it in return.

“He’s actually . . kinda cute.” Kili said as he started to reach out to touch it.

Bilbo pulled away before he could. “No touching. If he stops fearing humans, his chances of survival plummet.”

“Oh.” Kili consented a little disappointed.

“I’ll be a few minutes. You can wait for me here or head back to the inn and I’ll catch up.”

“We’ll wait.” Thorin rumbled.

Bilbo gave a short nod and then he was gone. A few minutes later, he was back. He thanked Thorin as he took his clothes back and put them back on. “Shall we head back to the inn? I’m sure the miners will want your services again tomorrow.”

“About that,” Thorin began as they started making their way back. “I’m not sure how much longer we should stay. It seems more like a permanent job to keep watch over the miners and even then we can only keep watch over one group at a time. I don’t feel like we’re accomplishing much.”

“Do you wish to stop then?”

“It’s more that I wonder if there’s any point in continuing.” Thorin said with a sigh.

“If only we could draw the harpies out somehow. Then we could clear the area and all the miners could go back to work. They wouldn’t need guarded.” Kili speculated dramatically.

“Why didn’t you just ask? Dealing with them all at once would be faster and quite profitable.”

“Ask who for what?” Fili asked confused.

“Me obviously. I already told you I can control them. For this, I don’t even have to do that much. I just have to summon them to me and you can pick them off as they come.” The vampire explained as though it should have been obvious.

“That would certainly be far more effective.” Thorin answered thoughtfully.

“We can talk more about it tomorrow. I think you should all take a break tomorrow from guarding the miners anyway. You could use some rest and we need to do some of our own shopping.”

“Yes, please! It’s so boring standing around doing nothing all day.” Kili whined.

“Fine.” Thorin agreed with a playful swat at his nephew. You can take the day off tomorrow. We’ll try to get most of our shopping done. If we go with what Master Baggins has proposed, we should be ready to leave soon anyway.”

The boys celebrated quietly between themselves as they continued towards the inn. By the time they got back it was already early morning, so the hunters went straight to bed. Bilbo settled himself on Nori’s still empty bed and watched over the hunters through the night.
Alright everyone, this is the last week of chapter posts for this month. I just can’t keep up with posting three chapters a week every week right now. I don’t know what I was thinking when I started writing three works at once (won’t be doing that again). So, until further notice, I will be posting new chapters for each work 2 times a month. So, the first and third full weeks will be my posting weeks (that cuts down the number of chapters I need to write from 12+ to 6 per month). Maybe when I finally finish a couple I will be able to bump it back up to every week, but, right now, it’s just too much. I considered pausing a couple so I could work on one at a time, but I just can’t do that to you guys, so this was my alternative. I figured that, this way, all three stories will still get regular updates.

Thank you for being patient with me! I appreciate all my readers and thrive on your comments! Have a great rest of the month! :D

By the time the hunters woke up the next morning, it was almost noon. Bilbo was still sitting on Nori’s bed, but was now shrouded in his day cloak.

Thorin sent the boys down to grab them all something to eat, not in any particular hurry to get around himself. “Shouldn’t you be resting?” He asked the vampire after the boys had left.

“I doze off and on. We have things to discuss. Can’t afford to hibernate.”

“Is that what you call it?” Thorin replied playfully with a smirk.

“It’s what it is. I shut down to promote healing and recovery.”

Thorin nodded in understanding.

The boys returned shortly with plenty of food in tow and the hunters each sat on their own bed while they devoured their meals.

Not long after they started, the door to their room mysteriously opened and closed itself. The hunters stared at the door in confusion, though Thorin suspected he knew the cause.

“Hey. Bring me any?” Nori’s voice suddenly sounded behind them. The boys startled and twisted around in confusion. Thorin just ignored him and went back to enjoying his breakfast.


“Nori. I assume you’ve been busy.” Bilbo greeted.

“Always am.” The thief confirmed as he stole a bite off Fili’s plate. Fili pulled it away and glared even harder.

“Find anything relevant?”
“Well, no lamias here. The incidents at the docks have been less frequent. Other than that it’s just your normal human stuff.”

“The fishermans’ issue has been dealt with.” Bilbo confirmed.

“Oh? What was it then? Something easy?”

“A kappa! We even got to see it!” Kili blurted out.

“Oh yeah?” Nori raised a curious eyebrow as he glanced at the vampire. “Ya kill it, did ya?”

“No, we weren’t even allow to bring weapons to see it. Why would you think we killed it? You know what it is, don’t you?” Fili corrected.

“Yer hunters, ain’t chya? Why wouldn’t ya kill it.”

“Cause Bilbo told us not too.” Kili answered honestly.

Nori raised a critical brow. “So, yer doin’ what the vampire tells ya to, now?”

“Shut up, Nori. Don’t give them a hard time.” Bilbo interceded.

“Yer grumpy. Ya eaten yet?” He asked as he stole a piece off Kili’s plate this time.

“I’ve been busy.” The vampire brushed him off.

“Ya should be eaten, even if it’s just a bit here and there. I’m more than happy to donate.” Nori offered with a suggestive wiggle of his brows.

Bilbo sighed and waved a hand at the thief.

“Don’t wave me off, Bilbo. I’m bein’ serious. Yer no good to us weak.”

“I’m not weak!” The vampire retorted shortly. “I’m just low on energy.”

“Yeah, okay. Same thing for a vampire.” Nori scoffed.

“Is it that bad?” Kili asked concerned.

“I’m fine.” Bilbo spoke over Nori’s “Yes.”

“Let’s talk about the harpies.” Bilbo redirected.

“What about the harpies?” Nori asked suspiciously.

“Bilbo’s going to help us draw out all the harpies in the hills around the town so we can kill them and the miners can go back to work.” Fili filled him in.

“Oh? And how are ya planning to do that?” Nori asked the vampire accusingly.

“It’s easy enough to summon them out.”

“Not in yer state it ain’t.” Nori argued. “Ya’ll have to maintain a psychic link with them to prevent them from heading towards the town. All of them. Which means ya won’t be able to fight them.”

“Which is why you four are going to pick them off one by one as they arrive. They won’t be expecting it, so you’ll have the element of surprise on your side. Take them all out, and we’ll have
another bag of tongues to trade in, the miners will be free to get back to work, and there’ll be no more hunter’s work to keep us here. It’s a win-win-win.”

Nori eyed the vampire with narrowed eyes as he thought. “Fine, but ya don’t fight and ya eat something tonight.” He demanded.

The vampire just waved him off.

“So, tonight then?” Thorin asked to confirm.

“Tomorrow. It will take all night, so you should get another night of sleep first. I’ll try to . . eat something tonight.” The vampire said with a disgusted lilt.

“Can you . . eat? What about the contract?” Fili asked sounding slightly concerned, though it was hard to tell if he was worried about the vampire eating or not eating.

“I can eat as long as I don’t hurt or kill any humans.” Bilbo assured. “I just don’t particularly . . like eating. Anyway, get our shopping done today and tomorrow, rest tonight, we’ll take care of the harpies tomorrow night, and then we can be out of here a couple days after that.”

“Alright.” Nori said after a moment of consideration. Thorin just nodded in agreement.

“Then I’m going to rest for now.” Bilbo said as he pulled out a sheet of paper. “Here’s the list in case you need a reminder of what we’re looking for.” With that he settled in and rolled over to sleep.

Nori scooped up the list and looked over it briefly before passing it on to Thorin. Thorin looked it over before folding it up and slipping it into an inner pocket. “I don’t suppose your gonna help us cover the shops.” He directed at the thief.

“So, tonight then?” Thorin grumbled in greeting.

Nori shrugged. “I had my own things to prepare.”

Thorin sent him an unimpressed glance. “Yes, I’m sure it was very important to secure enough wine
for the hunt.”

“Ya’ve no idea.” Nori shot back with an unfriendly grin.

Bilbo finally began to stir at the sound of their bickering. He stood up and stretched, being careful to face away from the windows as the sun hadn’t set yet. “Everyone ready?”

“We’re ready.” Thorin answered as he finished strapping his crossbow and spare bolts to himself.

“Then let’s go. We have to finish before the sun comes up tomorrow.”

They filed out of the inn, ignoring the curious stares, and stopped by the stable to grab their horses. They rode back the way they came at a gallop, trying to get as far away as possible before the sun set.

~Nori~

About an hour later, the sun was sinking below the hills, so they stopped and dismounted. The vampire immediately began scratching something into the dirt.

“What are you doing?” Kili asked curiously as the others tied their horses to a nearby tree.

“I’m drawing a magic circle to help amplify my power. I won’t be able to leave it while I’m pulling in the harpies.” The vampire explained.

The others walked over just as the sun fully disappeared behind the hills.

“Alright, before we do this, there’s something we gotta take care of.” Nori announced as he pulled the wine skins off his shoulder.

Bilbo stiffened suddenly as he was taking off his cloak and other day wear. His eyes widened and his nostrils flared as he focused on the wine skins.

Nori studied the vampire carefully. He knew Bilbo hadn’t been taking him seriously. But the vampire’s response was just proof of how hungry he really was.

“Yes, I’m sure getting drunk before a big hunt is very important.” Thorin chided sarcastically.

“Oh, this ain’t for us.” Nori said shaking the wine skins, making the contents slosh around noisily. “I ain’t helping unless Bilbo eats something.” He laid down his ultimatum.

“What?” Fili voiced the collective confusion as they all turned to the vampire. Bilbo was trying to remove his gloves, but his movements were strained and jerky. His hands were already shaking from the effort to control himself and a scowl had replaced his usual neutral or cheerful expressions.

“You know better than this Nori!” The vampire snarled, throwing his gloves down after finally getting them off. “You are putting that entire town at risk!”

“Ya and I both know there’s no place far enough to do this safely and the longer ya wait the more dangerous it is.” Nori stood his ground. “Look at ya! Yer already shaking and I haven’t even popped a cork yet!”

Bilbo rubbed his hands over his face in agitation, clearly trying to regain control.

“That’s not gonna be good enough! Look!” He yelled holding up the wineskins. “No bodies, no biting, no strings! Just how you like it!”
“It’s not enough. It’s not enough.” The vampire whimpered into his hands. “What if I can’t stop?”

“Get out yer crossbow, Oakenshield. If he looses it, shoot ’im. Aim for his heart. That should at least slow him down.” Nori ordered.

“What?!”

Nori could see a fear in his eyes that had nothing to do with the danger a frenzied vampire posed. Perhaps the hunter really did care about Bilbo. “Or would ya rather stand by while the whole town gets slaughtered?”

Thorin’s eyes hardened with resolve and he readied his crossbow.

“U-Uncle, you . . you can’t. .”

“We don’t have to kill him, Kili. Just stop him.” The older hunter tried to assure his terrified looking nephew.

“There ya go. If ya lose it, we’ll stop ya.” Nori said as he held out the first wine skin and popped it open.

When Bilbo finally dropped his hands, it was like a mask fell off with them. His face looked sunken and there were huge bags under his eyes. His eyes were already black as coal and his fangs were fully extended and visible as the vampire snarled at Nori.

Nori broke out into a cold sweat. A starving vampire was a thing of nightmares and one as powerful as Bilbo could bring ruin to all Eriador, but he stood his ground.

Starvation was the worst form of torture that could be inflicted on a vampire. Unlike humans, they couldn’t find relief in death. The hunger would simply grow and grow until it ruled their every thought and action.

To see Bilbo in this state despite his legendary self-control was painful. Bilbo had always been prone to practice self-torture, particularly by starvation and isolation, but Nori knew Bilbo would never do so to the point of putting others, even humans, at risk because of it.

Despite all the bickering and head-butting, Bilbo was the closest friend he had besides his brothers and Nori was gonna stand firm and do what he could for him.

Bilbo snatched the wine skin out of Nori’s hand with a hiss before throwing his head back and chugging it like a man dying of thirst.

Nori immediately popped the other wineskin open and held it out for the vampire.

Bilbo drained the first wineskin in seconds and snatched the second, downing that one just as quickly.

The hunters stood by and watched apprehensively. They had never seen Bilbo look so much like what he was. Nori understood how easy it was to forget when all you ever saw was the polite good-natured creature he usually appeared as. It was hard to believe that this blood-thirsty beast lay just below the surface.

When Bilbo couldn’t get anymore out of the wineskin, he ripped it open like it was nothing and started licking the inside clean. His eyes were black and empty and seemed consumed with only one thing.
The boys shifted nervously, shuffling closer to their uncle. Thorin kept the vampire in his sights, prepared to fire at any moment. He would do what he had to.

Nori cursed as Bilbo finished licking clean the first wine skin. He wasn’t showing any sighs of slowing down. It wasn’t enough, not nearly enough. Bilbo was losing it he had to do something quick. He had to keep Bilbo here so the hunter could get a shot in.

“Bilbo! Calm down! Yer better than this!” Nori yelled at him, trying to bring him to his senses.

Bilbo dropped the wineskin. At least he seemed to be listening.

“That’s right. Put that legendary self-control ta work.” Nori coaxed.

Bilbo snarled and curled in on himself, rocking back and forth in his squatting position. His whole body was shaking with tremors, revealing just how hard he was working to control himself.

Nori inched closer cautiously, thinking that Bilbo was going to be able to work through it. Suddenly, the vampire stopped. He wasn’t rocking or shaking anymore, he was deadly still.

“Bilbo?” Kili asked hopefully.

Bilbo slowly looked up and met his eyes with a cold hungry glare. There was no more struggle on his face. “Shoot ‘im!”

Before Thorin could even respond, the vampire lurched up and grabbed Nori by the neck and slammed him into the ground. When Nori raised his arms defensively on instinct, the vampire latched onto his wrist, sinking his teeth deep into Nori’s arm.

“Shoot ’im!” Nori screamed over the boys desperately trying to call Bilbo back to his senses.

Thorin lined his bow up with the vampire’s heart, only inches from his back. But now that it had come to it, Thorin hesitated.

“Do it!” Nori screamed as the bones in his wrist were being ground between Bilbo’s teeth.

“Bilbo!”

Nori watched in bafflement as the vampire’s eyes instantly cleared at the sound of the hunter’s voice. Gone were the pitch black pits to be replaced by beautiful emerald green orbs.

Bilbo blinked down at Nori as if having just been woken from a dream. Nori could already see the guilt and self-loathing building up behind his eyes.

“It’s alright.” Nori croaked hoarsely. “I’m fine.”

“Bilbo?” Thorin’s voice sounded behind him making the vampire jolt in surprise.

Bilbo’s eyes widened with a terror that Nori couldn’t quite place. Guilt and self-loathing made sense, but terror seemed out of place. He slowly released Nori’s neck, bringing both his hands to steady the arm he still had wedged between his teeth.

He carefully extracted his teeth from Nori’s arm before gently sucking and licking the ripped flesh clean, murmuring into Nori’s skin. Nori hissed in pain as his bones snapped back to their proper places and his flesh re-knit itself together before scarring over.

Bilbo slowly got up and stumbled away from the group, refusing to turn around and face the hunters.
Thorin kept the vampire in his crosshairs as the twins helped Nori to his feet. Bilbo had only gone maybe a dozen feet before squatting back down into a crouch.

“You alright?” He asked the thief.

“Just peachy.” Nori brushed himself off.

“And Bilbo?”

“He’s back. Something snapped ‘im out of it. Why didn’t ya shoot ‘im? We’re ya just gonna let ‘im eat me?” Nori accused.

Thorin lowered his crossbow as he allowed himself to ease out of his tension. He’d never frozen up before, but, when it came down to it, he just couldn’t bring himself to shoot Bilbo. “I was hoping it wouldn’t come to that.”

Nori scoffed and looked like he was about to make a cheeky comeback when he froze at the sound of the vampire gagging.

“No! No, no, no, no ya don’t!” He ran to the vampire. “I did not almost get eaten just for ya to throw it back up!”

Thorin ran after him. Bilbo was holding his handkerchief over his mouth and nose doing his best to hold down his meal.

Nori rubbed his back as he continued to gag. “Hey, Hey. I’m the only one ya got, okay. And look at me, I’m fine. Ya already patched me up good.”

Bilbo pushed Nori away. “I’m fine. Leave me alone.” He snarled half-heartedly between gags under his handkerchief.

Rather than fear or disgust, Thorin could only feel pity for the vampire. He knelt down just behind and to the side of the vampire, noticing how Bilbo tensed from his presence. He wanted to reach out and touch the vampire, but couldn’t bring himself to cross that barrier.

“It’s all right.” He reassured instead. “We’re all fine. You need to keep it down.”

Bilbo’s gagging stopped almost instantly, but he continued to take deep breaths to hold it down.

“That’s it.” Thorin encouraged as Bilbo continued to calm down.

After a few minutes, Bilbo finally uncovered his face and stood up slowly. He turned around to face the hunters, but kept his eyes down, refusing to make eye contact with any of them. “S-sorry about that. I . . . I lost myself there for a moment.” He brushed himself off as if trying to salvage what was left of his dignity.

Thorin nodded in acceptance, but Kili suddenly stepped forward and wrapped the vampire in a firm hug.

“Kili, I don’t think this is the time.” Bilbo reprimanded as he stiffened in Kili’s hold.

“No, this is the best time.” Kili corrected, holding him close and laying his head on Bilbo’s shoulder.

Surprise, confusion and disbelief each passed over the vampire’s face before it settled on resigned
acceptance. “You are a strange kid.” Bilbo chuckled quietly as he gently patted Kili’s back.

“Mom always said I was the special one.” Kili sniffed.

“Well, she certainly knew what she was talking about.”

Kili chuckled wetly. “I was scared.” He admitted as he squeezed him tighter.

Bilbo stiffened and his expression went neutrally blank. “I’m sorry, Kili. I never intended for you to see that.”

“Not for me!” Kili protested. “For you! I didn’t know you were suffering all this time.” He sniffled into the vampire’s shoulder.

“I . . .” The vampire trailed off, completely baffled by the sentiment. “I’m a vampire, Kili.” As if Kili had forgotten what had just happened.

“Yeah, you’re a vampire who cares about other people and creatures and who takes care of those weaker than you. That makes you good as far as I’m concerned. I don’t want to see you suffer.”

Bilbo was stunned speechless at first, but quickly recovered. He gently grabbed Kili by the arms and pushed him away so he could look him in the eye. “You can only say that because you don’t know me or what I’ve done and, for your sake, I hope you never do. But, thank you. It’s enough that you think so.” He ended softly.

Kili shook his head with another sniff. “It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter what you’ve done or how bad it was. Even if you hurt people, I know it’s not because you wanted to.”

For a millisecond, Thorin thought he saw despair and sorrow flash over the vampire’s face, but it happened so fast, he couldn’t be sure of what he saw.

Bilbo pulled the teen back into a gentle hug. “Thank you, Kili.”

“See, hugs aren’t so bad after all.” Kili joked as he finally pulled away.

The vampire chuckled. “Yes, I suppose I could get used to them.”

Kili beamed.

“But, in moderation, please.” The vampire hedged before the teen got out of hand.

Kili nodded in agreement as he chuckled.

“Well, shall we get started?” The vampire still wasn’t meeting Thorin’s eyes.

Thorin nodded. As much as he was jealous of Kili’s familiarity with the vampire, he had to admit it was very useful for diffusing tense situations. “If you’re ready.”

Bilbo nodded. “I think I’m actually feeling marginally better. Nori? Are you going to be alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Then let’s get started.”
I have had several people comment on my ‘Baby Bilbo’ prompt in ‘Future Works’ so I am SUPER EXCITED to be posting ‘Small, but Fierce’ as this month’s bonus sneak peak chapter! It is the first chapter to my ‘Baby Bilbo’ prompt. It actually wasn’t next on my list to post, but I decided to bump it up since so many seemed interested in it. You can find it in ‘Future Works’ and I will put the summary below.

I just have to say, I can’t wait to write the full story cause it is gonna be a blast to write. XD Enjoy!!

“Small, but Fierce" (Baby Bilbo Prompt)
As a result of a magical mishap during the trip to the lonely mountain, Bilbo is reverted to a wee little hobbitling. Only in body, of course. His adult mind is still very aware of the indignity of it all (seriously! He doesn't need to be coddled, carried, and fed like a child). It turns out, dwarves love children and there is nothing cuter than Hobbit children. Bilbo soon realizes that he can get away with just about anything in his babyish form and starts taking full advantage of it. Even the grumpy brooding king can't deny the angelic little creature anything he desires (and Bilbo's going to milk that for all it's worth).

Bilbo sat cross-legged in the center of the circle he had drawn as the others readied their weapons.

“Once we begin, I won’t be able to leave the circle. If I can, I’ll warn you when one draws near. Are you ready?”

After receiving an affirmative from each of them, he closed his eyes to focus. The hunters watched in fascination as the vampire began to murmur. The circle lit up beneath him and glowed with an eerie light in the dusk.

Several minutes later, Bilbo gave them a heads up. The first one was on its way. A couple minutes later, it flew into view over the southern stretch of hillside.

Thorin readied his crossbow and lined up the harpy in his crosshairs. The others took formation around him as support, but he had no intention of it getting that far. He kept in his sights as it flew closer and closer, waiting until it was close enough for a fatal shot.

It continued to fly straight toward the vampire as if oblivious to the hunters’ presence. Thorin waited until the very last second when the harpy seemed like it was going to fly right through them.

It couldn’t have been farther than twenty feet away when Thorin finally loosed his bolt. It flew true, tearing right through the harpy’s heart. It didn’t even screech as it hit the ground with a thud and skidded to a stop right in front of them.

“Well,” Fili huffed. “That was easy.”

“If we only take them on one at a time, this is gonna be a piece of cake.” Agreed Kili.
“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t count on them all being so cooperative.” Nori said pessimisticly.

“That’s fine too. We don’t want to get too bored, you know.” Fili said and Kili whooped in agreement.

Thorin just shook his head at the boys before turning to check on their vampire. Yeah, he was their vampire now. Kili had pretty much made that clear. Not only was Thorin not bothered by the statement, he was strangely satisfied to hold some claim over the vampire.

“Southeast, southeast, south.” Bilbo suddenly warned of three incoming harpies.

They split up, Thorin and his boys planted themselves on the southeast side while Nori prepared to intercept the one from the south. He and Nori were the only ones skilled in long range weapons. He figured he should probably do something about that in the future.

Nori felled his with a dagger to the heart, but Thorin was only able to kill one before the second was too close for a crossbow shot. It worked out just fine, though, when Kili and Fili took it down with a pincer attack, each stabbing it in the chest from either side.

“Whooo!” Kili high fived his brother. “Now that’s what I’m talking about!”

“Good work.” Thorin praised, chuckling as they puffed up like peacocks.

They spent the whole night in much the same manner. Sometimes they only had to deal with one at a time, but more often than not they were taking two or three down at once or one right after another.

They had one close call when four showed up at the same time. They only managed to stop the last one from reaching Bilbo by clipping its wings and by then it was aware enough to fight back.

Between the four of them they were able to take it down, but it was only feet from Bilbo’s circle when they did. As the night wore on, the number of harpies began to dwindle, until, about an hour before dawn, the vampire’s circle faded and he stood up and brushed himself off.

“That’s the last of them.” He said after Thorin took down the lone harpy. “I don’t feel anymore within range.”

“How wide a range were you pulling?” Fili asked curiously.

“The entire south and southwestern hill range, though we cleared most of the southwestern range when we passed through, I just wanted to make sure it was empty.”

“Sweet!” Kili exclaimed. “How many did we get, Nori.” He went to join the thief in rounding up the tongues.

“The energy of youth.” Thorin shook his head as he approached the vampire. “How are you feeling?” He asked lowly, knowing he didn’t like to draw attention to his weakness.

“Tired.” Bilbo still wasn’t making full eye contact with him. “But I’ll be fine. I’m not going to lose it again, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I’m only worried about your health and comfort.” Thorin rumbled lowly.

Bilbo’s head shot up in surprise and he finally met Thorin eyes. Thorin dipped his head and met his gaze, studying the vampire’s subtle expressions.

The vampire studied him back, unable to completely hide the curiosity in his eyes. “You shouldn’t
waste your time.” He finally answered quietly.

“I’ll do as I please.”

“I bet you will.” The vampire huffed quietly.

“Fifty-three!” Nori yelled over to them. “Fifty-three kills total!”

“That’s even more than we got in the hills.” Fili hooted.

“And Bilbo didn’t even kill any this time.” Kili hollered giving his brother a high five.

Thorin shook his head at his nephews. “That many will be difficult to cash in. They barely payed me last time.”

“I’ll take care of it. I can do it tomorrow night.” Bilbo volunteered.

“I doubt they’ll let you in at night.”

The vampire raised an unimpressed brow at him. “I wasn’t planning to knock.”

“Alright. I got the tongues. Let’s get back so we can eat.” Nori ordered cheerfully.

“Don’t you mean sleep?” Kili laughed.

“Ya kidding, gotta eat to maintain my delicate figure. This kinda work puts a hole in ma belly.”

The boys laughed cheerfully as they all mounted up to head back.

A couple of hours later, Nori and the hunters were filling their bellies with a large breakfast at the inn. Bilbo had immediately returned to their room to rest since the sun had risen and he didn’t want to attract attention.

Thorin decided that Nori owed it to them to explain the severity of the vampire’s condition considering he put them all at risk the night before. “Bilbo’s condition. How bad is it?”

Nori met his eyes briefly before returning to his food. “Bad enough ’e lost it.”

“Why haven’t we noticed? He certainly doesn’t act like he’s in bad shape.”

“Maybe you didn’t notice.” Nori scoffed. “I knew ’e was in bad shape when we met in Nogrod. He’s been focusing ‘is energy on maintaining a healthy appearance. Course, it doesn’t work when ’e’s sleeping or the sun’s up, but ’e has to keep ‘is hood up so no one’s the wiser.”

Thorin’s stomach turned uneasily as he processed the information. Bilbo was going out of his way to hide his suffering. Was it for his own sake or theirs?

“It’s just how ’e is.” Nori answered as if he could read Thorin’s thoughts. “Bilbo doesn’t like getting too close to people, so ’e puts up walls.”

“He seems close enough to you and your brothers.” Thorin grumped.

Nori snickered at the obvious jealousy in his tone. “We’ve had decades to learn ‘im. And we didn’t learn any of it from ‘im directly. It was all our own snooping and observations.”

“Decades.” Thorin didn’t want to wait decades.
Nori snickered again. “Yeah, but we didn’t have a secret weapon.” He sent a quick glance to the other end of the table were the twins were eating. “Yer boy Kili there seems to be breaking walls that even we never breached.”

“That sounds like Kili. He runs recklessly head first into everything. He’d break through a wall with sheer will power alone.”

“Hardheadedness must run in the family.” Nori smirked.

Thorin gave him a half-hearted glare. He couldn’t really deny it.

“Why didn’t you shoot ‘im?” Nori asked more seriously.

Thorin rubbed at his beard as he tried to come up with something that didn’t sound sappy. “I didn’t think it was necessary.”

“His teeth were locked on my arm.” Nori glared at him accusingly. “‘E would have killed you and your boys next and then the whole town.”

Thorin rubbed his face in agitation. He couldn’t really explain it. “It just didn’t feel right.”

Nori studied him before looking around shiftily. “Was it cause of yer feelings for ‘im?” He asked quietly as if someone might over hear.

Thorin glared at him with a little more heat this time. He couldn’t really deny it, but at the same time it didn’t seem to fully explain it. “Don’t know.”

“Well, at least yer not denying it.” Nori shook his head. “Look, I get where yer comin’ from. But ya don’t know nothin’ about ‘im. Seriously, what ya know ain’t even the tip of the mountain. Ya don’t know what ‘e’s done. Hell, I don’t even know everything ‘e’s done. But I don’t live by human standards anyway. If yer serious bout ‘im, which I’m not saying I approve of, yer gonna need to be prepared to learn and accept all ‘is darkest and bloodiest secrets. And frankly, I don’t think Master Righteous Oakenshield has what it takes for that.”

Nori was right. Thorin wasn’t even sure he could do it. There was no telling what was in Bilbo’s past. As much as he liked to think it wasn’t so bad, he couldn’t ignore all the little red flags and indicators that there was some pretty dark stuff in it. Self-inflicted isolation and starvation, emotional separation, anxiety triggers, just to name a few. They were all indicators of a dark past.

Thorin didn’t know if he could just dismiss whatever terrible things Bilbo might have done in his past, and yet he couldn’t get rid of this nagging desire to have more with the vampire, to have Bilbo. “Is it possible? For him to take a human mate?”

Nori gave him a look as if to say he’d lost his mind. “It’s not impossible, but it is extremely ill-advised. The line between thirst and lust is a fuzzy one for vampires. Mature vampire’s rarely feel one without the other. They’re biters and they often feed from each other in the midst of passion. Not to mention ‘e could snap ya like a twig if ‘e got over excited.”

Nori seemed to be doing his best to dissuade him. “Bilbo’s self control . .”

“Has limits, as was clearly demonstrated for us last night.” Nori interrupted.

Thorin rubbed at his face again in agitation. Everything Nori was saying made sense. And, although the biting and feeding bits were new information, he wasn’t saying anything Thorin hadn’t already thought to discourage his interest. Dark pasts aside, there would be huge obstacles for a
human/vampire relationship and being turned certainly wasn’t an option.

Nori must have picked up on Thorin’s internal struggle as he sighed. “Think about Bilbo.” Nori effectively regained Thorin’s attention. “Everyone thinks vampires are heartless and unfeeling, but they’re wrong. There’s a reason it seems like vampires are incapable of feeling. It’s because when they do feel, it’s intense and it consumes their entire being. They can’t afford to be moved by every little emotion, so they aren’t effected by most. But when something breaks through that barrier and causes them to feel, they feel it with everything they are. There’s no middle ground, it’s either nothing or everything. And it’s permanent; once they latch on to something, it takes something world shattering to make them change.”

Thorin’s brows scrunched in confusion. “Bilbo feels things. I’ve seen it.”

“No, he gives the appearance of feelings.” Nori corrected. “He’s a good actor. Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed.”

“Are you saying everything is a lie? Everything he’s said and done?!” Thorin whispered hotly.

“No! I’m saying it’s not what it seems! Though Bilbo is . . different from other vampires, he does have a higher capacity for emotions than others and he’s had centuries to learn how to mimic humans. But your missing the point! Yer human! Even if yer job doesn’t kill you, someday ya will die! If Bilbo comes to love ya, ya will be ‘is everything! What do ya thing yer death will do to ‘im?!”

That . . was something Thorin hadn’t considered. “What will it do to him?” As if he didn’t already know the answer.

“Nori stared at him, knowing full well Thorin knew the answer. “It’ll break ‘im.” He shrugged. “Best case scenario: ‘e’ll off ‘imself. Worst case? Well, ‘e’ll probably make the destruction The Dragon caused look like child’s play.”

Thorin’s gut twisted at the mention of the havoc that beast had wreaked. “Bilbo wouldn’t . . .”

“You don’t have a clue what ’e will or won’t do. The easiest way to deal with a lost love that big is to replace it with something else, something like anger or hatred. The difference between Bilbo and the Dragon is the dragon likes big displays of power; Bilbo don’t care about that an’ ‘e’s got the speed and stealth of an assassin. We’re talking about the possibility of entire towns being slayed in the quiet of a single night.”

Thorin’s stomach churned anxiously as he rubbed at his beard in thought. He didn’t want to believe Bilbo would be capable of such a thing, but he honestly didn’t know enough about him. He turned a critical eye to the thief. “Is this you trying to scare me off?”

“Is it working? It should be.” Nori shrugged unrepentantly. “It’s all hypothetical until it happens, but it’s well within the realm of possibility. If ya really care about ‘im, ya should stay away from ‘im.”

Nori downed the last of his drink before getting up and heading to their room.

Thorin’s gut continued to churn. Knowing the countless might die after his death was one thing. He could make Bilbo promise not to fall to that and Thorin wouldn’t know it even if he did. But knowing he would be the one to bring so much pain to Bilbo, the one who would break him beyond repair? Knowing it was certain and not just a possible outcome? Thorin wasn’t sure he could live with that.

He got up to follow his nephews back to their room. He was going to need time to really think about this.
All four of them collapsed into bed and slept most of the day away. About mid afternoon, they got up to eat and wash up after having a bath prepared. Still tired, they went back to bed later that evening.

Nori shared his bed with Bilbo as the vampire had already taken up residence there. Though the vampire seemed to be out cold the whole time and despite his talk with Nori, Thorin couldn’t seem to extinguish the hot burn of jealousy that simmered in his gut over it. Of course, Nori’s taunting wasn’t helping as he would drape an arm over the vampire or smile smugly when ever he saw Thorin eying him.

Thorin sighed to himself the next day as they were finishing up their shopping. Bilbo would exchange the tongues tonight and then they would leave in the morning. Thorin didn’t know why he couldn’t just give up on the vampire. The very idea of having anything with him went against everything Thorin was and believed in, not to mention logic itself.

Maybe he just wasn’t trying hard enough. He was notorious for his stubbornness after all. He just needed to put it to good use and refuse to let this . . whatever it was, get the best of him. But those deep green eyes seem to make it oh so difficult. He sighed again as he rubbed a hand over his face.

“You okay, Uncle?” Fili asked, having noticed all his uncle’s sighing.

“I’m fine. Still a bit tired, I guess.”

Kili eyed him knowingly. “Yeah, you must be having a hard time sleeping with Nori sharing a bed with Bilbo right across from you. I have to say though, I’m impressed you have dragged him off and kicked him out yet.”

“What?!"

“Oh, come on Uncle. We all know he’s your type. He’s cute as sin and we’ve all seen how you look at him.” Fili filled him in.

Good Mahal!! Even his nephews were onto him now! “It’s not like that. It’s not possible.”

“Why? Cause he’s a vampire?”

“I approve.” Kili chimed in. “Actually, scratch that. You keep believing that, Uncle, that way he’ll still be single when I’m older.”

That got both Thorin and Fili’s attention. “I thought you were worried about turning gay?” Fili asked.

“I was, but I thought about and I think I’d be okay with it if I could be with Bilbo. And he doesn’t age right? So I just have to wait a few years and then I can tell him how I feel.”

“He’s a vampire, Kili. Even if you ignore everything else, you’re still gonna grow old and die while he stays the same.” Thorin voiced his own concerns.

“Then I’ll just love him with everything I’ve got for as long as I can. I mean, that’s all anyone can do right? Even if we were both vampires or both humans, there’s no guarantee one of us won’t die or be killed.” Kili shrugged.

Thorin stopped and stared at his nephew in both awe and envy. Leave it to Kili to make something so complicated, so simple. “Your mother was right. You are the special one.” He said before turning to start walking again.
“Hey! I know you don’t mean that as a compliment when you say it, you know!”

“Huh? Guess you’re not as dumb as you look.” Fili stabbed playfully.

“We’re twins, you doofus.”

“We’re not identical twins and I’m clearly the better looking one.”

Thorin marveled about Kili’s straightforwardness as his nephews’ bickering devolved into rough-housing. Kili always followed his heart, it was why he got into so much trouble and why he always overcame any odds against him. Fili was the rational, strategic one, but Kili would never let anything stand in his way once he made up his mind.

Sometimes Thorin wished he could tap into some of that simplicity and optimism. Then perhaps he could even openly love a vampire and accept everything that came with that. But he couldn’t and he wasn’t sure he had what it would take to accept everything.

“Seriously though, Uncle,” Kili began having escaped from his brother. “If you don’t get serious, I’m gonna take him from you.”

“Is that a challenge?” Thorin raised his brow at the teen.

“Nope. It’s a promise.” Kili smiled cheekily.

“And what makes you think he’ll accept you. You heard him. He’s not interested in a mate.”

Kili just shrugged, undeterred. “I’ve been watching. I know your his type. And everyone has always said I look just like you, which means I’ll be his type. He already lets me hug him. I’ve practically won half the battle already!” He declared optimistically.

Thorin growled to himself at the reminder. Kili wasn’t that far off. Nori mentioned that they hadn’t even made it that far with the vampire. Kili was probably his most serious competition and he wasn’t even sixteen yet. “Don’t get cocky.”

Kili grinned a devilish grin. “Never.”

Thorin shook his head. Maybe having the thief around wasn’t such a good idea, after all. He seemed to be rubbing off on the boys and they were handful enough without the extra encouragement.

“Let’s get this shopping done so we can leave in the morning.” He ordered, pitting an end to the discussion.

“Yes, Uncle.” The boys humored him.
They rode out of Annunamis early the next morning as planned and headed east towards their next destination: Fornost. They would travel up along the lake then follow the Brandywine River as far East as it went before riding cross country the rest of the way.

By the second day, they had reached the river and started riding alongside it. That night they camped along the water and sat around the campfire as they ate their dinner. The vampire had been much quieter since the ‘incident’ and rarely spoke unless prompted.

This didn’t deter Kili in the least, of course, and he sat near the vampire as he jabbered away trying to lure the him into the conversation.

“I don’t think we’ve ever made that much profit from just one stop before.” He was just finishing up his observations of their time in Annunimnas.

“We haven’t.” Thorin confirmed.

“Guess it really is profitable to have a vampire around, huh?” He playfully nudged the vampire next to him who was sitting facing away from him.

Bilbo just hummed in reply.

Kili wasn’t discouraged in the slightest. “Hey, why do you always sit like that?”

“Like what?” The vampire replied distractedly over his pipe.

“Like that! You never sit facing the fire directly, you always face away from it.”

“I don’t like it.” Was his simple reply.

“Like what? The fire?” Kili was baffled. “Are vampires weak to fire?”

“Not particularly. Though the high gens seem more vulnerable to it.”

“Then why don’t you like it?”

“I just don’t.” The vampire relied unhelpfully.

Kili was quiet for a while. “Is it like the water?”

Bilbo brows scrunched. “What water?”

“The river. You said the water brings back memories from . . from before you were a vampire. . . Bad memories. Is that why you don’t like the fire? Does it . . remind you of bad things?”

Bilbo went quiet. After a few minutes of silence, Kili was just about to apologize for being nosy.
“Yes.”

Kili was so caught off guard he wasn’t sure he heard right. “What?”

“Yes.” Bilbo answered with more volume. “I said ‘yes.’” He ended softly.

“Oh. . . Sorry. I wasn’t trying to pry. I just want to know more about you. But-but you don’t have to
tell me things if you don’t want to, you know. I’ll understand.”

Kili perked up when the vampire chuckled softly. “There is only one thing I have to do, Kili, and
that’s not it.”

“Really? What is it then?” The teen’s curiosity was piqued and he leaned over the vampire’s
shoulder to hear the answer.

“That’ is not your business.” Bilbo tweaked the nose hanging over his shoulder playfully.

Kili pulled back with a yelp. “Aww! But you said it on purpose to make me curious!” He whined as
he rubbed his nose.

”A little mystery is good for you.” The vampire replied unrepentantly.

“‘Little’?” Kili scoffed. “You’re, like, a whole bunch of mysteries wrapped up in one small, adorable
package.”

Bilbo choked on his smoke and the others couldn’t quite contain their snickers.

“I am not ‘adorable!’” He countered when he had recovered.

“You totally are. Don’t fight it. Just embrace it.” Kili gripped the vampire’s shoulder in mock
sympathy.

Bilbo grumbled something under his breath about children not respecting their elders these days. Kili
just laughed feeling quite successful in getting the vampire to interact with him.

He leaned into the vampire’s back sending a smug smile to his uncle.

Thorin resisted growling at the obvious gloat and simply raised a brow at him instead, not wanting to
give the teen any more satisfaction.

Things wound down after that. They slipped into their bedrolls and settled in for the night. Well,
everyone but Kili. He had fallen asleep leaning on the vampire with his head resting on Bilbo’s
shoulder, already starting to drool.

Thorin huffed in amusement and Bilbo sent him an expectant raised eyebrow. Thorin huffed again as
he got up to relieve the vampire of his new burden, which proved much easier said then done as the
teen tightened around his victim with every attempt to dislodge him.

Finally, Bilbo just huffed and waved the hunter away, resigned to being the teen’s pillow for now.
Thorin complied and returned to his bedroll, a smirk on his lips at the vampire’s predicament. At least
Kili wouldn’t be endearing himself to the vampire as anything more than a child at this rate.

~Nori~

Nori slipped out of his bedroll silently. Everyone else was fast asleep. Everyone but the vampire, of
course, who was no where to be seen. He headed up river, he hadn’t missed the vampire’s subtle
looks as they made camp.

He didn’t stop until he was well out of earshot of the camp, but, as soon as he did, the vampire appeared before him. “Was wonderin’ when ya were gonna wise up.”

Bilbo glared at him. “This is out of necessity, not for entertainment.”

“Yeah, sure.” The thief shrugged with a smirk.

“And I have . . . a condition.”

“What’s that?” Nori asked with a quizzical brow. “I ain’t tellin’ the hunter.”

“What? No. Well, I mean, don’t do that, but that’s not my condition. I want DMB . . . I know you wouldn’t leave home without it so don’t try to tell me you don’t have any.” The vampire added with a stern look when it seemed like the thief might try to deny it.

Nori was baffled by the request. “Why?”

“Because I lost it!” Bilbo hissed. “I could have killed you! I’m not going to risk losing it again!” He took a calming breath. “If I’m going to feed from you, I want DMB first. Otherwise, forget it.”

Nori studied him in thought for a few moments. True, it would be safer, but a drunk vampire posed its own problems. “Fine, one drop.”

“One?! That’ll barely make me tipsy! I need six!”

“Six will have ya layed out! Ya won’t even be able to function!”

“Good!” The vampire countered. “Then I won’t be able to rip your head off!”

“Ya won’t be able to feed either! Two drops!”

“Five!” Bilbo counter offered.

“Three, then, and no more!”

“Four! I won’t go any lower than that, Nori. I’ll be able to feed, and it will be enough to suppress a frenzy.”

Seconds ticked by as they glared daggers at each other, neither willing to give in. Unfortunately, the vampire had the upper hand. “Fine.” He said brushing non-existing wrinkles out of his jacket. “I’ll just go without eating then.”

Nori growled in defeat. “Fine! But no more than four! And only this time!” He didn’t need the vampire getting addicted to the stuff. He had enough problems as it was.

“Fine. . . Well, come on then, we don’t have all night.” Bilbo prompted when Nori didn’t move fast enough.

Nori grumbled under his breath but pulled out a small vial from one of his inner pockets. “At least let me get comfortable first. Ya’ll be wobbling all over the place after ya take this.”

Bilbo nodded and waved his hand at the thief to hurry him along.

Nori relieved himself of a few layers and found a semi-comfortable spot to sit. He preemptively
unlaced his trousers and pulled out a rag suitable for cleaning. When he was finally ready, he summoned the vampire over with a curling finger and a salacious grin.

Bilbo rolled his eyes and also stripped off his nicer outermost layers before plopping into the thief’s lap in a straddling position.

Nori held up the vile. “Only four.” He reminded as Bilbo snatched the vile out of his hand.

Bilbo just shook his head at the mild warning before, very carefully, placing one drop at a time onto his tongue. After four drops, he resealed the vial and handed it back.

Nori watched as the effects became obvious almost immediately. Bilbo’s eyes closed and he began to sway in Nori’s lap as his body relaxed. He had to brace himself on Nori’s shoulder to stay still. “Ready?” He asked lazily.

“Always am.” Nori wrapped a steadying arm around Bilbo’s waist as the other tugged his shirt away from his neck and out of the way.

Bilbo buried one hand into the hair at the back of Nori’s head while the other steadied him by his shoulder. It took him a little longer to line up properly because of his condition, but he was soon slowly sinking his teeth into the soft flesh between Nori’s neck and shoulder.

The thief winced at the initial puncture, but the pain quickly dissolved into bliss as his nerves became alight with pleasure. His face went slack as the electrifying sensation intensified, triggering every pleasure nerve as it spread from his shoulder across his whole body.

“Oooohhh.” He groaned lowly as the wave of pleasure reached his groin, intensifying once again as it caressed every possible nerve into euphoric overdrive.

Bilbo continued to hold Nori steady as he pumped his teeth in and out of his flesh, encouraging a steady blood flow as he sucked around the wound he had made.

Nori groaned again as he pulled himself out of his pants and took his now throbbing member in hand. The electric sensation had reached his toes before doubling back and pooling in his groin. He barely had the presence of mind to cover himself with the rag before he started stroking himself. Bilbo would be furious if he got his clothes dirty, after all.

Nori slowly stroked his extremely sensitive member, almost whimpering at the over stimulation. He panted heavily as he got closer, trying to drag it out as long as possible. When he couldn’t hold it in any longer, his free hand flew unbidden to Bilbo’s rear, groping and pulling them together in a grind.

Bilbo’s grip tightened in his hair as he hissed threateningly. Nori was too lost to care as he fell into ecstasy with a strangled off cry. It took him several full minutes to come down from his high, by then, the vampire had finished feeding and healed up the bite wound.

Bilbo had relaxed, draping himself over the thief. After cleaning himself as best he could with the vampire hanging on him, Nori wrapped his arms around him again as his mental faculties slowly returned. “How bout ya?” He tugged at the ties of Bilbo’s pants after he had recovered. “It’s been awhile. Let me take care of ya.”

Bilbo finally stirred and pushed himself off from Nori’s chest. “No.” He moved to get up, but Nori held him down.

“Aw, come on. I know ya need it. It’s been bloody too long.” He started palming Bilbo through his pants.
“I ssaid no! S-sstop it, Nori!” Bilbo squirmed in his grip, weakened by the DMB.

“Ya’ll feel better. Ya gotta be pent up bad.”

“Stop!”

They both turned at the sound of the command, Bilbo still trying to push away.

“He said stop! Let him go!” Fili demanded.

Nori just raised a brow at the teen. “Ya sure about that?”

“Yes! He doesn’t want it so let him go!”

“If ya say so.” With a smirk, Nori suddenly pulled his arms away from the struggling vampire causing Bilbo to fall over backwards off his lap with a yelp.

Bilbo flailed trying to reorient himself after the tumble. Fili sent a scathing glare at the thief as he walked over to help. “You okay, Bilbo?” He asked as he pulled the vampire off the ground.

“I’m fine.” Bilbo replied with a lazy tongue before stumbling into Fili’s arms. He pulled away too fast and almost sent himself tumbling to the ground again. Fili grabbed him before he could, looking more and more confused.

“Are you . . drunk?” He asked bewildered. “What did you do to him?!” He turned on the thief.

Nori was brushing himself off after getting up off the ground. “I didn’t do anything to ‘im. That’s what ‘e wanted.”

“To get drunk?” Fili was skeptical.

“Yep.”

Fili looked to Bilbo for confirmation. “Why?”

“Izz shaver tha’ way.” The vampire swayed.

Fili was only more baffled by the answer. “What’s safer? And how do you even get a vampire drunk?”

“Feeding.” Nori rolled his eyes. The only way to keep the older hunter out of this now was to convince the kid he didn’t need to know. “We have an arrangement. I let ‘im feed on me when ‘e needs it.”

“That’s what you were doing? . . . It didn’t seem like it.”

Nori raised a brow at him. “Oh? How long ya been watchin’? Ya get off peepin’, do ya?”

“I-I thought something else was going on!” Fili sputtered. Even in the darkness, Nori could tell he was blushing. “It certainly didn’t look like he was eating!”

“Why? Cause I wasn’t in pain? Newsflash hunter: low gen bites don’t hurt, they feel good, real good, like orgasmic good, if ya catch my drift.”

Fili flushed again. “So, what, you were jerking off to getting bitten?”
“Don’t knock it till ya try it, kid.”

“I do not bite children.” The vampire protested drunkenly before he could get volunteered for anything.

Fili looked at the vampire in bafflement. “How do you even get a vampire drunk?”

“DMB.” Nori supplied, suspecting the hunter-in-training would know what it was.

“DMB? Dead Man’s Blood? But that’s poisonous to vampires! You poisoned him!?"

“Not poizionish.” Bilbo hiccuped and leaned heavily on the teen.

“What?” Fili looked between them looking for answers.

“It’s not a poison, it’s a drug, a super potent drug. Hunters use it because it impairs vampires a lot like too much alcohol impairs humans. Only, for vampires, it’s so potent it only takes a few drops to incapacitate them. Tha’s why most stay clear of the stuff.”

“So,” Fili started putting the pieces together. “you gave him DMB so he could feed without, what, losing control and killing you?”

“Pretty much.”

Fili’s searching stare hardened into a glare. “Okay, sure, then why where trying to force into doing things he didn’t want to do, knowing he was too impaired to stop you?!”

Nori shrugged unrepentantly. “Like I told your uncle, hunger and sex drive are practically one in the same for vampires. I was tryin’ ta help ‘im relieve some of that built up tension.”

“Even though he said no? He told you no!”

“He woulda thanked me afterwards.” Nori said, sure of himself. “It’s not like its the first time I’ve helped ‘im work off some stress.”

Fili was still glaring at the thief when he was distracted the the sound of soft snoring. Bilbo was dozing as he leaned into the teen, propped up in his arms. Fili turned back to the thief. “Uncle won’t be happy about this.”

“Good thing yer not gonna tell ‘im then.”

“Oh, yeah? Why is that?”

“Cause Bilbo don’t want ‘im to know.

Fili faltered in his threat, not wanting to go against Bilbo’s wishes. “Fine, but if you ever try to force him into something he doesn’t want again, I will tell him. He’ll be mad at you, not Bilbo”

Nori chuckled. The kid was right about that. “Yeah, okay. Ya gonna watch every time to make sure I don’t?”

“Maybe.” Fili threatened.

Nori just snorted. “Go on. Ya claimed ‘im so go take care of ‘im. I’ll keep watch tonight.”

Fili eyed the thief warily for a few more seconds before he started leading the vampire away. Bilbo
flailed as he startled awake unbalanced and nearly toppled to the ground again.

“I don’t think he can walk that far.”

“I can walk jusht fine.” The vampire argued.

Fili wasn’t impressed. “Put him on my back.”

Nori raised his brow, both at the order and the idea.

“No! I can walk!” Bilbo flailed again nearly toppling them both.

“Come on! I can’t do it myself.” Fili hurried the thief.

Nori walked over with a huff and a head shake. He grabbed the protesting vampire and lifted him effortlessly onto the teens back. Fili wrapped his arms around Bilbo’s lags, securing him to his back. “Kili wasn’t kidding. You barely weigh anything.”

“I am not cute.” Bilbo grumped, giving in and draping himself over his ride.

Fili chuckled, grabbed the rest of Bilbo’s clothes and started to head back to the campsite.

~Fili~

He left the thief behind, not particularly caring about his welfare. He didn’t trust the thief and didn’t especially care for his relationship with the vampire either. If it was just his secret, he would tell his uncle in a heart beat.

But at least Bilbo was eating, even if it was from Nori. Actually, he was kinda relieved that that was all it was, even if Nori was getting off on it. When he had first seen them together, he thought . . . Well, he thought they were meeting as lovers. That’s what it had seemed like!

He had been disappointed for his uncle’s sake until he heard Bilbo refusing. And then he had learned about a bunch of stuff on the spot while trying to take care of a drunk vampire and his mind was still trying to process the new information. Did his uncle know about the whole feeding and sex thing? Was that why he said it wouldn’t work? But, Nori seemed fine.

And why does Nori have DMB? Does he just carry it around with him? Not that that would be all that surprising. And, apparently, vampires can get drunk. And now he was giving said drunk vampire a piggyback ride back to the campsite.

“Waz with you hunterz an always manhanding me?” The vampire slurred in complaint. “Yerz bad azz Kili.”

Fili laughed softly. “Well, we haven’t all man-handled you. Uncle hasn’t . . not yet anyway.” He added softly at the end.

“I woun’t mind bein’ handled by h-*hic*-im.”

“Ha! I knew you liked him!” Fili smiled, his uncle had a chance after all.

“I didnsay tha’. Heez jusst ver~ry good looking.”

“He likes you too, you know.” Kili was better at it, but he could play match maker too.

Bilbo laughed surprisingly dryly considering his condition. “No. He likez the idea that the world isn’t
quite as evil as he thought it was. He likes the idea that I’m a ‘good’ and ‘tamable’ vampire that can be used for his own purposes. It has little to do with me.” He said with only a hint of a slur. The subject seemed to be sobering him up.

Fili’s brows scrunched in confusion. That’s not how his uncle felt. He was sure his Uncle was sincerely interested in the vampire, emotionally invested even. “Why do you think so?”

“I’ve been around. I’ve known a few hunters. It takes a certain kind of person to be a hunter, a scarred person. Someone with a grudge. As soon as I fail to meet his expectations, he’ll hate me, be done with me. Profits be damned.” Bilbo spoke with a calm resignation, as if he had seen the future and was already resigned to his fate.

“He wouldn’t.” Fili countered softly. He wanted to protest more strongly, but he knew his uncle and he knew there were things his uncle wouldn’t forgive, especially from a vampire.

The vampire just hummed, unconvincing, as he dropped more heavily against Fili’s back. He was still drowsy.

“You can sleep with me tonight.” Fili offered. He wanted to keep an eye on the vampire, just to be safe.

“You’re a bit young for my tastes. And I don’t think your uncle would approve, anyway.”

Fili made a strangled off noise. “That’s not what I meant!”

Bilbo chuckled at the response. “I’m fine, Fili.”

“Yeah, well, Kili would never forgive me if something happened to you, so you’re gonna stay where I can keep an eye on you until you’re fully sober.” Fili used his brother as an excuse. He wasn’t as comfortable expressing himself as his brother was.

“Fine, fine.” The vampire complied with a sigh.

Fili walked them into camp and back to his bed roll as quietly as possible before pulling the vampire in and tucking the blanket around them. Bilbo was dozing almost as soon as they were settled, but Fili could only get comfortable in the small bedroll by wrapping his arms around the vampire.

He tightened his arms around him, tucking him up against himself and sniffing his soft hair. “Kili was right. You are cuddly.” He just barely whispered as he drifted off.
Happy November everyone! I've been really busy so I'll be posting all this week's chapters at once. Enjoy!

This month's Sneak Peak Chapter is for a new future work called "Creatures of the Night." Check it out here. Summary below. Let me know what you think. ;)

Creatures of the Night

Bilbo stays in his tower, alone and so hidden away that even most of his own coven don’t know he’s there, condemned to live out his days in solitary confinement for no other reason than that he exists. He yearns for freedom, for the world outside his small window and for something else that seems to tug at his very soul. Resigned to his fate, he consoles himself with dreams of freedom and flight, until one day he is found by the most unlikely trespassers. Jumping at the offer of freedom, he faces his fears and the unknown as he ventures out to discover the world outside his window and maybe a place he finally belongs in the process.

Bilbo/Thorin, ShifterAU, A/B/O Dynamics

They continued east along the river. Thorin had noticed a new tension between Fili and the thief, though Nori acted the same as usual, but wasn’t overly concerned. Fili had never gotten over his suspicion of Nori and the blatant distrust was almost refreshing in the young hunter.

Bilbo, on the other hand, seemed to have been completely adopted by his older nephew now. He was starting to gravitate to the vampire almost as much as Kili. He almost felt sorry for Bilbo sometimes, it seemed the only time he wasn’t sandwiched between them was when they were on their horses.

They had taken to sitting and even sleeping on either side of the vampire during their stops. He didn’t seem to mind all that much and typically humored their attentions. Occasionally, if he needed some space, he would simply disappear for a few minutes.

Kili’s attentions, though persistent and even more familiar than before (if that was even possible), were innocent at least. After his big proclamation, Thorin had been a little concerned that the teen was going to attempt something rash or foolish, but, thankfully, he seemed perfectly content with treating the vampire like family. For now anyway.

Thorin had noted subtle changes in Bilbo as well. He seemed to be gradually loosening up again since the tension caused by the ‘incident.’ He was interacting with the boys more freely again and his mood seemed to be improving over time as well.

Though it was often on his mind, Thorin wasn't sure how to approach to matter of Bilbo’s meals. He knew the vampire needed to eat, but he had no idea how to bring up the subject without reverting them back to the tension they were only just breaking away from.
In the end, he never did ask. He wasn’t sure Bilbo would even talk to him about it anyway. But he did keep an extra close eye on him, hoping he would be able to pick up the warning signs this time.

When they got the to the elbow of the river where it turned south from its eastward journey, they decided to make camp early after crossing. They’d not have access to any more rivers for a while, and they still had several days left before they would arrive in Fornost.

So, they intended to make camp early, make a stew with the available water, restock their water skins, and take care of some much needed washing. The camp was made and the stew cooking well before the sun went down. The boys were sent to do some washing which turned into more roughhousing than anything.

By the time the sun dipped under the horizon, the boys were sopping wet despite being fully clothed. “That’s enough!” Thorin called an end to their scuffling. “Get your clothes hung up and get in there and wash properly.” He ordered throwing a bar of soap at them.

They sloshed over to the nearby tree, which was already holding several sets of wet clothes, and started stripping. “Hey! Why don’t you join us, Bilbo!” Kili suggested to the vampire who was currently stripping of his cloak and gloves.

“I think I’ll pass.”

“Really? Do you even take baths? I’ve never even seen you so much as wash up.” Kili wondered innocently.

The vampire let out a strangled, indignant sound. “Do I wash?! I’m not some filthy troll! I am always clean, thank you very much!”

“Then why haven’t we ever seen you washing?” Kili challenged.

“Considering it only takes me a matter of seconds to strip, wash and redress, what makes you think you would notice if I did.”

“Okay, so why don’t you bathe with us? It’s more fun that way.” Kili pushed.

Bilbo sniffed haughtily. “I don’t bathe with commoners.”

Thorin couldn’t help his chuckle as he waded into the water himself. “Being a vampire doesn’t make you a noble, Vampire.” Thorin jabbed playfully.

Bilbo spun around with another indignant noise. “I was born noble, I will have you know! My father was a lord and my mother a princess. Even my sire is of high standing. You wouldn’t know nobility if it bit you.”

“Is that a challenge?” He raised a suggestive brow at the vampire.

Bilbo’s brows shot up as he raked his gaze over the naked hunter’s defined abs, strong chest and wide shoulders in consideration. Before he could answer, the boys toppled past him face first into the ground as he side-stepped their assault.

“What are you doing?” He looked down at them unimpressed.

“Nothing.” Fili said after spitting a blade of grass out of his mouth.

“Aw! Come on, Bilbo!” Kili whined. “Come bathe with us!”
“Why?” He asked sounding baffled that it seemed so important to the teen.

“Because it’s more fun that way!” Fili had gotten up and waded into the water, but Kili stayed sprawled out on the grass as if he were having a tantrum.

“Bathing isn’t supposed to be fun, Kili. It’s basic hygiene. Now get up before something crawls somewhere you’ll regret.”

Kili popped up with wide eyes at the threat and checked himself over to make sure he had no uninvited guests.

“You’re fine. Now go get clean.” The vampire chuckled.

“Please~.” Kili begged as he hung of the vampire.

“Oh for-! Why is this so important to you?!”

“Cause it’s bonding time!” Kili blurted.

Bilbo raised a brow at him. “A bunch of men, more than half of which are attracted to men by the way, bonding while naked. Are you sure we’re not talking about an orgy?”

“Not that kind of bonding!” Kili squealed scandalized.

“Stop pushing him, Kili. If he’s too shy to join us we should respect that.” Fili interrupted with mischief in his eyes.

“Shy?” The vampire looked like he was considering taking the bait. “You think I’m shy? Of what exactly? Maybe I just don’t like being wet.”

“Nah, you wouldn’t ignore Kili’s pouty eyes just cause you didn’t feel like getting wet.” Fili challenged.

“Oh, it’s okay, Bilbo! We can’t all be well-endowed, you know.” Kili tried to reassure.

Bilbo gaped, scandalized by the suggestion. Fili and Thorin snickered and Nori was making some suspicious coughing sounds behind them. The next second there was a big splash as a body hit the water. Kili popped up spluttering water out of his face.

“You are free to speculate however you wish, but it will not be getting me in that water.” Bilbo glared at all four of them before turning around and disappearing into the darkness.

“Way to go, Fili. Now you made him mad.”

“Me? You’re the one who suggested he wasn’t ‘well-endowed!’”

“Well, why else would he be shy?!”

Nori snickered. “‘E’s not shy. ‘E’s just a bit tightly wound from ‘is hunger. ‘Sides, ‘e ain’t fond of cold water.”

Thorin raised a brow and Fili breathed out a soft ‘Oh,’ making Thorin turn his brow on his nephew. Fili was blushing and Thorin wondered what he knew that would initiate such a response. He hadn’t told his nephews about the hunger/sex correlation for vampires. It hadn’t seemed relevant.

“What does that mean? He might try to bite one of us?” Kili apparently was the only one who hadn’t
made the connection.

Nori snickered again. “Yeah, sure. Something like that.” Fortunately, he didn’t seem in the mood to spell it out to the teen and left him to think what he would.

Thorin sent another assessing look at his nephew, wondering just how much he knew and why he knew it before finishing up his washing. He was partly disappointed and partly relieved that the vampire had refused to join them. He would have loved to get a glimpse of what lay under all that proper clothing, unfortunately, he wasn’t sure he could keep from making a fool of himself if he did. He didn’t need to be sporting a boner like some high strung teen.

By the time every one was cleaned and out of the water, Bilbo had returned and settled down with his pipe. Kili threw his clothes on in a rush and hurried over to make his apology. “I’m sorry, Bilbo. I wasn’t . . I mean, I didn’t . . “

“It’s fine, Kili. I’m not angry.” The vampire took pity on the tongue-tied teen.

Kili deflated in relief. “Um . . is it cause you’re still hungry?”

Bilbo tensed and sent the thief a dangerous glare, which he ignored. “It doesn’t matter. I just didn’t feel like it. Maybe some other time, okay?” The vampire’s voice a little tighter than usual, signaling the end of the conversation.

Kili nodded compliantly and sat down in his usual spot next to the vampire. By now, the stew was done and they all ate their supper in silence.

“Hey, Bilbo. I was wondering about that Kappa.” Fili broke the silence and he finished the last bite of his stew.

“Oh, yeah. What ever happened to it?” Kili added.

“I took it farther down river.”

“Actually, I was wondering how you knew about it in the first place. You seemed to know it was in Annuminagas even before we got there.” Fili redirected. “And you said you were listening to something, but it seemed to stop after you took care of the kappa.”

“I didn’t know about it specifically. I only knew there was a fairy in distress in the area.”

“How?” Kili interjected, now fully interested.

Bilbo fiddled with his pipe and hummed as if preparing to give a lecture. “All fairies, both weak and powerful, are able to send out, a sort of, magical distress signal when they are in trouble. The signal is specific to the species and typically carries all the relevant information needed to aid the distressed fairy: the who, what, where, when and why and all that. When other fairies of the same kind hear it, they can decipher it and send or attempt aid.”

“But . . you’re not a kappa.” Kili thought it necessary to state the obvious.

“Yes, well, the signal may only be understandable to fairies of the same kind, but any fairy can detect the signal of another fairy, even if they are of different kinds. They just can’t decipher the information.”

“But you’re not a fairy . . You’re a goblin. Can goblins pick up the signal, too?” Fili questioned. All eyes were on the vampire now.
“No.” Nori intercepted. “Only fairies can hear another fairy’s distress signal. It’s sent through fairy magic which is toxic to goblins.” Nori eyed the vampire suspiciously.

“So then, how did you hear it?” Fili probed.

Bilbo seemed relaxed and unconcerned by the turn of the conversation, only the tense line of his shoulders gave away his unease. “It’s not like I can hear it well. It was little more than a buzzing in my ears.” He tried to downplay it.

“Ya shouldn’t have heard it at all.” Nori narrowed his eyes at the vampire.

“Yes, well, I suppose I have a special talent. It’s not unusual for vampires.” He replied vaguely and avoided eye contact.

Kili hummed in thought. “Is it possible to turn a fairy into a vamp-”

“No.” Bilbo answered harshly before the question was even fully formed.

Kili deflated a bit. “Why not?” He asked more timidly.

“Dark magic is as toxic to fairies as fairy magic is to goblins. It would kill the specimen.” Bilbo replied flatly.

“Not to mention it’s forbidden.” Nori added. “If such a creature were ever made, it would be hunted by fairies and goblins alike.”

“Why is it forbidden?” Thorin eyed the thief and vampire in turn, noting the tension.

“To fairies it’s an abomination, a corruption of fairy magic. For goblins it’s a matter of fear. There are few fairies left these days that pose a significant threat to most goblins. A creature with both dark and fairy magic is considered too powerful, too unpredictable, . . too dangerous to be allowed to exist.” Nori explained darkly as he continued to stare at the vampire.

“There you go.” Bilbo shrugged. “Even if it were possible to create such a creature, it would be sought out and destroyed by both sides.”

“But, doesn’t the fact that it’s forbidden mean that it’s actually been done before? You don’t forbid something unless you know it’s possible.” Fili reasoned wanting to know more.

“I don’t know the details. But, from what I understand, it was attempted long before my time. The great Dark One, from whom all dark magic originated, tried to create the ultimate weapon: a creature made from the blending of dark and fairy magic. Most of the experiments were grotesque failures, but, legend has it he succeeded with several specimens and they were indeed immensely powerful. They were also unpredictable and uncontrollable and the Dark One had to raise an army and form an alliance with the fairies just to destroy them. Since then, it has been forbidden by the Dark one himself and the fairies as a whole.”


“So, a fairy would never attempt to create such a thing and no servant of the Dark One would risk their own neck by trying. It’s little more than a horror story to deter overly ambitious sorcerers from attempting something stupidly dangerous, really.” Bilbo ended with a shrug.

“But what if one was created?” Kili pushed.
“It wouldn’t happen. There is only a handful of beings in Middle Earth who could attempt it and
even fewer who could get away with it. Whole races have been wiped out just to avoid such a thing


“No, not fairies. Humans, or rather half-breeds. True half-breeds. Those born of human and fairy
unions. There have been several instances in history where humans of a certain community
intermarried with nearby fairies creating an entire race of half-fairy/half-humans. Every time the Dark
One sent an army to completely destroy them. An occasional half-breed here and there isn’t much of
a concern, though they too are typically killed upon discovery, but an entire race of human/fairy
beings is considered too much of a threat.”

“Was this before your time too? I’ve never heard of that kind of mixed race.” Fili asked, wondering
if it was simply beyond the scope of recorded human history.

“No, there was such a genocide just within the past couple hundred years. I doubt you would ever
hear of mixed races though. Humans fear them as much as the Dark One. Typically only other fairies
or goblins know of them.”

“Wait a minute? Exactly when is ‘before your time?’ Just how old are you?” Kili picked up on the
vague phrasing.

Bilbo just raised a brow at him. “Old enough to have been around awhile.”

“That’s not an answer!” Kili scoffed. “How old are you really?”

“An old vampire never reveals his age.” Bilbo sniffed haughtily.

Nori snickered. “Why don’t ya just admit ya can’t remember.”

“Really?” Fili asked incredulously. “I thought you didn’t forget anything?”

“I didn’t forget!” The vampire protested. “I just stopped counting.”

“So, are you, like, really old? Is that why your so powerful?” Kili asked excitedly.

“Age is related to power, but there are other factors as well.”

“Like what?” Fili encouraged.

“Like generation, diet, and cultivation.”

“You mention that a lot. Low gens and high gens. What does that mean?” Thorin fished.

“A vampire’s generation is the biggest determiner of its power potential. The lower the generation
the greater its potential. A generation three, for example, will be stronger on the day of its creation
than a generation thirty with several hundred years under its belt already. Generation zero is the first
vampire. Those he sired are generation one, those sired by generation one are generation two and so
on. I think it’s something about the dilution of power that results in every consecutive generation
being weaker than the last.”

“So, the higher the generation, the weaker the vampire.” Thorin summed up. “What generation are
you?” He asked after Bilbo confirmed with a nod.

“Wouldn’t you like to know.” Bilbo diverted with a mischievous smirk.
“So, your not going to tell us your age or your generation?” Fili asked suspiciously.

“A vampire needs his secrets.”

“You have too many secrets!” Kili threw his hands up in exasperation.

“Yes, it’s more fun for me that way. Now, it’s getting late. You can hound me with more questions tomorrow.” He spoke over Kili’s groan.

“Fine. But one more question.” Fili insisted. “What do you consider a low gen?”

Bilbo eyed him in consideration as if he could see the boy’s thought process. “Only generation ten and lower are considered low gens.” He consented.

“So, that means your a gen ten or lower.” Fili declared with a triumphant smile at having narrowed it down.

“Yes, Alright. Aren’t you the clever one, now go to bed.” The vampire shooed the grinning teen to his bedroll.

“Now we just need to figure out how to narrow down his age.” “Maybe we can ask him about historical events, you know, find out of he was there for them.” The boys conspired together as they set up their bed rolls.

The vampire just shook his head as he got up to check the area one more time. As soon as he returned, he was bombarded by the twins who wrangled him over to sit between their bedrolls. He heaved a put upon sigh but allowed himself to be manhandled to their designated spot.

Despite the showy sigh, it was obvious he didn’t mind overly much since he made himself comfortable between the two of them with a small smirk.

Thorin watched as he lay in his own bedroll, unable to take his eyes off the vampire. Not for the first time, he wondered if Bilbo even bothered to sleep while they were out on the road. He didn’t even have a bedroll, though Thorin would be more than happy to share, his intentions entirely innocent of course. . . mostly.

Then again, his dreams had been turning more erotic by the night it seemed and the vampire was always center stage. Perhaps it would be best not to have the object of his dreams pressed up against him. He could already imagine the awkward wake up call.

He closed his eyes and tried to will himself to sleep. As much as he was trying not to think about the vampire, his dreams weren’t exactly something he could control. Not that he particularly wanted them to stop, he was quite enjoying his fantasies play out in the privacy of his dreams, even if they were instilling a craving for more.

But, that wasn’t going to happen, so he felt safe in his indulgence. He slowly drifted off to visions of green eyes and curly locks, unaware of the gaze of those same green eyes.
The next day, they continued eastward. Fornost, Like Annuminas, was a mining town, however it was largely supported by the surrounding farmland. By the second day after leaving the river, they were already in the midst of the farmlands.

The fields seemed average and quiet enough, but a gloom seemed to weigh over the land and only got darker and heavier as they got closer to town. By the third night, they were rapidly approaching Fornost and an eerie quiet seemed to settle with the darkness as the sun went down.

They had planned to make it to town before stopping, but now Thorin was wondering if they shouldn’t stop for the night and approach the town in the morning. “What do you think?” He asked Bilbo as the vampire stripped my off his sun wear. “Something seems off.”

Bilbo hummed as he let his senses spread out. “I don’t sense any particular malevolence in the atmosphere. The oppression isn’t magical in nature, though it could very well be caused by some magical affliction. If it's dangerous, we might as well tackle it tonight. Night is the best time for me anyway.”

Thorin nodded and continued leading them towards the main gate. About an hour later, they had stabled their horses and were heading to the miners’ inn, which also catered to the occasional hunter that ventured to the area.

It was much like any other mining town. And, though the mining wasn’t as lucrative here as it was in Annuminas, there was clearly still a thriving economy. Being about a week’s steady travel north from Bree meant that Fornost saw more traffic than Annuminas, but it was still far enough away not to be on the typical travel main way.

Despite the oppressiveness that seemed to weigh over the town, people still bustled here and there, taking care of the last of their business for the day. No one seemed to pay much attention to the strange looking hunting party.

Until they got to the inn, that is. Almost as soon as they entered the Rough Diamond’s doors, they were the center of attention. The room went startlingly quiet as the resident miners sized up the new hunters. Bilbo ignored the stares, as usual, and ordered their room and meals.

Even as they sat and ate their meals in the disconcerting quiet, the stares continued, though no one seemed interested in engaging them. The silence continued until Bilbo grabbed his tea and sauntered over to one of the groups playing cards. “Have room for one more? I could use a good game?” He gave them his most charming and disarming grin.

Thorin growled involuntarily as he watched a couple of the miners practically undress the vampire with their eyes before making room and welcoming him into the game. He already wanted to bash their faces in.

“Relax hunter. ‘E’s just doing recon. As I should be. Don’t wait up.” The thief winked at him with a knowing smirk before getting up and fading into the crowd.

Thorin tried to reign in his jealousy, but couldn’t take his eyes off the way the miners were getting overly familiar with their vampire.
"I don't like the way that guy's looking at him." Kili groused quietly.

"Bilbo can take care of himself, Kili." Fili reassured despite his own glares being sent at the offender.

"You don't think he's actually interested, do you? I mean, the guy's not that bad looking but I can see the layer of dirt from here." Kili's glare turned disgusted at the thought of the man touching their vampire.

"I doubt it. You know how fastidious he is. I'm surprised he's even letting the guy get that close."

"We should do something."

"He won't be happy if we interrupt him while he's working."

All three of the hunters bristled as the miner casually draped his arm over the back of Bilbo's chair and leaned a little closer into his space. Kili's cup hit the table hard, making the other two jump. "Let him be mad." He mumbled as he got up and made his way over to the table.

"Uncle Bilbo!" He announced as he walked up behind the vampire. "It's getting late. You promised to take us shopping first thing in the morning, remember? Shouldn't we call it a night?" He casually brushed the miner's arm off with a little more force than was necessary.

For a moment, the look on Bilbo's face was priceless as he stared up at the teen like he'd gone mad, but he quickly recovered. "Ah, I'm sorry. Indeed, I did. I'm sorry, gentlemen." He addressed the table. "It seems my . . . nephew is determined to spoil my fun tonight." He raised a brow at the teen.

"No harm done." The overly friendly miner assured. "There's always tomorrow night." The suggestion heavy in his voice.

"Yes, I suppose there is." Bilbo matched his gaze. "Well, I suppose this is good night then, gentlemen." He announced as he got up. The miners bid him goodnight and he turned and followed the hunters up to their room.

"Were you really gonna let him touch you?" Kili accused once they were safely shut in their room.

Bilbo just shrugged as he claimed a bed. "He was quite charming. Might even be quite good looking with a proper scrub."

"He was filthy. You hate getting dirty."

"I was getting answers, Kili. It's called 'acting.' I can't just drop character every time someone does something I don't like." Bilbo sighed.

"So, you weren't really . . . into him?"

"Does it matter?" Bilbo raised a baffled brow at him.

"Yes!"

"Why?"

*cough-jealous-cough!* Fili coughed suspiciously.

"I am not jealous!" Kili protested when Bilbo raised his brows at him, waiting for confirmation. "He just isn't good enough for you!"
"I wasn't going to marry him, Kili. I wouldn't even bite him in that condition." The vampire shuddered at the thought.

"Well . . then don't let him get so close."

"I was fishing, Kili. To get answers you need your target to drop their guard. And a target who thinks he's going to get lucky tends to throw all caution to the wind."

"So, did you find out anything?" Thorin jumped at the opportunity for a subject change. All the talk about Bilbo getting involved with anyone other than himself was making his stomach do very uncomfortable things.

"Yes. I found out why this town is so tense and gloomy."

"And why is that?"

"Three infants have disappeared out of their cradles either in town or the surrounding farmlands within the past four months. One is taken every month. They're anticipating another one being taken soon." His tone was quiet and dark with suppressed anger.

"The lamia? It's here?" Thorin's stomach twisted for a different reason now.

"It seems safe to assume."

"So how do we find it?" Fili asked as if he thought he was going to be part of the hunt.

"We don't. Lamia's are incredibly difficult to detect between feedings, even for me. After they feed, they go temporarily dormant until its time to feed again. Bait is the fastest way to find it, but, in a town this big, that may not work anyway. So, we can only wait until it strikes and try to destroy it before it goes dormant again."

"So, we just wait?" Fili didn’t sound pleased with the answer.

"I wait. You will not be joining this hunt." Bilbo corrected.

“What?! Why not?!” Kili squawked.

“Because! This is not like hunting a harpy or even some trash vampire! Lamia’s only come in one power level: dangerous. This one is beyond your skill level. I’ll have enough on my hands just trying to keep an infant alive, assuming I make it in time. I don’t need to be worrying about you too.”

The hunters were silent in consideration. “Are lamias that dangerous?” Thorin finally asked. “Are they dangerous even for you?” The thought made him uneasy.

Bilbo sighed with a nod. “It’s not their power that makes them dangerous, but rather their constitution. Vampires and lamias have much in common structurally. We are both considered to be ‘living’ in a state of ‘death’, giving us near immortality. But we differ in constitution. Vampires are solid physical beings able to control and manifest dark magic. Lamias are only borderline physical, formed mostly from darkness and blood. A vampire can be killed by physical means with the help of magic or purity items. A lamia cannot he killed by physical means, it must be killed with magic.”

“Wait. Does that mean it could kill you?” Kili was clearly disturbed by the idea.

“It cannot kill me, though it could possibly do some damage. A mere lamia isn’t much of a threat to me unless I have something getting in my way of dealing with it swiftly.” He sent the teen a
significant glance. “Even if I didn’t fight back, it couldn’t kill me. I’m not that easy to kill.” He added when Kili still looked concerned. “I’ll be fine, Kili. And I’ll be better if I don’t have to keep track of a couple of teens while I’m at it.”

Kili nodded but still didn’t look entirely sure.

“Now, aren’t you going shopping first thing in the morning? You best get to bed.”

“I only said that to get you away from the table.”

“Yes, well, wouldn’t want to be seen as a liar would you. Wouldn’t be good for business. Besides, your ‘Uncle’ says it’s time for bed, so off you go.”

“Are you saying I can call you that now?” Kili asked with a mischievous grin.

“I never gave you permission to call me that in the first place. Doesn’t seem like it stopped you.” Bilbo replied unimpressed.

“‘Uncle Bilbo’ does have a nice ring to it.” Fili piped in.

“Do what you want.” The vampire answered distractedly while packing his pipe. “You wouldn’t be the first to use the title.”

“What?” “Really? Who else would call you that?” The boys asked over each other, a hint of jealousy in their voices.

Bilbo looked at them with a mischievous smirk. “Wouldn’t you like to know. Now, off to bed. I expect you up first thing to go ‘shopping.’” He ordered over their groans.

The boys complained about an early morning but complied and made ready for bed. Later, once they were settled and snoring away, Thorin joined the vampire at his window for a smoke.

“Are you sure you’ll be alright?” He asked quietly as to not wake the boys.

Bilbo studied him before answering. “It’s not my first lamia. I’ll be fine.”

“But, you’ll be careful?”

Bilbo’s brows furrowed. “Cation is for mortals.”

Thorin chuckled at the response. Sometimes it was too easy to forget what Bilbo really was. “Of, course.”

~Fili & Kili~

Despite their complaining from the night before, the boys really did get up early and head to the market. Well, after some ‘help’ waking up from their vampire and some cold water.

“I can’t believe he really made us get up so early.” Kili whined as the meandered through the market.

“It wasn’t all bad.” Fili soothed. “The breakfast pastries at the bake shop were amazing.”

“That’s true! I’ve never had so much spending money before. We could have bought almost everything!”

Fili chuckled. “I don’t thing our ‘Uncles’ would have approved.”
“Can you believe he’s letting us call him that?”

“Yeah, actually. He seems like the uncle type.”

“Morning, boys. Where’s your ‘Uncle’ this morning? Wasn't he supposed to be bringing you to the market?” They were interrupted by the same overly friendly miner from last night.

The boys instantly sobered, not welcoming the intrusion at all. “We decided to let him sleep in. He’s not a morning person.” Fili finally answered.

“That so? Good to know.” The miner rumbled. “Name’s Patrick.” He held out his hand for a friendly shake. He was a big guy, well built with short hair and a decent beard.

The boys glared at him and his hand in turn. “Shouldn’t you be in a mine somewhere?” Kili said in a demonstration of atrocious manners.

Patrick pulled his hand back with a raised brow. “I only mine part-time off and on. I’m actually a blacksmith. Look, I already know he’s not your real uncle and it’s your job to protect him while you’re traveling, but I don’t mean him no harm. Just interested in a little fun, you know, between adults.”

The boys floundered in confusion before remembering the story Bilbo had told in Annuminas to explain his presence with the hunters. “Yeah, well, Bilbo’s a real neat freak, hates getting dirty, so I wouldn’t hope for too much.” Kili tried to discourage the man.

Patrick nodded with a hum. “I’ll keep that in mind. Tell ‘im I look forward to seeing ‘im tonight, would ya?” He said before walking off without waiting for a reply.

“I will not.” Kili scoffed when he was out of sight. “Ow!” Fili elbowed him in the ribs hard.

“Nice going! Now he’ll go take a bath and be all over Bilbo tonight.” Fili accused.

“I was trying to discourage him! Not give him advice!”

“Whatever. Let’s just get done and get back to the inn. Suddenly I don’t feel like shopping anymore.”

—Thorin—

Thorin was brooding. Ever since his nephews had returned from the market and told him of this ‘Patrick’s’ blatant confession he had been in a bad mood. He sat on his bed and grumpily sharpened his weapons.

True, it wasn’t really his business what the vampire got up to with total strangers, but, Mahal, even the thought of Bilbo in someone else’s arms made his blood boil. He grit his teeth and scraped the whetstone a little harder than necessary down his blade at the image.

The worst part was he didn’t even have any right to feel this way. He’d made no move on the vampire, in fact, he had been doing his best to squash any of those kind of feelings towards Bilbo, which he was obviously failing miserably at.

“Mahal’s Beard, Uncle! Just tell him how you feel and that you don’t want him getting with anyone else!” Fili urged in exasperation when he couldn’t take anymore of his uncle’s grumpy brooding.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He growled moodily back.
"You need to make up your mind. If you don’t want him, then stop being angry and move on. But, if you do want him, you need to man up and make a move! Stop worrying about whether it could work or not and resolve to make it work!" Fili continued as if the subject of the conversation wasn’t sleeping in the same room.

His uncle and brother gaped at him for his outburst, though Thorin more so.

“What? I’m tired of all this indecision. You’re not that kind of man, Uncle. You make choices, under stress, with our lives on the line, and you stick to ‘em, you make ‘em work. Why is this any different?”

Thorin just stared at his nephew. He didn’t even know how to respond to that. Fili was right. He had never been this indecisive before, even he didn’t understand it.

“Fili’s right, Uncle. No one’s perfect, but, if you love someone, you make it work.” Kili added with a shrug.

“How can I love someone I barely know.” He challenged lowly, well aware that Bilbo was still in the room.

“Maybe he’s your One.” Fili shrugged, not all that concerned for an answer.

“‘One’s’ are for dreamers. They’re just a myth.”

“Yeah.” Kili scoffed. “So was the dragon.”

“Fair enough.” Thorin mumbled.

“Uncle Thorin, you’re the most stubborn person I know. Only Mom ever compared. If you can’t not want him, despite your efforts, there’s probably a reason.” Fili sat down again with his weapons to resume his work.

Thorin glared at the teen half-halfheartedly. Again, what could he say to that? The Durin’s were notorious for their stubborn streaks.

“I don’t know, Fili. I think Bilbo might give our uncle a run for his money in that area.” Kili hummed.

Fili chuckled. “You noticed, huh? Guess they really are perfect for each other.”

“I can be stubborn too.” Kili pouted.

“Don’t lose hope yet, Kili. Uncle could still totally mess it up.” Fili grabbed his shoulder in reassurance.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” Thorin grumble, earning a laugh from his nephews.

They waited until Bilbo woke that evening after sundown before heading down for dinner. Thorin was already planning to interfere with anyone trying to make off with his vampire and was going to keep a close eye on him all evening.

Bilbo seemed oblivious to their earlier conversations and joined them for dinner none the wiser. They ordered their meals and settled down at a table. Thorin was already scanning the room for any sign of ‘Patrick’ when Nori suddenly emerged from the growing crowd.

He made straight for their table, eyes wide and disturbed. “There’s a shadow in town!” He
whispered urgently towards the vampire. Before they could even respond, the inn door flew open and a woman stumbled through it.

“Help me! Please! Someone help me!”

The room went quiet as everyone turned to stare, but no one moved to help. She looked around in desperation and noticed the hunters at their table. She stumbled through the room and nearly collapsed on their table. “You’re hunters aren’t you?! Help me, please! My baby! It took my baby!” She sobbed.

Thorin’s head whipped around to get confirmation from the vampire. Bilbo’s lips were pressed in a tight line and his eyes stern. He nodded almost imperceptibly and Thorin jumped into action. “Show me.”

The woman’s eyes widen, momentarily too shocked by the compliance to answer.

“Where was it taken from!” He almost shouted. They needed to move fast.

The woman pushed off from the table bolted for the door with Thorin right on her heals. “Stay here!” He shouted at his nephews as he disappeared out the door.

He chased the woman as she sprinted through the streets until she finally barreled into the door to what he assumed was her house. She led him straight to a cradle and he scanned it quickly, not sure what he should be looking for,

“Can you help! Can you save my baby?” She asked shakily.

He looked the cradle over once more before turning to her. “I’ll do what I can.” He turned and left before waiting for her response. He couldn’t promise anymore than that. He was wondering what he should do next when he walked out of the house and spotted the vampire squatting under a window to the house.

“I have a trail.” He said standing up strait. “Go back to the inn.”

“I’m coming with you.” Thorin countered immediately. He wasn’t exactly equipped for the sudden hunt, but there was no way he was going to let the vampire go by himself.

“You’ll slow me down.” Bilbo was already following the trail down the road.

“Don’t wait up.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, it’s a cliffhanger, but this was the best place to put it. Trust me, you wouldn’t want a cliffhanger in the middle of the next chapter. ;)

Lamia

Chapter Notes

This months Sneak Peek: *The Voice of the Gods*

Bilbo is an audio telepathic hypnotist, whatever that means. All he knows is that he can make people do things with just his voice, sometimes without even trying. Which is why 'singer' was probably not the best career choice. Yet here he is, currently one of the most popular pop idols and not simply because of his power (or so he would like to believe). He thought the hardest thing he would have to face was keeping the power out of his voice when he performed until, suddenly, he's on the run. Someone has found out about his gift and Bilbo doesn't want to know why they want it. Something is stirring in the shadows and Bilbo finds himself forming new alliances and reforging old ones he never thought would rise again.

Bilbo/Thorin, X-Men Fusion

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Don’t wait up.”

Before his words were even out, Bilbo took off at a slow run. Thorin assumed he needed to go slower to not lose the trail. He followed after him until he came to a man walking with his horse. He rushed forward and grabbed the reigns. “I need to borrow this! I’ll drop it off at the stables!” He shouted as he hopped up and took off after the vampire, ignoring the man’s loud protests.

He followed the vampire, ducking through alleys and weaving through streets as they drew closer to the mining hills north of town. They didn’t even slow down as they left the town behind and made directly for the hills.

They were working their way up a small trail heading into the hills when the vampire suddenly vanished from his sight. Thorin cursed and spurred his horse on faster. They must be close if Bilbo could ignore the trail for speed.

Only seconds later, the trail led him right to the entrance of an old cave. He skidded his horse to a stop and slipped off, not even bothering to secure it. He grabbed one of the old torches propped at the mouth of the cave and lit it with some nearby rocks before dashingly down into the darkness just as a blood curdling shriek sounded from deep inside.

The cave seemed to go on forever before he finally stumbled into a dimly lit room. There was no sigh of the lamia at first, only Bilbo leaning over a small still form in his arms, chanting and rubbing or tracing with his fingers over the small infant.

He stepped forward to see if he could help when a movement and rattling in the darkness caught his attention. Before he could cry out to warn the vampire, a darkly clad figure like that of a shriveled, old woman lurched out of the darkness and wrapped an old chain around Bilbo’s neck.

Bilbo stumbled back, nearly dropping the baby as the ugly witch-like creature yanked on the chain around his neck with all her might. He all but ignored the attack with a hiss, as he desperately tried not to drop or harm the baby in the struggle.
Thorin was at a loss as to how to help until Bilbo swung them around to face him. “Take it!” He hissed.

Thorin rushed forward to grab the baby and made it just in time as the lamia gave another hard yank on the vampire’s neck. The baby slipped out of his fingers right into Thorin’s arms. Thorin immediately retreated to the far wall as he shielded the baby from anymore harm.

Now free of their fragile burden, Bilbo’s hands flew to the chain around his neck and snapped it like a brittle twig. Thorin wasn’t entirely sure what happened next. There was an ear-ringing scream and a whirlwind of darkness and blood. The next scene that Thorin could register was of a cold, angry looking Bilbo staring down at what was left of the twisted and broken lamia.

The vampire thrust his hand into the vile creature’s chest and ripped out something black and shriveled that vaguely resembled a heart. The witch gurgled a scream as Bilbo summoned a silver dagger from Thorin’s belt. “This is where you end.” He informed the broken creature darkly as he carved symbols into the corrupted heart in his hand.

He started chanting as he finished and the heart began smoking under the carvings. The lamia gave one last angry screech as it writhed and dissolved into smoke and ash.

Thorin stared in awe of the ease which the vampire dispatched the nasty creature. “Give it to me.” Bilbo ordered, snapping Thorin out of his daze. Before he could respond, Bilbo as already pulling the infant from his arms.

He resumed his chanting and whatever he had been doing when Thorin arrived as he huddled over the baby, gently turning it over and doing the same to it’s back. In all the excitement, Thorin had forgotten to even check if the baby was still alive.

He stayed quiet and let the vampire work. A few moments later, they were rewarded by an entirely different and welcome shriek. Bilbo heaved a sigh of relief as the, now very animated, baby screamed in protest of its new situation.

Thorin couldn’t suppress his grin of triumph. “You saved it.”

“I merely reversed the damage.” The vampire downplayed tiredly. “Here, it’s best if you hold it.”

“Why? You seem to be doing just fine.”

“Because I’m a vampire and it’s chilly out. If you want it to freeze to death, then, by all means, let me carry it.”

Thorin took the offered infant, he was definitely the warmer of the two.

“You should wrap it in something. Poor thing must be chilled.” The vampire suggested while trying to sound uninterested and failing, in Thorin’s opinion.

“Yes, mama.” Thorin teased with a smirk as he handed the baby back so he could pull off his tunic, leaving him in only his undershirt. Bilbo tutted but held the baby out so Thorin could wrap it up snugly.

"Go on and head out." Bilbo ordered.

"What about you?"

"I need to bury the remains. I can't do that until you're out." He waved the hunter out.
Thorin nodded, sending one last glance at the pile of ash that was once a lamia. He made his way back through the cave more carefully this time, doing his best not to jostle the babe in his arms. Unfortunately, when he finally made it out, the horse was missing. It had probably bolted in fear from the vile creature's screams.

He hadn't even been out of the tunnel for a minute before the hills began to shake and cave collapsed in a cloud of dust. He was staring at the entrance waiting for the vampire to emerge when a familiar voice startled him.

"What are you waiting for?" Bilbo asked joining the hunter as he stared at the caved in tunnel.

"You." He sighed as he turned to him.

Bilbo raised a questioning brow at him. "Where is the horse?"

"It must have spooked and took off."

"Head back down, if you can. I'll round up the horse."

Thorin nodded and the vampire was gone. He carefully made his way back down the trail. At least, he still had the old torch and the baby had quieted. By the time he made it to the base of the trail, Bilbo was waiting there with the horse. Bilbo took the baby long enough for Thorin to climb up and they headed back into town.

They dropped the horse off at a stable in town along the way and Thorin made sure to pay for several days stay in case it took the owner that long to find it. They walked the rest of the way back to the mother's house. They were just passing through an alley that opened up near the house Thorin noticed the vampire had stopped. "What are you doing?"

"You're the hunter. You have to take it back."

"But you're the one who saved it. All I did was carry it." Thorin wasn't comfortable with taking credit for the vampire's success.

"It will only be suspicious if I come with you and even more so if you give me any credit. Just go. I'll watch from here. Wouldn't want you to lose the baby after we worked so hard to get it back." He waved the hunter on with a playful smirk.

Thorin huffed with a grin, he probably deserved that, and headed for the door of the woman's house. The door swung open before he had even finished knocking and the woman had broken down in relieved sobs as Thorin returned her small son to her. He then spent nearly the next ten minutes reassuring her and her husband that they didn't own him anything as they continuously offered to pay him with whatever they had.

He did make sure to reassure them that the creature that had been taking babies was dead before he finally managed to pull away from their profuse praises and gratitude. When he returned to the alley where the vampire was, Bilbo was leaned up against the wall grinning like he had found Thorin's ordeal quite amusing.

"They seemed grateful."

"Of course they were grateful." Thorin turned to glance back at the house once more. "They thought their son was dead. They would have been grateful to you too if they had known you were involved." He turned back to the vampire.
"They wouldn't if they realized what I was." Bilbo shook his head. "No one appreciates a vampire, no matter what he does."

"I appreciate you." Thorin countered lowly.

"You appreciate what I can do for you." The vampire scoffed. "I'm surprised you didn't take their payment. It was far less than what such assistance should have cost."

Thorin's anger flared in indignation. "Is that what you think of me? That I care for nothing but profit?"

"You're a hunter. The only thing you care more about than profit is revenge. If I hadn't been useful and too powerful, you would have killed me without a thought." Bilbo challenged softly with a shrug, not actually trying to start a fight.

Thorin bristled, nerves still tightly wound from the hunt. Bilbo watched with an unimpressed raised brow as he stomped across the gap between them menacingly. Before he could even question his own actions, Thorin buried one hand in the curls at the back of Bilbo's head and crashed their mouths together in an aggressive kiss. As soon as their lips touched, a jolt ran through him, tingling his nerves before settling into a deep-seated feeling of rightness.

The vampire froze under the assault save for a small gasp which Thorin took advantage of to thrust his tongue in and taste the vampire. Just when Thorin was about to pull away from the one-sided kiss, Bilbo wrapped one of Thorin's braids around his hand and pulled him back hungrily. It was a deep and desperate battle of teeth and tongues and they danced around the alley in a game of push and pull.

With some effort, Thorin was eventually able to maneuver them back to the wall, pinning the vampire against it and taking more control over the kiss. Thorin wrapped an arm around Bilbo's small waist and tugged him closer as he guided them into a slower, softer kiss.

When Thorin finally pulled away with one last nip to Bilbo's lip, the vampire's eyes were heavy lidded and glazed. Thorin rested their foreheads together and smirked in self-satisfaction as he traced a thumb over the vampire's still slick bottom lip.

Bilbo's eyes widened and, after a few blinks, returned to their focuses state. Suddenly, Thorin found himself pinned against the wall in a much less romantic position. Bilbo's hands were fisted in his collar as he snarled at the hunter. "This is a dangerous game you're playing."

Thorin reeled at the sudden change in mood. "If you know me at all, you know I don't play games." He managed to ground out.

"Then what is this? Are you looking for a quick lay? Or is bedding a vampire on your bucket list?"

"If I was looking for a quick lay, I'd pick one up at the bar." Thorin retorted, picking up some volume as he recovered from the shock. "And certainly not."

"Then what do you want from me?!" Bilbo hissed in frustration.

"Everything!" Thorin blurted before thinking.

Bilbo's grip loosened and his face went slack in shock. Thorin noted the opening and flipped them back around so he had the vampire pinned, well aware Bilbo could reverse the situation at any time.
“Why?” Bilbo finally uttered in confusion.

“To be entirely honest, I don’t even know.” Thorin confessed, making the vampire even more confused. “I have denied myself many things in life: comforts, pleasures, even necessities. There has never been anything that I couldn’t ignore or resist once I put my mind to it. Until you. Despite my efforts, despite everything that’s between us, I can’t stop wanting you, all of you.” Thorin rested their heads together again.

Bilbo had listened with a blank face, but had yet to offer any resistance. “You don’t know what your asking.” He answered blandly.

“I know that vampire’s mate for life. I know that they form deep bonds and love intensely.” Thorin corrected.

“None of which I have any guarantee of receiving from a human, more so a hunter. I thought I made it clear I wasn’t interested in having a mate.” He sneered with an irritated tone.

“I would not be unfaithful.” Thorin growled in his defense.

“Humans are fickle and you know nothing about me.” He hissed. “You could find out something tomorrow, next year or even a decade from now and come to hate me. All your professions of love would be like dust in the wind!”

Thorin stared down at those sweet, scowling lips. He pressed a gentle kiss to the side of Bilbo’s mouth, unable to resist the temptation set in front of him. Bilbo’s eyelids fluttered and his irritation seemed to leave him in a sigh. Despite the argument, they fell into another slow, passionate kiss as they wrapped around each other.

“You flirted with me first.” Thorin accused when he pulled away again.

“It’s my hunting style, Thorin.” Bilbo rebutted tiredly, offering no resistance to wandering hands. A shiver ran down his spine at the casual use of his name. Bilbo rarely used it. “And this?” Thorin rumbled into the vampire’s ear, earning him a delicious tremble. He cupped Bilbo’s rear and pulled them together in a slow grind.

Bilbo gasped and suddenly Thorin was pushed away at arms length and wondering what changed. “This is very dangerous.” Bilbo hissed. His eyes were dark and his fangs were bared in a snarl.

Thorin conceded it probably wasn’t the smartest move to play on sexual desire while the vampire was already as hungry as he was. He reached out slowly and cupped the vampire’s jaw, stroking his cheek with his thumb before running it down one bared fang.

Bilbo’s arms slackened and Thorin closed the gap between them again. He would prove he neither feared nor hated Bilbo for what he was. Bilbo was breathing hard from restraint and had his face turned away, refusing to look the hunter in the eyes.

“Will you give me a chance?” Thorin rumbled in his exposed ear as he gently wound an arm around him again and pulled him close.

Bilbo’s eyes closed with a shudder. “No vampire in his right mind would even consider having anything to do with a human, especially not a hunter.” He tried to redirect.

Thorin wasn’t having it. “And are you in you’re right mind?” He pushed with a kiss next to Bilbo’s ear.
“Apparently not.” He sighed out shakily.

Thorin grinned triumphantly into his temple before the vampire started to slowly push him away.

“A chance! To prove you’re worth the risk. I’m not promising anything and a mating bond is out of the question.” Bilbo clarified.

“Then what exactly am I working towards?” Thorin asked confused. He was pretty sure he made it clear he was looking for something permanent. He did say ‘everything.’

“I don’t know yet. But, it can be permanent and monogamous without involving a mating bond. Humans don’t have them anyway and what would be permanent for you won’t be very long for me.”

“Alright.” Thorin nodded after a moment of consideration. He could accept those terms for now as long as it meant Bilbo would be his and only his for the rest of his mortal life. He was pretty sure he could get more with a little ‘persuasion’ once they were closer anyway. After all, it had gotten him this much.

“Now that that’s settled, can you please stop touching me before I have to go kill something!” Bilbo bit out through gritted teeth.

Thorin stepped back with a small smirk. The threat would be far more amusing if it wasn’t so real. “Have you been eating?” He asked concerned.

“Yes. It’s just not enough, especially not for this.” Bilbo leaned against the wall as he tried to calm down.

Thorin crosses his arms. “What and when? Has Nori been helping?”

“Yes.” Bilbo side-eyed him cautiously.

“And it’s still not enough?”

“Would it be enough for you if you only ate once or twice a week?” The vampire huffed.

“No, of course not.” Thorin answered contritely. Of course it wasn’t enough.

“Besides, being with you has sapped more power and energy than I’ve used in several decades combined lately. And I wasn’t exactly well-fed when you found me. I’m a bit deficient at the moment.” He explained as he was finally starting the settle down.

“Is there anything I can do?”

Bilbo raised an eyebrow and slid his gaze across the hunter appreciatively before answering. “I can’t feed from you in this condition. I don’t think I’d be able to stop. . . and you haven't earned any sheet wrestling yet.”

"Is that something I'm earning?” Thorin stalked closer making the vampire straighten back up in response.

"Yes. When vampires get 'attached' to something, they don't give it up easily. You really should reconsider all this."

"Are you getting 'attached' to me?” Thorin rumbled as he caged the vampire against the wall, pointedly not touching him.
Bilbo stared at him with wide darkening eyes, but didn't answer. Thorin smirked at the response. Now that he understood what he was seeing, it was easy to spot the vampire's desire.

"Lust is not the same as attachment or love." Bilbo rebutted as if hearing the thoughts behind Thorin's smirk.

"I didn't ask you if you 'lusted' for me, did I? You're very good at avoiding questions you don't want to answer." He cupped Bilbo's jaw with one hand and leaned in to the opposite ear. "Besides, if lust was all you felt, you wouldn't be so concerned about me betraying you." Or about Thorin's welfare in the matter, he added to himself.

When he leaned back, Bilbo's eyes were black and his teeth were out. Faster than Thorin could pull away, Bilbo lurched at his neck and he braced for the bite, jumping when all he received was a gentle nip to his neck.

Bilbo stared up at him with dark eyes, one hand fisted in his collar and the other wrapped around one of his braids. He pulled him down into a kiss, which Thorin reciprocated eagerly burying a hand in the vampire's curly hair. It was just as passionate, but not as deep as before as Bilbo's fangs made it difficult. He very gently dragged a fang over Thorin's lip in a final nip as he pulled away from the kiss. "You must think you're so clever. I'll admit I like you more than I should, but that's not necessarily a good thing for you."

"I'll take my chances." Thorin responded a bit breathlessly.

"I bet you will." Bilbo leaned away with a smirk. "You are ridiculously stubborn like that."

"You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

Bilbo huffed but didn’t try to deny it. Instead, he rubbed his hands down Thorin’s bare arms. “You should get back to the inn. I like my hunters warm and comfortable, not freezing in the streets. Why did you even give them your tunic with the baby?”

Thorin shivered from the contact and looked down at himself. In the literal heat of the moment, he had completely forgotten that he was only wearing his undershirt. “I just forgot, I guess.”

Bilbo tutted and gave the hunter a nudge to get moving. “Well, I suppose you deserve a new tunic. You did save a baby, after all.”

Thorin complied with the shove and they started walking back to the inn. “You saved the baby. I only carried and delivered it.” He corrected.

“I saved it from the lamia. You saved it from the cold.”

“Fine. We both saved it.” He wrapped an arm around Bilbo’s waist and pulled him closer as they walked. “What reward would you like for your hard work.”

“I don’t need anything.”

“Won’t stop me from buying you something.” Thorin rumbled.

Bilbo huffed but didn’t argue and allowed Thorin’s possessive hold as they made their way back to the inn.

Chapter End Notes
Finally some action! of both kinds. ;)

Up next: Thorin has a problem and his name is Patrick. What will he have to do to keep the miner's grabby fingers off his vampire. Also a gift is given and the hunters go shopping.
They parted ways at the inn. Thorin had left alone so he needed to return alone to avoid suspicion. Bilbo gave him a brief farewell, before vanishing into the night before Thorin could drag it out. Thorin huffed, having been left standing outside the inn. Wooing a vampire was certainly going to have its difficulties.

He made his way back to their room and was ambushed as soon as he stepped through the door.

“Uncle! You’re alive!”

“Did you kill it!”

“Where’s Bilbo? Is he alright?”

“Where’s your shirt?”

He was greeted with a volley of questions from his nephews as they spoke over each other. “Yes, I’m fine. So is Bilbo, he said he had some things to take care of.”

“And the lamia?” Nori asked, it seemed he too had been waiting for answers.

“It’s dead.”

“What about the baby?” Kili asked apprehensively.

“Alive. Bilbo was able to resuscitate it. We returned it to its parents.”

There seemed to be a collective sigh of relief. “Good. That’s good.” Fili spoke for them.

"But, Uncle, where’s your shirt? Did the lamia steal it or something?” Kili asked bemused.

Thorin chuckled at the thought. “No, the lamia was up in the hills outside of town. We had to keep the babe warm until we could return it. I just forgot to ask for it back when we returned the baby.”

“Are you okay? You didn’t need even grab your weapons before you left.” Fili prodded.

“I’m fine.” Thorin sat tiredly on his bed, slipping off his boots. “I didn’t engage it. Bilbo took care of it. All I did was hold on to the baby.” He admitted, realizing it didn’t bother him all that much to do so.

“And you’re sure Bilbo’s okay?” Kili pushed.

Thorin paused. The lamia had had a chain wrapped around the vampire’s neck. Bilbo had seemed no different than usual after the fight that Thorin hadn’t thought to check for any injuries. Not that vampires were particularly easy to injure in the first place, but this was a lamia.
“I saw no signs of injury.” He finally said, though his delayed answer seemed to have earned him a suspicious look from the thief.

“And ya just let ‘im wander off without being sure.” Nori challenged.

“I highly doubt I could have stopped him.” Thorin snapped back.

Nori scoffed but let it drop.

“To bed! We should try to get some sleep before the sun comes up.” He slipped into his own bed, exhausted now that the adrenaline and arousal had worn off. The boys moved to obey, but his eyes were already drooping shut. He drifted off to thoughts of soft curves under fancy clothes and hungry kisses.

It was well past sunrise by the time Thorin stirred awake, much to his dismay as he had hoped to see the vampire before he settled in for the day. The groaned as he sat himself up and swung his legs off the bed. The room was empty, his nephews likely fetching breakfast.

He glanced over at the lump that he knew was a vampire in the bed opposite his. As much as he wanted to, he knew better than to disturb Bilbo’s sleep. Just as he finished washing his face, the boys returned bearing laden trays for breakfast.

“Morning, Uncle.” They greeted as one as they shuffled in with breakfast.

“Did you open it yet?” Kili asked as if Thorin should know exactly what he was talking about.

“Open what?” He glanced around in confusion as if it would answer his question.

“The package. On your bed?”

“He just woke up, Kili.” Fili tried to temper his brother.

Thorin turned to his bed. Sure enough, there, at the foot of his bed, lay a small brown wrapped package. He walked over and picked it up, confused as much as he was curious. It was limp in his hand, as if the brown paper and twine around it was all that was holding it together.

The boys watched on curiously as he untied the twine, allowing the paper to fall open. He held the contents up in his hands. It was a tunic. The material was soft and felt expensive and had beautifully intricate silver thread geometric designs sewn along the hems. His lips curled up as he remember his conversation with the vampire from the night before. A new tunic indeed. He was quite sure that the tunic he held in his hands was easily the nicest piece of clothing (and probably most expensive) he had ever owned outside of his hunting gear.

“Hey, there’s a note.” Fili grabbed a piece of paper that had fluttered to the bed and handed it over, only giving it a cursory glance before doing so.

Thorin set the tunic down and accepted the note.

Thorin,
No, I didn’t steal it. Though there may have been some breaking and entering involved.
Relax. I left compensation.
Bilbo

Thorin chuckled as his nephews read over his shoulders. Despite the vampire’s concerns about upsetting Thorin’s ethics, he hadn’t even spared a thought for whether Bilbo had stolen it or not.
Somehow he just knew the vampire wouldn’t do that.

“Is this a gift?” Kili asked suspiciously. “Is he giving you gifts? Why is he giving you gifts? Did something happen?”

“He is merely replacing a lost tunic, Kili.” Thorin tried to reassure his nephew.

“If he was just replacing it, I don’t think he’d buy the nicest one in the shop.” Fili wasn’t buying it.

Thorin just shrugged. “He has expensive taste.”

They both eyed him suspiciously, but he ignored them and pulled his new tunic on instead. It was perfect. It was warm, but not overly heavy and it fit just right. He ran his hand down the fabric appreciating the soft texture. The vampire certainly went a little over the top.

He continued to ignore his nephew’s searching stares and claimed his share of breakfast. “Nori head out already?”

“Yeah, he thinks we should finish up our shopping today so we can head out tomorrow. Says there’s rumors of vampire attacks farther north.” Fili grabbed his own breakfast, leaving the rest for his brother who was still sending a narrow eyed glare at his uncle.

“We might as well, though it will take several weeks to reach Cardume, so we had better stock well. And the temperatures will drop as we go farther north; we will need to grab some warmer clothing.”

“Looks like Bilbo already got started for you.” Kili pouted as he picked at his breakfast.

Thorin huffed at his nephew’s obvious jealousy. Clearly it would be best to keep what happened last night to himself. “Finish eating. We have a lot of shopping to get done today.”

They cleared their plates and headed out, they had a lot of ground to cover if they were going to get it all done in one day. They hit shop after shop, looking for both supplies and anything they could find off the list. They grabbed a quick lunch from a small food stall around noon. It wasn’t exactly the best fare they’d eaten but it was hot and edible.

By late afternoon, they had found most of what they needed and had only a handful of shops left to visit. Thorin’s mood was getting darker and darker by the minute. He had told Bilbo he was going to buy him something, a reward for his good work, just as the vampire had bought him the tunic. Bought so far he had found a grand total of nothing that would be suitable for a vampire.

Bilbo didn’t need anything and, anything he wanted, he could easily get for himself. So Thorin was at a lost of what he could possibly get for the vampire. The only thing he knew the vampire truly enjoyed were his tea and his pipe weed, and Thorin wasn’t an expert on either.

He was all but brooding again as he entered another shop, having split with his nephews to cover more ground. There were several shops that targeted hard manual labor type workers, like miners and blacksmiths. He was pleasantly surprised to see that this one seemed to also target hunters.

He perused the small section dedicated to hunter weapons and supplies, not finding anything of particular interest. He was about to leave again when a red glint caught his eye. He stalked over towards the merchants counter and, there, in a small box behind the glass was a ring with a small red gem.

“You a hunter?”
Thorin looked up at the merchant. He was a portly man but friendly looking enough. “I am.”

“I figured ya must be. Not just anyone would know the value of that ring right there.”

Thorin figured he’d play along. “And what is the value of that ring.”

“That there,” the merchant pointed at the small, deep red stone. “Is a blood ruby. I hear vampires go wacky over ‘em. If the blood pumping through your veins won’t get their attention, that will. Handy little piece a bait, it is.”

A blood ruby. Well, that would explain what it was doing in this kind of shop, but Thorin had no way of confirming that it was, in fact, a genuine blood ruby, though it did appear to be very similar to the one he had seen at the Ri’s.

The ring itself was simple. A wide band wrapped around a single stone. “Are you sure it’s a blood ruby? Because I would be very . . disappointed if I were to pay for it and it wasn’t.” He added with a dark glare when the merchant looked affronted.

“It’s the real thing, sir. I can assure you of that.”

Thorin let his glare work for a few more moments, but when the merchant held fast against it, he relented. “I’ll take it.”

“Excellent!”

The merchant pulled it out and secured it in a small leather pouch as Thorin counted out the coins to pay for it. It wasn’t much, but if it truly was a blood ruby, it was the best thing he could think of to give the vampire.

He finished up his share of the shopping shortly after that and headed back to the inn. It was shortly before sunset but the time he got back and his nephews were already organizing and packing their new supplies.

“What is that?” He asked as he looked over what they had bought.

“It’s a bow.” Kili’s confident tone belied by the sheepish look in his eyes.

“I see that, Kili. Why do you have it?”

Kili shuffled a bit and looked to his brother for some help. Fili dutifully ignored him and left him to explain himself to his uncle.

“I wanna learn how to shoot.” He shrugged.

“Kili, you need a teacher and I have never touched a bow. If you wanted a crossbow, I would have helped you.”

“I don’t want a crossbow. I want to learn to shoot a real bow.” He pouted.

“And you’re just going to figure it out for yourself?”

“I’ll teach him.”

The hunters turned to their still groggy vampire. It was still early for him since the sun hadn’t quite set yet and he sat there drowsily, blankets pooled around his lap and hair wildly tussled from sleep.
Thorin valiantly pushed back the urge to walk over and kiss the small vampire silly, though he couldn’t quite douse the heat that stirred in his belly at the sight.

“You can shoot a bow?” Kili perked up.

“I’ve been around a long time, had to keep busy somehow. There isn’t much I can’t do.” The sleepy vampire stayed very matter-of-factly. He slipped out of bed with a yawn and a stretch and made a visit to the wash basin before pulling on his clothes.

Thorin did his best to not look like he was watching the vampire’s every move but suspected he was probably failing. Fortunately, his nephews were just as focused on the vampire as he was, though hopefully for different reasons.

“You can use any kind of weapon?” Fili pried.

“Yes, though I prefer some over others.”

“So, you could give me some pointers with throwing daggers? And maybe teach me some left handed sword techniques?” Fili suggested.

“Nori might be a better choice for throwing daggers. And I could but I got the impression you were more interested in dual wielding.” He gave the teen a knowing look.

Fili blushed. Thorin wasn’t sure why. They all knew he had been practicing with two swords for a while now. He just thought he was being sneaky about it.

“I would like that better.” He admitted quietly.

“I’d be happy to help you, both of you. You can never know too many weapons, styles, or techniques in your line of business. Always good to be flexible.” Bilbo dipped his hands in the basin before running them through his curls, doing his best to wrangle them into some semblance of order.

Suddenly, he froze, hands halfway through his hair. The boys didn’t notice, having gone back to their packing while excitedly discussing their future possibilities. Thorin was just about to ask if the vampire was alright when he started moving again. He finished with his hair, or maybe just gave up, and turned and pinned Thorin with the most openly curious gaze Thorin had ever seen on him.

Thorin raised a brow at him in silent question. Bilbo didn’t answer but studied him for several moments before seemingly dropping whatever it was that had caught his attention and returning to his ‘morning’ routine.

Once the sun had set, they decided to head down and grab some dinner. Thorin and the boys ate their dinners while Bilbo sipped away on his tea. Thorin froze, fork half-way to his mouth when he felt eyes on their table.

He looked around cautiously, hairs standing on end from the intent gaze he could feel being sent in their direction. He cursed under his breath when he located the source of the gaze. How could he have forgotten about ‘Patrick’?

The miner’s gaze was clearly on a specific target and Thorin turned his head, already sure of who was the receiver of that heated gaze. Bilbo as staring back, eyes slightly darkened, and Thorin watched as a small tongue flicked out over beautiful lips. Lips that he had claimed just the night before.

Before Thorin could do anything, Bilbo stood up, quietly excusing himself, and sauntered over to
join the miner by the hearth. Now his nephews were watching as intently as he was and he forced
down a growl.

He knew they weren’t officially together yet but he thought that they were close enough to warrant
Bilbo not openly flirting and encouraging other men right in front of him. Their conversation from
the night before came back to his mind. Flirting was the vampire’s hunting style, he had said.

So was he legit hunting or was it just a habit? As he watched the miner drift closer and Bilbo allow
it, his jealousy burned. Bilbo never flirted with him so openly or suggestively, not like he was doing
now. Even last night, he had tried to keep Thorin at arm’s length, both emotionally and physically.

Kili grunted when Fili elbowed him hard. “I told you this would happen!”

“How was I supposed to know! And why is Bilbo letting him get that close anyways? We don’t
need any more information or anything.” He nearly whined.

“Obviously, he thinks the man’s hot.” Nori swooped in out of nowhere, helping himself to Fili’s
plate. Fili was too focused on the vampire to care.

“So?” Kili asked, as if that wasn’t a good enough answer.

“Ya still don’t get it. Desire equals hunger. How do ya think vampires choose their meals, hmm?”

Kili seemed to ignore him but Fili turned to the thief in disgust. “Are you saying he’s planning on
eating from him?”

Nori chuckled at the reaction. “Probably not. Bilbo ‘as a little more restraint than that. But instincts
still drive ‘im to hunt, even if ‘e don’t go for the kill. Then again, ‘e could. ‘E’s got to eat too, ya
know.” He admitted with a thoughtful rub at his beard.

That made Fili’s glare get even darker. Thorin didn’t know what his nephew knew that he didn’t, but
it only made his own jealousy grow. When the big miner smoothly wrapped an arm around Bilbo,
splaying his hand across the vampire’s lower back, Thorin couldn’t take it anymore.

He stood up with more force than necessary, nearly toppling his chair, and started stalking over to the
couple. Patrick’s hand started slipping down over Bilbo’s rear and Thorin saw red. Before he was
even fully aware of what he was doing, he yanked Bilbo out of the man’s arms.

Bilbo stumbled back into my him, staring up at him in shock. Patrick’s brows were nearly to his
hairline as he processed the new development.

“Keep your hands off him.” Thorin growled low and threatening.

Patrick’s eyebrows rose even higher, if it was possible, and Bilbo gaped at Thorin like he had lost his
mind. The miner’s eyes shot back and forth between the two of them searchingly.

“What are you doing?” Bilbo’s shook melted into irritation.

“I will not stand another man’s hands on you.” He growled down at him. And, really, the vampire
should know better.

“I don’t believe I need your permission.” Bilbo answered shortly, and Thorin could tell there was
anger simmering just below the surface.

“Perhaps you’re the one who should keep your hands off, buddy.” Patrick stepped in, obviously
taking the vampire’s side.

Thorin’s muscles tensed as they prepared for a fight. The miner was a little bigger than him, but he could take him out easily enough and he would before he let him get his hands on Bilbo.

The vampire seemed to pick up on his thoughts and stepped more fully between the two big men. “Alright, that’s enough. Thorin, I don’t need your approval to -“

Bilbo never finished his sentence since Thorin grabbed him and pulled him into a rough kiss before he could. As before, the vampire froze momentarily before reacting. He tried to pull away once, but Thorin held him fast. After that, Bilbo seemed to surrender and opened his mouth to Thorin’s invading tongue. He all but melted in Thorin’s arms, as the hunter plundered his mouth.

Thorin gentled the kiss, burying his fingers in honey golden curls and letting his other hand wander down Bilbo’s back to that shapely rear that Thorin had claimed as his own. By the time Thorin pulled away, nearly every set of eyes in the room were staring at them, including his very surprised nephews and a thief who just looked resigned.

He wrapped his arm around Bilbo possessively and gave the miner a glare. “He’s unavailable.” He growled threatening before turning and heading back to their room, dragging a spluttering vampire along with him.

As soon as they were behind a closed door, Bilbo turned on him. “Thorin.” His tone suggested a rebuke but his expression seemed to be teetering between irritation and amusement. “You can’t just-“

“I will not stand by and watch another man put his hands on you! If you want company for the night, it will be me. If it’s a meal your looking for, talk to Nori. Why would you consider a stranger for your bed when I have to earn the right?!”

“Because he’s a stranger! A meal! What you want is different! You don’t seem to understand the depths of what you’re asking for!” His amusement gone.

“And I thought I made it clear that I haven’t agreed to anything!”

Thorin’s nostrils flared and he stomped over to the vampire. Bilbo retreated a step apprehensively, and, if Thorin wasn’t so angry, he would have found it amusing. He grabbed Bilbo’s face, cupping his jaw in his hands and brought their foreheads together. Bilbo grabbed the hunter’s arms as if to remove them, but, instead, seemed to relax under Thorin’s touch.

“Then what is this?” Thorin rumbled as he gently rubbed their noses together. “Why do you crave my touch so much?”

Bilbo’s eyes shot open in shock, as if he hadn’t even realized himself what was happening. He tried to pull away, and, though he could have overpowered the hunter easily if he wanted to, he allowed Thorin to tug him back in.

“Answer me.” Thorin pushed, most of his anger already diffused. He could feel their connection in his skin, he could see the desire in Bilbo’s eyes and how he nearly melted at every touch. Why did the vampire resist when it was obviously what he wanted?

“I told you. I already fancy you more than I should.” Bilbo offered softly as of it was an answer.
“Then why do you push me away? If it’s for my sake-“

“It’s not for you. It’s for me. This can only end badly. Human lives are short and they forget easily, but I will have to live with it forever.” The vampire’s confessed quietly. “You are asking me to give you a piece of myself that will die with you and remain lost to me for the rest of my eternal life.”

Thorin leaned down for a soft kiss, letting his hands fall away and trail down the vampire’s back. “I cannot spare you from future pain, but I can offer you love and happiness for as long as I live.”

Bilbo huffed disbelievingly but let Thorin encase him in his arms. “I’m not convinced.”

“Then I will prove it.” Thorin rumbled softly, rubbing his nose along Bilbo’s smaller one. “But please do not taunt me.”

Bilbo sighed but nodded when Thorin cupped his jaw and stroked his cheek with his thumb. “Yes, yes. Alright.” He consented breathlessly.

Thorin pressed their lips together in one more soft kiss before pulling away. With the distance, Bilbo seemed to regain his composure. “Shall we let your nephews in?” He asked with a small mischievous smirk. Before Thorin could answer, the vampire was gone and two teens and a thief were tumbling through the suddenly open door with a chorus of yelps.

“I should have known.” Thorin rubbed his hand down his face. Well, it’s not like that kiss in the common room had exactly been subtle either.

Nori recovered the fastest and sauntered in looking them over curiously. The boys had to detangle from each other and finally shot up. “So, does this mean you two are together now?” Fili spoke up since his brother seemed too disappointed to.

“No.” Bilbo closed the door and walked back over to his bed.

“I’m working on it.” Thorin shot an exasperated look at the vampire.

“Good. You should make him work for it, Bilbo.” Kili agreed as he followed the vampire sending his uncle a glare that looked more like a pout.

Thorin rolled his eyes and returned to his own bed. “Get ready for bed. Cardume is a long ways away. We should get an early start tomorrow.”

The boys did as they were told, though hesitantly at first. Clearly they still had questions, but Thorin wasn’t about to lay everything out for them. Bilbo took up his post standing by the window, smoking his pipe, as the others slipped into bed, one by one.

Thorin walked over to stand by the vampire before heading to bed. “Bilbo.” He rumbled when it seemed the vampire was going to ignore him. The vampire blew out a puff of smoke before finally turning to him. “Wha-“

Thorin swooped in for a quick kiss, leaving the vampire staring at him in shock. He smirked at the reaction. “Good night.” He rumbled before heading back to his bed.

He heard the vampire huff behind him as he walked away and could have sworn he saw a small amused smirk on Bilbo’s lips when he glanced over his shoulder. He gave a challenging glare to his nephews at their open stares and slipped into his own bed for the night. Progress, he was making progress.
Next time: Thorin starts learning more about his vampire and gets a surprise when he finally gifts Bilbo the ring.
Happy New Year everyone!
Here's to the first chapters of 2019! :D

Sneak Peak for January: To Live or Not Die
Four months ago the first deadwalker was found and everything went downhill from there. The world as they know it has ended and Thorin and what’s left of his family are struggling to survive in the new dangerous world. Thorin, military trained and determined to keep his family alive, rules uncontested over his group until one day they find and take in a short middle aged bookworm who’s convinced that Thorin has lost sight of what really matters and has no qualms letting him know it.

Thorin/Bilbo, Older!Bilbo, Younger!Thorin, Zombie!AU

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The next morning they rose early, ate a large breakfast, and headed out. There was no road going their direction. The only road to Cardume was farther east along the mountains, which they would be taking later on their way to Moria. But, for now, they would be riding small trails and cross country.

Not to say that the land would be completely empty. There were always small settlements here and there and they hoped to come across a few creeks or wells on the way. Having a vampire along would prove very useful as he could search a large area in no time for food or water.

They traveled east first, deciding to swing around the hill country rather than try to go through it. It was the longer route, but it would save them time in the long run. They traveled along the hills north, encounter small mining camps here and there, until they were past the hills.

They had just made it past the northern most part of the North Downs when they stopped for the night at a small stream they had found. The ride had been mostly quiet for the past two weeks, thanks to the new tension resulting from Thorin and Bilbo’s non-relationship.

Thorin had been doing his best to woo the vampire at every opportunity, but Bilbo was doing a marvelous job of staying just out of his reach. Not that Bilbo was avoiding him, per say, he still engaged and was generally as involved as he was before with the group. Even more so, in fact, since he had started training the boys with their new weapons.

He would practice with them for as long as he could in the evenings until it was too dark to do anymore. He walked Fili through new sword techniques to practice and corrected Kili’s shooting pose as he shot at makeshift targets.

Thorin watched in amusement, and a little wonderment, as the boys soaked up the attention from the vampire. They had truly adopted him. He was already as good as family to them. Even Kili seemed to have gotten over his moping at Thorin finally making a move for the vampire’s affection.

It only made Thorin’s own resolve stronger. Despite being a vampire, Bilbo was such a good fit for their family. He would make it official. If the infuriating creature would let him. His fingers itched to
touch, but every time he got close the vampire would slip away out of his reach.

He knew why. Bilbo was weak to his touches, they both knew it. He was just setting boundaries, but it didn’t make it any less frustrating. Thorin still hadn’t had the chance to give him the ring he had bought. Besides the vampire’s avoidance, it’s not like they had a whole lot of privacy.

Once it had gotten too dark to see, the boys and their vampire returned to the fire to eat their dinner. They didn’t stay up late much anymore, likely too worn out from the new exercises the vampire was putting them through. Nori would disappear every several nights and return sometime before sunrise.

Bilbo always disappeared for a time, at least once a night, to check the area before returning and settling down near the boys. Thorin was still awake when he returned tonight and he eyed the vampire.

Bilbo glanced up, sensing his gaze, and Thorin made a come hither motion with the hand setting on his knee. He saw Bilbo’s eyes flick to it before returning to him with a raised eyebrow as he puffed on his pipe.

“Please.” Thorin murmured so quietly he could barely even hear himself. But he knew Bilbo would hear it.

Bilbo stared at him for a few moments before he finally got up and walked over, plopping down next to the hunter.

“You’ve been avoiding me.” Thorin lightly accused softly.

“Not you, just your grabby hands.” Bilbo retorted even as Thorin’s arm wrapped around him.

“You like my grabby hands.” He murmured into curly hair... Very cold curly hair, like frigid. “Are you cold?” The vampire was still wearing the same light clothes he had gotten in Belegost.

Bilbo looked at him in confusion. “What?”

Thorin pressed his hand into the vampire’s side. The temperatures had been dropping as they traveled farther north, even more so at night. Thorin and his boys each had thick, furred coats to keep warm, but the vampire had nothing but the clothes he had gotten from Dori. “It’s getting colder. Are you sure you’re warm enough?”

Bilbo continued to stare at him. “I’m a vampire, Thorin.”

“Yes, so? Does that mean you don’t get cold?”

“It means I’m always cold.” Bilbo took a puff of his pipe.

Thorin’s brows furrowed. “All the time?”

“Cold as a corpse as you might say.”

Thorin stared back, briefly wondering if the vampire was messing with him. He was certainly warm enough every time Thorin had kissed him and even now he felt a faint warmth through his clothes. “You’ve felt warm to me.”

Bilbo was shaking his head before Thorin had even finished. “It’s a spell. It makes me warmer and softer, more human like. Unaltered, I’m cold as stone and just as hard. And it only works to a point. If you were to hit me, it would still be like punching a boulder.”
Thorin considered that, his fingers sneakily inching up under the vampire’s jacket. “Do you feel the cold . . . or warmth?”

“Sort of. Not like you. Cold is . . . normal. Not comfortable, but . . . the standard. Heat is . . . we don’t feel heat like you do. It never quite reaches our insides, never really warms us. It’s more like a tingling sensation across our skin. Sometimes a little deeper. It feels, well, it’s one of my favorite sensations actually. It feels like, like a reminder of what it feels like to be alive.”

“It’s more nostalgic than anything, I don’t actually remember what it feels like to be warm, but I remember that it was a pleasant feeling. Perhaps it’s just a faint lingering memory. Most vampires don’t care for it.”

“But vampires can burn.” It was a fact, but he figured Bilbo would know what he was asking.

“Yes, we burn. The sun burns us, fire can burn us, if intense enough. But it doesn’t feel warm, it just feels . . . like a sting, I guess, like our flesh is being peeled away, one tiny piece at a time. Few things actually make us feel pain, but when we do, that’s pretty much what it feels like.”

Thorin cringed at the image and wasn’t comfortable with how familiar Bilbo seemed to be with the feeling. But Thorin had learned some new things about him. He liked warmth, even though he couldn’t feel it like before he was turned. It reminded him of being human.

Thorin suddenly scooped up the vampire, who choked on his pipe at the jostling, and plopped him into his lap, wrapping his thick fur lined coat around them both. Bilbo fit perfectly into the bowl of Thorin’s crossed legs, his much smaller legs set against the hunter’s. Bilbo made to protest, but Thorin wrapped his arms around his middle, securing him in place.

Encased in Thorin’s heat, Bilbo quickly relaxed, melting back into his hunter’s chest and arms. Thorin smirked when the vampire let out a sigh of contentment, his pipe all but forgotten. Thorin nuzzled into the limp vampire’s hair, smirking triumphantly at his small victory.

“I’m beginning to think you only like me for my warmth.” He rumbled softly. He had always been warm natured. His siblings had called him a forge and he had kept his small nephews warm many a nights.

“It’s definitely a perk.”

Thorin chuckled. Bilbo was practically buried under his coat in his lap, only the top half of his head visible over the fur of Thorin’s coat. His head was turned a bit to the side, his nose buried in the fur lining.

The way his head was turned made one ear stick out from underneath his curls. Thorin stared at it. He hadn’t noticed before, but Bilbo’s ears were just a little bit pointed at the end. He ran a finger down the outer shell in curiosity.

Bilbo jolted into instant tension in Thorin’s hold and went completely rigid. “Don’t do that.” He almost sounded threatening.

Thorin reeled in confusion before finally putting the pieces together. A smirk slowly spread across his face. “You have sensitive ears.” It was a statement not a question.

Bilbo must have heard the mischief in Thorin’s voice, since he sucked in a breath sharply. “I’m warning you.”

Thorin chuckled darkly. Oh, he would definitely remember this little tidbit. When Bilbo did finally
let him touch, he would be taking full advantage of that. “I’ll be good. I promise.” He complied into the vampire’s curls.

Bilbo gradually relaxed back into him when it seemed he would keep his promise. Thorin wrapped back around him, nose buried in soft curls. They sat for a few minutes before Thorin remembered the ring.

“Oh.” He shuffled around in his pockets to find it. “I have something for you.”

Bilbo hummed in confusion as he was jostled around in Thorin’s questing.

Thorin found the little leather bag and pulled Bilbo back into place. “I told you I was going to get you something.” Bilbo’s attention was already fully focused on the bag in his hands as he held it up. “I found this in a shop in Fornost.” He opened the bag and tipped out the ring, holding it up to the vampire.

Bilbo made no move to take it, in fact, he was perfectly still, not moving at all.

“I was told it was a blood ruby. Perhaps the merchant lied to me.” He started to pull it away in disappointment.

Bilbo grabbed his wrist, holding him in place. “You are . . giving this to me?”

“Yes. If you want it. I told you I would get you something and I couldn’t think of anything better to get you.” He admitted, realizing the stone must be genuine to cause such a reaction in the vampire.

Bilbo gently took the ring from his hand, stroking the stone almost lovingly, before slipping it onto one of his fingers. It fit perfectly.

“Good. It fits.” Thorin stroked the band on Bilbo’s small finger. He had been a little concerned. The ring had looked so small, but then the vampire had small, slender fingers, so it worked out.

Bilbo admired his ring for a few more moments, but didn’t say anything. Thorin knew vampires loved the stones, but he wondered if rings had any other significance to them.

Suddenly Bilbo swiveled in his lap and claimed the hunter’s mouth in a kiss, catching Thorin by surprise. He quickly recovered, returning the kiss eagerly even as the vampire continued to turn in his arms until he was seated once again, legs wrapped around Thorin’s waist.

Bilbo buried his hands in Thorin’s thick ebony hair, deft tongue begging for entry into the hunter’s mouth. Thorin opened up quickly, more than happy to give the vampire access. He ran his hands over as much of the vampire as he could, taking advantage of the lapse of discipline, before cupping Bilbo’s rear and tugging his hips closer.

Bilbo hissed into the kiss as their rapidly hardening erections rubbed together but refused to break the kiss. Thorin groaned, encouraged by the lack of restrictions and ground them together again.

Finally Bilbo had to pull away as his fangs were getting in the way. His breathes were ragged and his eyes black as coal. He tried to pull away weakly, an attempt too late to stop where things were going.

Thorin tugged him back in a hard grind and groaned, his own breathes become heavy and stuttered. Bilbo hissed again and lunged for his neck, again only nipping with his front teeth, but insistently this time. Thorin could almost feel his desire to bite, but he never used his fangs.
Thorin lifted his head, giving the vampire more access to his neck as he continued to grind them together. Bilbo wrapped his arms around and gripped the back of Thorin’s shoulders as he began to bounce in Thorin’s lap, desperately searching for that wonderful friction.

Thorin moaned deep in his throat and let Bilbo take over. He leaned back on his arms and stretched himself out, offering himself up to his vampire. Bilbo took as much as he was given. Beyond words, he was reduced to snarls and hisses as he ground them together.

Bilbo suddenly buried his face in Thorin’s chest, his jaw making an audible click as he clenched it tight over a deep guttural snarl. He shook in a full body shudder but kept grinding. Thorin only vaguely noticed the vampire’s shaking as his own peak rapidly overtook him.

He clenched his mouth shut to stifle the bellow he could feel growing in his chest, instead rumbling a deep groan in his chest as he lost his senses in blissful release. His arms were shaking, threatening to collapse when his senses slowly returned.

Bilbo was bonelessly draped over his chest, arms hanging limply off either side. Thorin slowly pushed himself back into an upright position before carefully laying them out on his bed roll, holding on to the limp vampire as he maneuvered them. He threw his coat over them both.

Bilbo’s head lay on his arm as they lay facing each other, eyes heavy lidded and glazed over and face slack. Thorin leaned in for a soft kiss. Bilbo returned it, snapping out of his daze. He groaned as Thorin pulled away, mumbling something that Thorin didn’t understand but certainly sounded like a curse.

“Now I have to clean my underclothes.” He sighed and rubbed a hand down his face.

Thorin chuckled. He did too, but it was definitely worth it. “You can’t blame me for this. You were in total control at the end there.”

Bilbo groaned. “I still blame you. You prey on my weaknesses.”

“Maybe, but you enjoyed every minute of it. You obviously needed a good release.

“Or two or three.” Bilbo mumbled.

Thorin stared in disbelief. “Seriously?”

Bilbo just nodded lazily. “I guessed I am a bit pent up.”

Thorin smirked mischievously. “We could do it again.” He rumbled lowly.

“No. I already feel gross. Eru, I didn’t even take my jacket and vest off!” Bilbo quickly sat up and pulled his jacket off, checking for wrinkles and tears.

“I’m sure they’re fine.” Thorin chuckled from where he lay, trailing his knuckles along the vampire’s thigh soothingly.

“Well, my pants aren’t.” Bilbo grumped as he folded and set aside his more important clothes. “I can’t stand it. I need to wash.” He stood up and paused, looking back down at Thorin. “I’ll bring you a rag.”

Thorin raised a brow, but Bilbo was gone. No doubt down in the creek somewhere cleaning himself up. A few minutes later, he was back and offered Thorin the promised rag.
Thorin took it and started cleaning himself up. “We’ll try to avoid this next time.”

Bilbo huffed. “What makes you think there’s going to be a next time?”

Thorin threw the rag off to the side, as clean as he was going to get without giving his pants a proper wash. Bilbo was still standing, in far less clothing than before and Thorin shivered just looking at him. He grabbed the vampire’s hand and gave him a soft tug, not demanding, but requesting. “Stay next to me tonight.”

Bilbo pinned him with a calculating stare, probably determining whether he was up to something or not.

“Let me keep you warm.”

“Vampires don’t get warm.” He huffed but let Thorin pulled him down into his bedroll.

Thorin tucked him into his chest as they spooned and covered them with his large coat. Bilbo’s head rested on his arm again and Thorin nuzzled into his curls. The vampire quickly relaxed in his arms, allowing the hunter’s hands to wander as they would.

Not that Thorin was looking to rile him up again. He kept his touches soft and soothing, simply enjoying having the vampire in his arms and bedroll. He certainly hadn’t been expecting that pleasant little reaction from the ring, and, as much as he enjoyed it, it was these gentle intimate caresses that gave it meaning, made him more than just another ‘Patrick.’

“So, I take it you like the ring.” Thorin felt more than heard the responding chuckle.

“A blood ruby is one of the most romantic gifts vampires can give to each other, even more so if it’s set into jewelry. Of course, you’re not a vampire, so maybe I rewarded you a bit overly much.” He stroked the ring on his finger affectionately.

Thorin smirked triumphantly. “So, there will be a ‘next time.’”

“Don’t get cocky. I just got a little carried away this time. It’s hard to resist when I’m hungry. Why do you think I’ve been keeping out of your reach?”

“You’re in my reach now.” Thorin rumbled into his ear.

Bilbo shuddered deliciously. “Yes, well, you’re warm.” He shrugged as if it was all the excuse he needed.

Thorin would take it, any excuse that allowed him to hold the vampire in his arms was good enough for him.

“I was wondering what you were doing with a blood ruby.”

“You knew?” Now that he thought about it, Bilbo had given him a strange look the day he had bought it.

“Of course, I did. Blood rubies contain dark energy. I could feel it on you. I was wondering why you didn’t put it in the sack with the others.”

Well, so much for hiding it. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Why would I? I’m not some small fry who would mug you for a tiny stone. It was yours; it wasn’t my business.”
Thorin hummed. Well, at least he still had the element of surprise. The conversation reminded him of another stone, one that still hung about the vampire’s neck. “Ori gave you a blood ruby.” His question in his tone.

“No, he didn’t. I paid for it. It was a supplied product.”

And the ring was a freely offered gift. Thorin congratulated himself on his lucky find. “What else do vampires gift their lovers?”

“Pleasure, blood, and dark stones mostly.”

Oh. Oh. Thorin couldn’t contain his growing grin. “So, we’re lovers then?” After all, Bilbo had gifted him ‘pleasure’ in return.

Bilbo stiffened slightly in his arms. “It’s not official yet, so don’t go celebrating.” Bilbo grumped sourly.

Thorin just chuckled, squeezing his vampire closer to him. “Of course.”

“Go to sleep, Thorin. You’re going to be tired tomorrow.” Bilbo huffed.

Thorin hummed into his hair. “Are you worried about me?”

“No, I’m just reminding you how miserable you’re going to be tomorrow if you don’t get some sleep.”

“Fair enough.” Thorin placed a kiss to his curls. “Good night, Bilbo.”

Exhausted as he was, he closed his eyes and felt the lulling pull of sleep. Before he fell into darkness completely, he heard a soft murmur that sounded a lot like a ‘sleep well, Thorin.’ He drifted off with a small smile.

Chapter End Notes

Next time!: Thorin and company finally make it to Cardume. Something is definitely amiss in the cold northern town and it seems to be affecting their vampire and Thorin gets confronted about his new ‘bed mate.’
The next morning Thorin woke up to empty arms. The sun was coming up and his nephews were already sleepily getting around. He sat up looking around and found the vampire slipping into his sun wear nearby.

He stood up and stretched with a groan before noticing the light frost that had settled onto his coat. Looks like they would be breaking out their tent soon. They preferred to go without when possible, it being more work to set up, but it would be far better than waking up frozen or under a snow drift.

He slipped off his coat to freshen up in the stream and reattach all his weapons.

“Uncle, what happen to your neck?!” Kili’s concerned voice got his attention.

“What are you talking about?” He rubbed at his neck in confusion.

“You have little whelps all over your neck.” Fili explained, stepping closer to get a better look.

Oh. He forgot about that. “They must just be some kind of bug bites.”

Bilbo cleared his throat off to the side somewhere and Nori was eyeing them both suspiciously.

“Do they itch?” Kili rubbed his own neck in sympathy.

“Not really. I’ll be fine, Kili. Finish getting ready.” After several more assurances the boys got back to their preparations and they were soon mounting up and moving on for the day.

That night, Bilbo waited until the boys were asleep and approached Thorin. “I’m sorry.” He sounded contrite

“For what.” Thorin frowned in confusion as he tugged the vampire down into his lap.

“Your neck.” Bilbo went willingly into the cocoon of heat his hunter pulled him into.

“Why?”

“What do you mean ‘why?’ I left bruises.”

Thorin shrugged. “Humans leave bruises too.”

“Yes, but those are kiss marks. These are bite marks. It’s not the same thing.”

“Sure they are. They’re just from vampire kisses.” Thorin nuzzled into his curls.

“That’s not . . . They weren’t kisses.”

“Why do vampires bite?”

“Because it feels good.”

Thorin nodded. “So, vampire kisses.”
Bilbo huffed. “Well . . . fine, if you put it that way. . . . I didn’t think I was biting that hard.” He mumbled softly at the end.

"You haven't heard me complaining."

"Well, I'm still sorry. I don't . . don't want to hurt you."

Thorin only barely heard the last part, but he did. He tugged the vampire tighter against him. "You didn't hurt me. I didn't even notice them until Kili mentioned them. Don't worry about it."

"Yes, well, I'm sorry about that too. Nothing like announcing to your nephews what you've been up to."

Thorin chuckled. "They didn't make the connection-"

"This time." Bilbo cut in.

"And when they do they'll get over it. They'll be sixteen soon. They'll have to grow up sooner or later anyway."

Bilbo hummed, not agreeing or disagreeing. "Speaking of your nephew. I've been getting the impression lately that he's a bit . . . um . . ." "Infatuated with you?"

"Is that what it is? So, he was jealous? Back in Fornost."

“I think he believes he's in love with you.”

“Hmm. Much like his uncle then.”

It was said lightly, but Thorin still picked up on his meaning. “You still doubt me.” It was a fact not a question.

“I don’t doubt what you think you feel, Thorin. But I know humans. And the feelings of humans are very fickle.” Bilbo spoke softly, almost apologetically.

Thorin couldn’t argue and even if he could, it wouldn’t have gotten him anywhere. So, instead he lay them down in the bedroll, tucking the vampire in next to him. “I will do my best to prove myself to you.” He mumbled into curly locks as they settled in.

Bilbo didn’t answer and he drifted off to sleep.

Though they continued as if nothing had changed during the day, Bilbo would always return to Thorin’s arms and share his bedroll for the night. Only to share it, he made no more advancements and Thorin was content for now to simply be wrapped around his vampire.

A couple of nights later, Thorin awoke to his vampire slipping out of his arms. “What’s wrong?” It was still pitch black out, too early for the vampire to be getting up for the day.

“Shh. Go back to sleep, Thorin.”

Well, that didn’t help settle him. He sat up, gripping the vampire’s wrist. “Where are you going?”

“There’s something I need to take care of. Go back to sleep.”
“What kind of something?” Thorin pushed, becoming more alert by the second.

Bilbo sighed. Thorin wasn’t going to let him go until he got some answers. “We have company in the area. Relax, it’s not too close. I’m going to go deal with it. Now go back to sleep.”

“What kind of company?” Thorin reached out for his sword, reassuring himself it was still there.

“Thorin, please. You don’t need to worry about it. Let me go so I can take care of it.”

Thorin’s hand loosened in response to the almost urgent tone in Bilbo’s voice. No sooner had he let go, the vampire was gone. He surveyed the camp and found the thief sitting in his bedroll tensely.

“What is it?”

“Vampire.” The thief didn’t even look at him.

“Is it close?”

“Close enough. Probably out hunting. Bilbo will take care of it.”

Thorin nodded but stared out into the dark warily. He kept a firm grip on his sword. He turned back to the thief after feeling his gaze. “If you have something to say, say it.” His nephews may still be in the dark about his and Bilbo’s recent activities, but he was under no illusions that Nori was.

“Not me. Ain’t got nothin’ ta say. Not that ya’d listen if I did. Bilbo knows ’e’s being stupid, just hope I can pick up the pieces when yer done with ‘im.”

“I’m not going to hurt him.” Thorin glared back.

“Yeah, Okay.” Nori scoffed. “Ya keep telling yerself that, maybe ya’ll be able to magically make it true.”

Before Thorin could retort, Nori lay back down and rolled over in his bed roll. Thorin figured the thief’s lack of tension probably meant that the threat had been dealt with. Sure enough, a few moments later, Bilbo returned.

He cast Nori a quick glance as he made his way back to Thorin.

“Is it gone?”

“Yes, of course.”

Thorin pulled him back into his arms. “Did you kill it?”

“Of course, I did. If I let it live it would have come back with friends.”

Thorin tucked them back in, content with the vampire’s word that the threat was gone. ”Are you hurt?” He doubted it, but he felt the need to be sure anyway.

“Hardly. It was just a small fry.” Bilbo tutted.

Thorin nodded and let himself relax with Bilbo in his arms again, the adrenaline slowly slipping out of his system.

Bilbo rolled in his arms until they were facing each other. “Did Nori say something?”

Thorin stared at him, brain slowly catching up after getting caught on the new intimate position.
“What makes you think that?”

“His heart rate was elevated, more so than when I left.”

“You can hear his heart beat?” Did that mean Bilbo had heard every time his heart beat had increased over the vampire?

“I can hear all your heartbeats and smell the blood under your skin. We’re not talking about my superior senses here. Answer my question.”

Thorin’s brain reluctantly stuttered back to the topic. “He did.”

“What did he say?” Bilbo kept his voice carefully level.

Thorin brushed some wild curls from Bilbo’s face. “He thinks I’m going to hurt you.”

Bilbo merely hummed in reply.

Thorin’s heart sank at the reaction, or lack there of. “So do you.” He sighed. “Bilbo, I -“

“Shh.” Bilbo put a finger to his lips, only to replace it with his own in a soft kiss. “We don’t need to talk about it.” He cupped Thorin’s face in his hands and rested their foreheads together. “Whether it will or won’t happen, talking about it won’t change anything. So, sleep.”

Thorin sighed but relented. He placed a kiss to his vampire’s head before tucking him in close. Bilbo snuggled in against him, his head tucked under Thorin’s chin and one arm draped over his waist.

Thorin grinned into his curly hair, once again content.

It was only a couple nights later when they finally decided to set up the tent. His nephews had already been huddling together for warmth and had tried on several occasions to convince Bilbo to join them.

Bilbo always refused, stating he needed to be able to get up quickly, though Thorin knew the real reason. Bilbo would much rather be tucked in to a different bedroll. Things continued much the same, only now with a tent at night. Nori stuck closer to camp, not disappearing so often anymore.

Bilbo, however, disappeared in the middle of the night several more times over the journey. It seemed there was a much higher concentration of vampires in the area.

When Thorin had asked about it, Bilbo had explained it was because they were getting closer to the mountains. The Misty Mountains apparently house several large covens within its recesses, one of which lied just east of their current position.

There were no significant settlements to be found past the hills of the North downs and they faced the cold wilds on their own. Fortunately, at just over four weeks of traveling, Cardume finally came into sight.

They pushed hard on their last day, eager to spend the night in a warm inn and a soft bed. They finally road into town late one evening, we’ll past sunset. It was still and quiet, a layer of snow covering everything in sight. It was hard to make much out about the town, but, with Bilbo’s help, they managed to find the nearest inn.

They quickly paid for a room from the sleepy innkeeper and retreated for the the night. Thorin built up the fire in their hearth and they ate a quick cold meal before seeking out their beds. Which there
only happened to be three of, this time, so the boys shared one while Nori and Thorin claimed the
others.

Thorin readied for bed, looking forward to sharing an actual bed with his vampire for the night when
Bilbo walked over to him. Thorin’s brows furrowed in confusion, his nephews weren’t even in bed
yet.

“I’ll be out tonight.” His tone was low and serious.

“Why? Is everything all right?”

“It’s fine. I just need to go out tonight.”

Thorin hesitated but nodded. He would give the vampire his space.

Bilbo left and the rest of them climbed into bed for the night.

Bilbo was back by morning, his mood still quiet and solemn. “Stay together when you go out today.
All of you.”

“Why? What’s going on?” Fili quickly picked up on the vampire’s mood.

“Just do as I say. Stay together, stay alert. And keep your weapons with you.”

“If there’s a threat, I need to know about it.” Thorin pried. They needed to know what hey we’re
dealing with.

“Don’t trust the people.” Bilbo whispered to him before slipping into Thorin’s bed for the day.

Thorin’s mind spun as he tried to decipher the warning.

“Where’s Nori?” Kili asked as he looked around for any sign of the thief.

Great. Bilbo tells them not to separate and the bloody thief is already off who knows where doing
who knows what. “Let’s get some breakfast. Wear your weapons and stay together, like Bilbo said.”

The innkeeper seemed friendly enough, if a bit twitchy and nervous, as they ordered their breakfasts.
The inn seemed all but empty, only two others in the common room with the hunters.

They finished eating and donned their coats, heading out to get a better look at the town. Even
during the day, the town seemed abnormally empty and quiet. Very few people were out and about,
one occasionally skittering about in the snow covered streets.

They visited several shops while they were out. Most of the shop keepers were normal enough,
though they all seemed to share in that twitchy nervousness the hunters had witness in the innkeeper.
There weren’t a great many shops. This town being so far from any other towns, there wasn’t a
whole lot of traffic coming in and out.

One shop they visited stuck out, not because of the shop itself, but because of the merchant. From the
moment they had entered, he had glared at them suspiciously and continued to do so until they left.
Clearly he wasn’t that desperate for customers.

In fact, they had received that very same stare from several men throughout the town during their
wanderings. It was strange. It seemed everyone they ran into were either twitching nervously or
glaring suspiciously. Houses were closed up tight, windows covered, and only handful of people
were about at any one time.
Granted, it was pretty far north and the snow was rather inconvenient, but a town this big shouldn’t be so inactive. It couldn’t afford to be. Thorin had been in the north before and he had never seen an occupied town look so desolate.

It was late afternoon or early evening when they headed back to the inn. They ordered a late lunch, claiming one of the any empty tables in the common room.

“Something doesn’t feel right.” Fili voiced after their food had arrived.

“No kidding. Have you seen the looks we’ve been getting?” Kili agreed.

“They’re kinda hard to miss. But the look that merchant gave us was the worst.” Fili shivered in disgust. “I can’t even describe it.”

“It’s like everyone here is scared or .. or angry or something.”

“Something strange is definitely going on here.” Thorin agreed. He just wished the vampire would tell him what. He was sure Bilbo knew. He didn’t understand why he wouldn’t say.

“And Nori is still missing.” Fili pointed out.

“Yeah, but Nori always does his own thing.”

“But Bilbo told us to stick together.”

“Don’t worry about Nori, he can take care of himself.” Thorin reassured. Nori wouldn’t be found if he didn’t want to be.

“I’m not worried about him.” Fili scoffed. “But he picks up on thing faster so he makes a good prediction tool.”

Thorin chuckled in surprise at his nephews tactics. He certainly was the strategist in the family.

“Well, What does his absence tell you then?”

“It can mean that there’s nothing to worry about or that there’s something really bad coming. If he doesn’t check in with Bilbo, I’m inclined to think it’s the latter.”

Thorin nodded with a hum. “Then we best keep an eye out for him.”

They finished up their meal and returned to their room. There wasn’t much else for them to do for now, the only reason they came this far north was so Bilbo could snag some dark iron ore from the hills. So they returned to their room to do some much needed maintenance on their weapons. They needed to be ready for trouble.

Thorin grabbed his sword and whetstone and sat down on his nephews’ bed with them to work.

“Hey! Why are you sitting on our bed?” Kili squawked.

“Cause there’s a vampire in mine.” He thought it was rather obvious.

“So? I thought you’d be used to it by now, Uncle. After all, he’s been in your bed for weeks.” Fili snarked.

Thorin stared at him, frozen. “What are you -“

“Oh, come on, Uncle. You didn’t really think we wouldn’t notice did you? Bug Bites? Really?” Kili
smirked at him challengingly.

Thorin was gaping. Jaw bobbing but not making any words. “You seemed to believe it at the time.” He returned with a moody frown when he finally recovered.

“Oh, Kili bought it.” Fili grinned at his brother receiving a scowl in return. “But I knew better.”

Thorin’s mind spun. “So, you’ve known from the beginning?”

“We suspected.” Fili corrected. “When we found Bilbo in your bedroll, it just confirmed our suspicions.”

“So, are you two . . . official now, or whatever.” Kili asked, more reserved than before.

“No. He does share my bedroll, but only for warmth.”

Kili gave him a skeptical look. “And that’s how you got the ‘bug bites.’ He snarked sarcastically.

“They were bites, just not ‘bug’ bites.” Thorin snarked back.

“He bit you?!” Fili seemed to reign himself back in. “I mean, did you let him?”

Thorin stared at his nephew suspiciously. “Not real bites, just nips, with his front teeth. Why?”

“Nothing.” Fili answer a little too quickly. “Was just wandering.”

Oh, his nephew definitely knew something that he didn’t.

“Wait. Why was he biting you?” Kili frowned in confusion.

Fili sighed. “Vampires get horny when their hungry and hungry when their horny.”

Thorin coughed and sputtered on his own spit and Kili just gaped at his brother.

“How do you know this?!” Thorin demanded when he recovered.

“Nori told me.” Fili shrugged.

Of course, he did.

“What?” Kili looked at his uncle, realizing it wasn’t new information for him. “How come no one told me?!”

“It wasn’t relevant.” Thorin deflected.

“Uh, it kinda is! Things make a lot more sense when you know that! Now we know how vampires pick their targets!”

Thorin and Fili both stared at him. They hadn’t thought of the implications beyond their own vampire. “You’re right.” Fili agree. “That means every vampire has a type. We can trace them by their victims and better predict their attacks.”

“Yeah~.” Kili sounded like that much was obvious. “How long have you guys known this?”

“A while.” Thorin answered absently. He must have been too caught up in his own vampire to make the connections.
“Wait. If Bilbo was biting you, that means he was -“

“Drop it, Kili.” Thorin was not going to explain what they were getting up to.

“But you said you weren’t -“

“I said drop it!”

Kili huffed with a pout, but let it go. Verbally, anyway, he continued to pout for quite some time.

They tended their gear mostly in silence for most of the evening. After a while, Thorin went down to see about getting a hot bath prepare in their room. “What do you mean you ‘don’t provide bathing facilities?'”

“My humblest apologies, but, you see, we’ve always used the hot springs under the mountain for such services.”

Hot springs? Even better. Thorin could see Bilbo being all over that. “And where are these hot springs?”

“Ah, I’m afraid they’ve been closed for some time.” The innkeeper apologized nervously yet again.

“Why are they closed?”

“It was recently deemed unsafe. I can heat some water for your wash basin, but apologize that that is the best I can do.”

The innkeeper seemed unwilling to talk about the springs anymore and Thorin decided to go with what he could get. “All right.”

“I'll have it sent up shortly.”

Thorin walked back to his room. The innkeeper was definitely scared of something and Thorin had a suspicion that the hot springs were involved somehow.

Chapter End Notes

Next Time: Bilbo is acting strange and Thorin wants to know why. There's a monster on the loose and Bilbo doesn't seem interested in doing anything about it. What will Thorin do when he encounters the monster and his world begins to crumble?
This month's Sneak Peek: *The Blind Burglar*
'A burglar of great skill.' The wizard said. 'Best in the business.' He said. 'Would decide the fate of their quest.' He said. And here they were in the land of *halflings*, in the home of a gentle hobbit who looked like he had never worked a hard day in his life. What was that blasted wizard thinking?! And why was the hobbit acting so . . peculiar? Who needed a bloody walking stick in their own home?! And what was up with his . . wait. Mahal's beard! Was the hobbit really blind?! Thorin was going to have words with a certain wizard.

Bilbo/Thorin; Blind!Bilbo; Protective!Thorin

Later that night, the vampire woke and silently slipped from bed to get himself around.

“Morning, Uncle Bilbo.” Fili teased with a mischievous smirk

When Bilbo merely hummed, not even turning to them, Fili’s smirk fell into a concerned frown. He shared a look with his brother before the two of them turned to stare at their uncle.

Thorin was sporting his own confused frown. Bilbo was usually more personable. His concerns about the vampire’s behavior this morning and the night before coming back to him. He met the gazes of his nephews and Fili tilted his head towards Bilbo meaningfully.

Thorin cleared his throat before making his way over the the vampire. He stood next to Bilbo as he freshened up in the wash basin. “Is everything alright?” He asked quietly.

“Of course.” Bilbo answered flatly, still not turning toward the hunter.

“Really? Because it doesn’t seem like it.”

“Everything’s fine. But we can’t stay here long. It will take me a few nights to get the ore we need and then we should leave.”

“Why the hurry? We haven’t had the luxury of beds and hot meals for some time.” Thorin studied the vampire. He didn’t understand why he was suddenly so closed off when he had been so open before.

“Because it’s better that way.” Bilbo evaded giving a real answer.

Thorin watched the vampire carefully. Something was going on and he wasn’t telling Thorin about it. He glanced over at his nephews who were studiously pretending not to eavesdrop and turned back to his vampire, mind made up. He knew how to get answers.

He stepped closer to the vampire who seemed to be doing his best to ignore the hunter’s already close proximity and slipped his hand up against the side of Bilbo’s neck, his fingers getting lost in luscious curls and his thumb resting threateningly close to Bilbo’s ear.
Bilbo stiffened at the touch but allowed Thorin to guide his head until they were facing each other, the vampire’s eyes wide and dark.

Thorin rubbed his thumb ever so slightly against the skin next to Bilbo’s ear, fighting the urge to smirk when the vampire let out a barely audible gasp. He leaned down to set their foreheads together. “Tell me the real reason.” He rumbled quietly.

“It’s not important.” Bilbo pushed out just as quietly and just a bit shakily.

“Then there should be no problem with you telling me.” Thorin just barely brushed his thumb against Bilbo’s earlobe.

The vampire’s hand shot up to grab Thorin’s wrist and his eyes were dark as coal. His fangs peeked out of his firmly pressed lips and Thorin could see his jaw muscles flexing under his skin. “Your nephews are watching.” He hissed in a quiet whisper.

“Let them watch.” He whispered huskily back, rubbing his nose along the vampire’s. “Tell me.” He placed a soft kiss to the corner of Bilbo’s mouth.

Suddenly his lip was caught by a now bared fang and he barely heard the vampire’s low snarl. “It’s dangerous.” Bilbo hissed quietly when he finally released Thorin’s lip.

“Then tell me and-“

“No! This town is dangerous!” He hissed louder.

“Why?” Thorin pulled away, dropping his hand away from the vampire’s ear now that he was getting answers but maintaining the contact.

Bilbo huffed his eyes gradually returning to normal and fangs slowly retracting. “Because there’s a monster here.” He answered as if it should be obvious.

“Then why aren’t we killing it?” Kili spoke up from the bed, giving up the appearance of not paying attention.

“It’s too strong for you to handle. You will stay away from it.” Bilbo answered with a tone of authority.

“But what about you? Couldn’t you kill it?” Fili pushed. It went against their instincts and training to just let a monster be.

The vampire huffed irritability. “I don’t want to deal with it.”

Thorin pulled his hand away with furrowed brows. “Why not?” He asked, voicing his nephews confusion as well.

“Because it’s bothersome and unnecessary.” Bilbo scoffed and stepped back now that he was released.

Thorin stared, doing his best to understand the vampire’s reasoning. “So you would rather leave the people of this town at its mercy?” He asked in a carefully level tone.

“The people have embraced it!” Bilbo sighed at Thorin’s confused and concerned expression. “Look, just . . . just stay here and rest. Don’t go out alone and do not go out after dark for any reason. Please? You have to trust me. I need you to trust me.”
Thorin stared surprised to hear the urgency in the vampire’s voice. He had only heard it once before, when their safety was in question. His gaze bore into green orbs before he finally nodded. Bilbo never did anything without a reason. “Alright.”

Bilbo sighed in relief. “Thank you. I should get going. The sooner I get done the sooner we can leave.”

A few minutes later, the vampire was gone and the hunters sat on their beds wondering what it all meant. “What do you think it is? I mean, that he doesn’t even want to mess with it?” Kili wondered out loud.

“I’m more concerned about what he meant when he said that the people have embraced it.” Fili replied.

Thorin sat on his bed deep in thought, barely hearing his nephews. There was something missing he wasn’t telling, something off about the vampire’s behavior. Bilbo had never backed out or avoided a fight before. He didn’t sound like he was scared of it, whatever it was, more like it wasn’t worth the trouble of dealing with it. Yet he had said it was too powerful for the hunters to deal with.

His mind spun in circles trying to put together a puzzle with too many missing pieces. Finally he sighed in frustration. He wasn’t going to figure it out until he found out more and that wouldn’t happen tonight. “Get to bed!” He barked irritability at his nephews and belatedly realized they were already climbing into bed.

They stared at him as he huffed, slightly embarrassed by his lack of awareness, and got himself around for bed.

“Don’t worry, Uncle. I’m sure everything will be fine.” Fili said softly as Thorin pulled his covers up over himself.

He only nodded before laying down and settling into bed. He truly hoped that was true.

They took the opportunity to sleep in the next morning as they had no where to be and it was well past sunrise when Thorin began to stir. His eyes lazily eased open, conforming that his nephews were still sleeping on the bed next to his.

He lay there a few minutes, enjoying the luxury of being able to ease into wakefulness. Finally, he arched his back in a stretch and felt something shift against him. He craned his neck trying to look behind him but saw nothing but blanket. He did, however, feel something draped over his side. He lifted his blanket and found a small hand dangling against his stomach. If he focused, he could swear he felt a head of curls snuggled between his shoulder blades.

He relaxed back into the bed with a content smile and focused on finding all the tell-tale evidences of his vampire snuggled up behind him. The weight on his side, the brush of legs against his, the soft feel of curls on his back. This was the first time he ever woke up with Bilbo still next to him and he reveled in it as his smile grew. He decided he could stay in bed a little longer.

All too soon, his nephews began to stir and he realized he was going to have to get out of bed. After his display last night, he was kind of surprised they hadn’t already started teasing him, but he didn’t need to give them anymore ammo.

He slipped out of the vampire’s limp hold, carefully tucking him back in, and threw himself together enough to go order some breakfast -brunch?- while his nephews got around.

He found the innkeeper at the bar and ordered meals for three. There had still been no sign of the
thief and Thorin thought back to what Fili had said his absence could mean. He almost overlooked the increased nervousness of the innkeeper. He was pale and jumpier than he was before and his hands shook noticeably.

“Is everything alright?” He asked the twitchy man.

The man stared at him, eyes wide and afraid, looking like he was deciding if he should tell or not. He must have finally decided for he started talking in hushed tones. “Well, I don’t wish to scare my patrons, but it would be best if you don’t go out at night.”

Thorin raised a brow at the repeat of the vampire’s warning, “Why is that?”

The innkeeper glanced around as if worked he might be overheard in the near empty room. “There’s a rumor of a monster in the streets. Only comes out at night. Five men have gone missing. No sign of them anywhere. No bodies or anything.”

Thorin’s eyes hardened. The vampire hadn’t said anything about people being targeted. “How long has this been happening?”

His low authoritative tone seemed to make the innkeeper even more nervous, but he still answered. “The first men went missing the night before last, or so I heard.”

Thorin’s eyes widened. Five men in two nights?! Did Bilbo know? If he did, how could he dismiss it so easily? Is this why he wanted Thorin and his nephews to stay in at night?

“I know you’re a hunter, but, if I were you, I’d finish whatever business I had here and get out of town.” The innkeeper said quietly before finally moving back to the kitchen to give their meal orders to the cook.

He stood in silence as he waited for their meals to be prepared, thinking about the new information and how it fit with what he already knew. Five men in two nights. Two nights. Thorin and his group had only been there for two nights. Gone without a trace. Vampires usually leave the bodies, but, if it was an intelligent one, one who knew and cared enough to cover his tracks. . . The killings had started the first night they had arrived.

Thorin’s mood got darker and darker. He didn’t like the picture this puzzle was starting to make. Bilbo wouldn’t do that. Bilbo wasn’t like that. He collected the tray with their meals and returned to their room.

His nephews gave him curious glances as he ate in brooding silence but otherwise gave him space. He wanted answers but he wasn’t going to be able to question the vampire again until tonight.

The day passed slowly. The boys tended to their gear and weapons and played cards to pass the time and Thorin brooded. All day. Making his nephews even more wary of him. Finally, after what felt like forever, the vampire stirred from underneath his blankets.

Thorin studied him as Bilbo went about his usual routine. It was hard to tell in the torchlight, but Thorin thought he see an improvement in the vampire’s complexion. And, was he imagining it or did his eyes look less tired, stronger.

Bilbo sent him a curious glance at the obvious scrutiny and Thorin walked over, intent on getting answers. “What’s going on?” He spoke lowly, lacking the warmth that was in his voice the night before.

Bilbo studied him, likely for the cause of the change. “We already talked about this.”
“And you failed to mention that people were going missing.”

Bilbo’s face immediately closed off and went blank. “It doesn’t concern you.”

“Forgive me if people dying does concern me! Especially if I can stop it!”

“You can’t stop it.” Bilbo replies flatly, eyes and face void of emotion.

“Why not!?” Because it’s you? Thorin wanted to ask but feared the answer.

“Because you are too weak.” Bilbo continued flatly.

That answer wasn’t much better and Thorin stepped back in shock, more effected by the dismissive tone than the words themselves.

“I need to go.” Bilbo stepped around him and promptly left before Thorin could recover.

Thorin stood there, his anger rising to cover the hurt. If the vampire wasn’t going to give him answers, he was going to find them himself. He stomped over to his bags and began angrily pulling on his gear.

“Uncle, what are you doing?” Kili interrupted.

“I know you’re angry, but you can’t go out there! You told Bilbo you wouldn’t!” Fili tried to reason.

“If he wanted me to stay put, then he should have given me a good reason too!”

The boys looked at each other before running to their own packs. “Then we’re coming too!”

“NO!” Thorin bellowed louder than necessary, flinching from his own volume. “You will stay!” He ordered before strapping on the last of his weapons and stomping out the door.

He stomped through the inn, only stopping once he was outside. He breathed deep, letting the frigid air clear his head. He needed answers, he needed to know. He just desperately hoped he was wrong.

He released the now heated air in a long exhale and wandered into the night.

He wondered the streets, for how long he wasn’t sure, an hour, maybe two. The moon was mostly full overhead and the sky was clear providing a dull light to navigate by. He found nothing unusual nor ran into anything dangerous, and every step he took cooled his temper.

Finally he stopped with a great sigh. This was ridiculous. He was being a fool. Bilbo had only ever gone out of his way to protect Thorin and his nephews. He had no real reason to suspect the vampire.

And now he was traipsing around doing the one thing the vampire had all but begged him not to do. He spun on his heel and started swiftly making his way back to the inn. Bilbo had said it was dangerous to go out, even the innkeeper had said so, and, here he was, stomping around like some scolded rebellious teen.

He berated himself on the way back. How could he have ever doubt Bilbo? He trusted Bilbo, had trusted him with his life, with his nephews lives! Bilbo wouldn’t lie to him. If he wanted Thorin to stay in the dark about whatever was going on here, then he must have a good reason.

The first thing he was going to do when he saw his vampire again was apologize for being an idiot, even beg for forgiveness if he had to, then he was going to kiss him into a curly haired puddle of melted vampire.
His mood was already lifting at the images of his vampire yielding under his touch when he turned out of an alley just in time to see a group of men disappear into an alley just two houses away from the inn.

The sound of a scuffle and a shout reached his ears and he was rushing forward and pulling out his sword. Dangerous or not, he couldn’t just ignore an attack going on right in front of him. He raced into the alley but instead of a fight he only found two figures. One was hunched over in a typical vampire feeding stance while the other hung limply in its grasp.

He rushed forward and pulled back his sword for a swing. He would lop the beast’s head off while it was distracted. He swung his sword in a powerful swing only barely registering the sting on his arm.

His sword stopped mid swing in the grip of a bare hand and the creature turned on him with a snarl. Coal black eyes, bloody fangs . . . and a familiar head of curly hair glared back at him. Almost instantly the aggressive snarling stopped, eyes fading back to green and fangs retracting.

“Thorin! What are you doing here?! I told you to stay inside!” A hint of a hiss still in his voice.

Thorin couldn’t answer. He stood frozen in shock, his gaze turning down to the human townsman still hanging limply in the vampire’s grip.

Bilbo followed his gaze, turning swiftly back to Thorin. “I can explain.”

“You lied to me.” It came out as barely a whisper.

“No! Thorin, please.” Bilbo pleaded, but Thorin’s eyes were already cold and hard.

“I trusted you, with my life, my nephews’ lives. And everything you have ever said was a LIE!” He picked up volume as he went.

Bilbo’s mouth snapped shut as Thorin continued his tirade.

“I listened to you! Followed you! Trusted you!” I loved you! He wanted to scream. “To what?! For you to bring us here to nowhere and kill us all!! I should have never trusted you!! I should have never let you come with us!!” He surged forward, his sword forgotten and grabbed the vampire by his collar. “How did I think I could ever care for such a vile creature!! I should have killed you and rid the world of your lying filth when I had the chance!!” He shoved Bilbo away as hard as he could.

Bilbo stumbled back from the force of it, nearly tripping over his recent meal. For a moment, hurt and devastation marred his face. In that moment, Thorin doubted. Had he missed something? Could he have been wrong? What if it was all just a misunderstanding? His resolve wavered and he almost reached out to apologize.

But the next moment the vampire’s expressions closed off into a mask of cold anger and Thorin’s resolve hardened.

“How dare you touch me you filthy, weak human!!” He hissed, surging forward and slamming Thorin into the wall so fast the hunter’s mind reeled as it tried to catch up. “You dare to accuse me, to blame me for your own foolish blindness when you are still alive by only my grace!!”

Thorin grunted, the cold, hard hand on his throat cutting off too much of his air to do anything else.

“How dare you threaten me, you pathetic, weak excuse of a hunter! You disgust me, you’re not even worth eating!!"
In a blink, Thorin was flying and landing into the snow covered floor of the alley. He coughed and rubbed at his neck as he climbed to his feet, his glare never leaving the vampire.

“Get out of my sight! Get out of this town!! If I ever see your face again, your life is mine!!” He snarled almost rabidly.

Thorin glared back with a snarl of his own before swiftly turning and stomping back towards the inn. He stormed out of the alley, not even turning to look back, missing the way the lone figure he left behind deflated as he left.

He thundered through the inn, slamming the door to their room open. If he was angry before he was furious now, his hurt and shame fanning the flames of his anger into a roaring inferno.

The boys jolted off the bed in surprised at his violent entrance. “Uncle! What happened?! What are you doing?!” Fili asked as Thorin began throwing his packs together.

“Grab your things! We’re leaving!”

“What?! Why?! What -?!”

“NOW!!” Thorin bellowed silencing Kili from finishing his questions.

The boys rushed to do as they were told. They had never seen their uncle so furious before. They hurried to get their things around, but Thorin was in no mood to wait and was stomping back out the door before they were ready, leaving them to scramble behind him.

They were still only barely put together as they followed their uncle out into the cold, Thorin already heading for the stable that kept their horses.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Thorin and his nephews have a little disagreement over the abandonment of their vampire. They finally get to meet the real monster of Cardume and find themselves in a tight spot. Enter an angry, possessive Bilbo in the nick of time.
They stumbled behind him, trying to manage their improperly packed gear and supplies.

“Uncle, what happened?” Fili asked again when he finally caught up.

“We’re leaving.” He growled out as a reply.

“Yes, I gathered that, but why?”

“Because I will not stay in this Mahal forsaken town one more minute!” Thorin barked back.

“What about Nori and Bilbo? Are they meeting us at the stables?” Fili continued to push.

“That filth will never leave this town if he knows what’s good for him!” He shouted out with a venom that shocked his nephews.

“What?” Fili faltered confused. “We have to at least wait for Bilbo!” Kili finally spoke up, obviously misunderstanding who his uncle was speaking of.

“That vile, lying *****” Thorin spit out the worst insult he could think of in their own tongue, “will not be joining us again!”

“What?” Kili faltered while Fili just stared in shock. “Why would you say that?”

Thorin finally stopped to turn on his nephews. “That piece of rotting filth has been toying with us this whole time!! If I see him again, I will kill him myself or die trying!” He turned around to continue but Kili rushed forward and grabbed him by his coat.

“Don’t call him that! Don’t you ever say that!” Kili shouted back.

Thorin shoved him away easily, making the teen stumble. “He has betrayed us! I will not suffer my own kin defending him!”

“How do you know he betrayed us?!” Fili interjected, always the voice of reason. Kili continued to glare at his uncle.

“I caught him red handed!”

“And then what?! Did he try to explain?! Did you let him explain?!?” Fili hollered back, their combined voices enough to knock piles of snow loose from nearby rooftops.

“No!”

“Why not?!”
“Because he’s a liar!!” Thorin bellowed, overpowering his nephews voices. He panted harshly, staring off with his nephews in the startlingly silence that followed. He felt a twinge in his chest and he covered it with more anger. He needed to be angry, it was better to be angry because he knew the hurt that lay beneath it was going to be crippling. He had loved Bilbo. His heart had called to him and now it felt like it was being ripped out with a dull meat fork.

His nephews stared silently back and Thorin picked his pack back up and turned to go. “Move!”

“I’m not leaving without him.” Surprisingly, it was Fili to make the declaration, though his brother’s unmoved stance clearly echoed the sentiment.

“You would choose that vampire filth over your own kin?!” The accused angrily.

The boys just glared back, refusing to move.

He looked between them for any sign that they would relent. “So, be it. Then stay and rot with your precious vampire.” He growled out lowly when he found none.

He turned to stomp away only to stop short. They were being approached by several village men. They must not have noticed them, too lost in their own bickering. The hunter’s glanced around, taking in the near dozen men converging on them from all sides.

“I apologize for the disturbance, gentlemen. We were just leaving. Step aside and we’ll leave in peace.” Thorin ground out evenly, the potential threat dousing the heat of his anger to a more manageable more level.

The men continued to step closer as they surrounded the hunters. Thorin stepped towards his boys defensively as they huddled back to back to cover each other.

“Oh, I’m afraid ya won’t be goin’ anywhere but with us.” The man closest to Thorin warned threateningly.

Thorin’s hand instinctively went to the hilt of his sword . . . which wasn’t there. He glanced down only just remembering he had left it back in the alley. He cursed under his breath and took another step back. There were maybe a dozen of them. No real weapons in sight. The hunter’s could easily take a bunch of simple villagers, and it was for that very reason that they would not fight them.

They weren’t that type of hunters, the lawless, self-important type. They worked for the people, for their safety, and, as such, they never lifted their weapons against other humans without good cause.

“And to where might that be?” Thorin asked, forcing his arms and shoulders to relax despite their reflex to fight back.

“To the Master. He wishes to meet you.” The man answered ominously as he continued to step closer. “Hand over your weapons.”

“Uncle?” Fili whispered uncertainly.

Thorin eyed the man. Something felt off, but he wouldn’t fight with the village people. “Do as he says,” Certainly this was something that could be dealt with without bloodshed. They just needed to plead their case to this ‘Master.’

The hunters relinquished their weapons reluctantly. When the men were satisfied they began to lead them back through the town, keeping them carefully surrounded.
“Something’s off with their eyes.” Kili whispered as they walked. Thorin could only nod that he had heard.

A lone figure watched from the rooftops unnoticed as the hunters were led to the northern most part of town where it was built into the mountain in some places. They were marched into a large cavern opening with an old ‘Hot Springs’ sign hanging lopsided on the side of the entrance.

Thorin’s brows furrowed when he remembered the innkeeper's words. The caverns weren’t supposed to be safe. He paused at the entrance only to be shoved forward with more force he would have expected from the skinny man following behind. He glared back at him but continued to walk.

He stayed close to his nephews who he could tell were becoming more and more concerned by the the direction things were going in. They passed through caverns, some with steaming pools of abandoned water, others with benches and tables and all manner of things that suggested there was once a thriving business.

Finally they were led to a final large cavern, nothing particularly special stuck out about it save for the stone throne that rested on a raised area at the far end. They were stopped before the throne, maybe a mere thirty feet away, and Thorin’s blood ran cold.

A tall lithe figure stared down at them, covered in black robes and decidedly unimpressed, eyes black as coal and fangs jutting from his irritated frown. Thorin swallowed thickly. They had no weapons and, unbelievable as it was, these humans seem to be working for the vampire. This was certainly not what he expected.

“So these are the hunters.” The vampire stared down at them, only a hint of irritation in his tone.

“Yes, Master. We caught them trying to leave town.” The man who had addressed Thorin answered.

“Well, we can’t have that can we. Not after all the damage they caused.”

Thorin’s mind spun. What damage? They had barely done anything since they had arrived and they certainly hadn’t done any hunting. “I don’t know what your talking about. We haven’t done anything.” This vampire seemed intelligent, perhaps he could be reasoned with. At the very least, Thorin needed to stall until he could make a plan.

“Don’t play innocent with me!” The vampire hissed. “I have lost ten of my ghouls in just three nights, the same amount of nights that you have been here, and you expect me to believe the only hunter party residing in this town isn’t responsible?!”

“Ghouls?” Thorin was beginning to get a terrible sinking feeling in his stomach.

“Yes! My ghouls!” The vampire hissed again waving a hand in front of him to gesture to to all of the village men present. “I have spent years building my army, my presence here in this town. I’m not like other impatient retches, I know full well that the people will come to me, if only I provide them with something they want.” The vampire smugly held up a small vial of inky black liquid.

“That’s right, little hunter. A vial like this could easily bring a man back from the brink of death, but dying humans are in rather short supply and I’m not that patient. Now, discontent ones, I have found, are a copper a dozen. And just a drop of this, supplied from my very own veins, is enough to bring any unhappy man bliss, two drops to ecstasy, three to complete euphoria. Of course, the more one uses it, the more one wants it. And after while, one might become, say, consumed by it, by me in a sense, losing their self-will. Of course they gain something much better. They gain strength and
speed and prolonged life. Though their appearance does tend to change over time,” he gestured to a pale, black eyed, almost skeletal, creature standing off to the side of his throne. “But the younger ones are able to pass as regular humans easily enough. And so they go out and find more unhappy humans. And I offer them relief . . Sweet release.” He almost purred at the end.

Thorin fought down the bile in the back of his throat. It felt like there was a hole in his stomach and his heart was tumbling through it. He messed up. He messed up big time! He cursed his wild temper not for the first time, and likely not for the last. Why couldn’t he have just listened?! Heard Bilbo out?! It was just like the thief had said. He hurt Bilbo. He knew he had. Despite the vampire’s quick recovery he had seen the heartbreak in his eyes. He should have known then!

“And you have been undoing my hard work!” The vampire continued, unaware and unconcerned by the hunter’s internal self-berating. “So, you will have to compensate. You will make fine ghouls at any rate. The young ones especially so. I suppose that will have to do.”

Thorin snapped out of his internal distractions as he and his nephews were forced to their knees. They struggled, but the iron like grips of the ghouls were like vices. Their hands were pulled and tied behind them and each one had a ghoul guarding them to keep them from running.

Thorin growled as the vampire handed off the vial to one of his servants. He glanced over to check on his nephews. Fili looked pale, but Kili glared defiantly. “Bilbo will come.” He whispered with confidence. “He won’t let them get away with this.”

Thorin wanted to correct him, tell him that he had ruined any chance of the vampire coming to their aid. But, he hoped he would come, if only for his nephews’ sake. Fili’s own face hardened in resolve at the words. And Thorin once again found himself envying his nephews’ connection with the vampire.

The man, or ghoul rather, with the vial stepped closer, easing the cork off in preparation. He stepped up to the oldest hunter first and Thorin glared up at him defiantly. His guard grabbed his head and began to force his mouth open. He could here his nephews struggling and calling for him as he fought against the impossible strength.

“Excuse me.”

Almost comically, every head swiveled to the source of the voice.

“I hate to interrupt, it’s really quite rude of me, but I’m going to have to ask you to, well, stop . . Please.” Bilbo stood just off to the side, several feet closer to the throne then they were and just there, like he had been there the whole time.

Fili and Kili grinned with glee but Thorin could only stare and hope the vampire would give him the chance to apologize when all this was over.

The tall vampire glared down at their vampire. “Who are you and why should I?” He said with a slightly irritated and uninterested tone.

“Oh, how rude of me, Bilbo Baggins at your service.” He bowed. “And you should stop because those are my hunters your trying to corrupt.” He smiled politely even as his tone dripped possessiveness.

The hunter’s quietly watched the exchange, the teens already smirking triumphantly. Thorin couldn’t seem to take his eyes of his vampire. It seems he still claimed them at any rate.

The tall vampire raised a brow at the smaller. “And are you supposed to be a vampire? Your power
level is laughably weak. I’m not even sure you deserve to call yourself as such.”

Bilbo simply shrugged, his polite smile never dimming though it clearly didn’t reach his eyes.

“Well, someone of your . . insignificance may not know who I am but I -“

“I know who you are.” Bilbo interrupted earning a glare from the other vampire. “You are ‘The Blood Letter,’ ‘The Ghoul Maker.’” He supplied, disinterest clear in his tone.

“And yet you dare speak to me in such a way.” The tall vampire warned lowly.

Bilbo shrugged again. “Technically, you are on my lands, so I am the superior in rank.”

“Your lands?!” The tall vampire sneered. “Wait.” He stepped closer as if to get a better look at the small vampire. “I know you.” He sneered venomously. “You’re The Halfling!” He pointed his finger quite rudely and laughed as if it was a great joke.

Bilbo’s polite smile faltered to barely an upturn of his lips, but his eyes were hard with cold anger.

“Tell me, oh great lord of Eriador, what is your claim on these hunters?!” The Blood Letter asked far to gleefully.

“The big one.” Bilbo gestured with a wave of his hand. “He’s my blood siren. He’s mine by right.”

The Ghoul Maker scoffed. “If he is your blood siren, why haven’t you eaten him yet?”

“I like my meals properly aged. I was planning to let him ripen for a few more years.” He said with a shrug.

The Blood Letter leveled him with an unimpressed stare. “You are either a liar or even more pathetic than I thought.” They stared each other down for a few moments. “Fine! Take your hunter and get out of my town.” He waved them away as he moved back to his throne. The ghouls immediately began to loosen the older hunter, but made no move to do the same for the boys.

Before Thorin could begin to protest Bilbo continued. “I want all of them. The boys too.”

The Ghoul Maker turned around slowly with a deadly glare. “All of them?” He asked low and threateningly.

“Yes.” Bilbo seemed unconcerned. “I’m afraid I must insist.”

The tall vampire’s eyes gleamed with dangerous anger. “How dare you make demands of me!” He hissed lowly. “I humored you with your pathetic hunter for your sire’s sake!”

Bilbo’s shoulders went tight with tension, his smile completely gone now.

“And you, The Halfling, dare to make demands of me! You are pathetic! You are nothing without your sire! Even your lands were granted to you by him! I granted you your request because of him but now you will get nothing!! If I see you in my town again, I will kill you and your sire will thank me for ridding him of your uselessness!!” The tall vampire hissed angrily.

Bilbo’s head had lowered during the vampire’s verbal lashing and the hunters began to fear that this was indeed an opponent too powerful for their vampire. That is, until a quiet chuckle reached their ears.

Bilbo lifted his head and he was smiling, hands clasped behind his back. Not the charming smile that
the hunter’s were used to or the mirthful one that they had seen but rarely. No, this one was sharp and dangerous, predatory, and it made a chill run down Thorin’s spine at the sheer hostility in it.

“Thank you!” He chuckled. “For a moment there, I was a little concerned you were gonna cooperate and just hand them over.” He laughed darkly.

The tall vampire stared, as if reassessing the small vampire after the strange show of hostility.

“That would have been most disappointing.” His laughing had stopped, but his smile only grew more threatening. “You see, I’m in a terrible mood.” His smile fell into a scowl. “And I’ve just been itching to kill something. But it would have been terribly rude to do so if you were going to be accommodating. And far be it from me to be rude.”

“You think you can kill me?! The Halfling killing The Blood Letter?! That is a good joke!” The tall vampire scoffed. “Kill him.” He waved to a group of his minions.

They converged on the vampire, wasting no time and fully intent on ripping him to pieces. Thorin’s heart leaped to his throat as he tried to jump up to help his vampire, but was still being restrained by his ghoulish guard.

There was a high pitched whistling in the air and the ghouls that had moved to attack the small vampire fell to the ground in a pile of bloody pieces. Bilbo stood there, his predatory smile back on his lips, leaning on a sword like it was some walking stick. Thorin’s sword! The one he had left behind after their fight! He had never been so glad to forget it.

The tall vampire stared shaken by the display of power he clearly wasn’t expecting before he managed to shake himself from the stupor. Even a weak vampire could take out a few ghouls with a proper weapon. He glared down at the little vampire, his anger seething.

“You know what I don’t understand?” Bilbo began as he casually stepped over the piles of chopped up corpses, swinging the sword like a cane beside him, the blood slipping off and splattering around the cave. “Is why vampires like you, who know my status, know my sire, still manage to delude themselves into believing that I’m weak.”

“You are weak! You are nothing more than a plaything!”

“It makes me wonder if youngsters like you even understand how our kind work.” Bilbo continued as if the other hadn’t even spoken, slowly making his way closer. “I mean, what are you? Five, six hundred maybe? Twelfth, maybe eleventh generation? I have to say, you haven’t really don’t much with yourself.”

“Kill him!” The Blood Letter hissed and suddenly every ghoul in sight was running towards Bilbo. He stopped as they charged him and, just as the first was about to reach him, a surge of power shot out from him like thunder, knocking every ghoul to the ground in convulsions.

Bilbo walked through the convulsing bodies, kicking them out of his way or slicing them up for good measure as he went. “Really. You’d think you’d have learned after the first ten.”

The Ghoul Maker’s eyes went wide with fury. “It was you!” He pointed rudely. “You were killing my ghouls, not these hunters!”

Bilbo just shrugged. “They were snooping around. Getting to close to what’s mine!” He hissed back.

“And here I was wondering if you were even a real vampire not that long ago. But don’t get cocky just cause you killed a few ghouls.” The taller vampire hissed as he slipped off his outer robes. “It
seems it will be my pleasure to kill you and I’m gonna start by taking you apart piece by piece.”

Bilbo’s grin only widened, showing off deadly fangs. He chuckled softly. “Well it’s about bloody time. I was starting to get bored.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Bilbo goes head-to-head in a rather lopsided battle with the Ghoul Maker, intent on teaching him a lesson. The hunters learn a disturbing new fact about their vampire.

Since I have several sneak peeks ready, I figured I'd give you all the chance to pick the one that sounds most interesting to you for March. Here's what I've got for you:

- The King’s Harem (Concubine!Bilbo; Explicit)
- Wild Wings (wing!verse; Lovebird!Bilbo; Raven!Thorin)
- One of a King (Single Parent!Bilbo; Smitten!Thorin)
- Lost in Shadows (Devouring Ring!Verse)
- The Crime Lord and the Warden (Modern!AU; from the prompt)
- The Sea is My Home (Merpeople!AU; Modern!AU; Sequel to ‘The Sea Calls to Me’; Explicit)
- Love at my Fingertips (Telepahic!Thorin; inspired by Yubisaki no Koi)

'Explicit' refers to the first chapter, not the story in general. Figured you should know what you're asking for. :)

If no one has a preference, I'll just pick one randomly. Otherwise, I will go with whichever one gets the most votes. :)
Lessons

Chapter Notes

Thank you to every one who voted for the next sneak peak! Your comments and support are wonderful! I don't know what I'd do without you! <3

If you didn't get what you voted for this week, don't worry. They will all get posted eventually. :)

March's Sneak Peek: Wild Wings
Thorin wakes up wounded and confused in the home of a lovebird, a race so reclusive little is known about them. Stuck with his primitive caretaker until he recovers or is found, he struggles to overcome language barriers and cultural differences to learn about his host. Unwittingly, he finds himself growing . . attached to the little lovebird. But he's a king and he will have to return to his kingdom and Bilbo has never left his people's forest.

Bilbo/Thorin; Lovebird!Bilbo; Raven!Thorin; Cultural Differences

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Blood Letter stepped down of the platform where his throne sat and they began to almost casually circle each other. Bilbo eyed the other with a look of bored, disinterest while The Ghoul Maker glared at the smaller vampire.

“You must feel quite confident wielding a hunter's sword. It’s pathetic. You’ve no pride as a vampire.” The tall one goaded.

“And what exactly do you have to be proud of, oh great one?” Bilbo asked sarcastically. “Those weak little toys you like to make? Or maybe your great skill in combat that has you so concerned about a little hunter’s sword. Personally, I just don’t like getting my hands dirty. You can be proud as you want, but when your covered in filth, you’re still filthy.”

The Blood Letter hissed at the taunt as they continued to circle each other.

“But, you’re right. I don’t want to kill you too quickly. So it would probably be best to put this aside.” Bilbo pushed on the hilt of the sword with his open palm and it sunk into the rock with a metallic whine. “Happy now?” He said letting it go.

Thorin flinched. That couldn’t be good for his sword.

The tall vampire surged forward in a blur with a powerful swing of his claws only to slice through empty space.

“You're gonna have to do better than that.” Bilbo chuckled as he walked around right behind the other vampire.

The Blood Letter swirled with another swing and missed again. Bilbo now farther away than he had been.
“I’ll admit your speed is impressive, but is that all you can do? Dodge and run away all you like it only shows my superiority.”

Bilbo puckered his lips in though. “You said you humored me, yes? I suppose it’s only fair that I do the same.”

The next swing that came at him, Bilbo didn’t dodge. He parried it with a precisely timed counterattack. The Blood Letter didn’t so much as pause, throwing swing after swing now that Bilbo was within reach and every time Bilbo blocked or rebutted it perfectly.

The hunter’s stared, watching the violent dance of the two vampires, their size difference almost as comical as their apparent power difference. Bilbo fought effortlessly, he almost looked bored, while The Ghoul Maker seemed to be getting angrier and angrier by the second.

They were startled out of their spectating when the bonds around their wrists were suddenly cut loose. “Come on. Best not get in the way.” Nori whispered and started tugging them closer to the side of the cavern.

Bilbo parried another attack from the increasingly vicious larger vampire and was instantly ambushed from the side. He seemingly vanished at the intrusion only to re-materialize behind the interrupting ghoul. It was an ‘older’ one, skin pale and taunt over bones, eyes black and empty, baring claws and teeth like an animal.

Bilbo’s hand swung up and swiftly lopped its head right off. The body collapsed as the head rolled away. “No who has no pride? Ambushing me with your little pets? Really? Can’t deal with me yourself?”

“As I said, your speed is troublesome. But maybe this will slow you down.” The Blood Letter reached out and yanked Thorin’s sword from the stone floor, turning it on his opponent.

Bilbo just stood there looking amused as the vampire’s hand began to smoke and sizzle like meat on a grill.

The taller vampire shrieked and flung the weapon down as his hand continued to burn. “What did you do?!?” He snarled.

“Me?! It’s a silver handle. I thought that was obvious. You must be more of an idiot than I thought.”

“You were handling it just fine!!” The Blood Letter accused.

Bilbo shrugged, holding up the hand he had used to hold the sword palm up. The skin was red and aggravated, but there were no burns. “I’m not allergic like others, just a bit . . . intolerant.”

“You’re not a vampire. You’re a freak! You can’t just become immune to the pure elements! And no one with as little power as you should be giving me this much trouble!”

Bilbo raised a brow at taller vampire. “You only think I have no power because you can’t feel it. I’m not like you, but I guess, if my power was as laughable as yours, I’d want to flaunt as much as I can to make people think I was tough!” Bilbo hissed back. “You want to feel my power? Then I’ll give you a taste.”

Suddenly a cold, weight settled over the cavern, spreading like darkness that threatened to snuff out torches set into the walls. The fires flickered as if under stress and the hunter’s found their knees threatening to buckle under the cold dread the dark heaviness inspired.
They gave in and knelt, huddling on the floor. For all that they were feeling it, Thorin had a feeling the vampire was getting the brunt of the force.

Bilbo towered over his opponent who had slunk to the floor, overwhelmed by the waves of hostility and power washing over him. His eyes cold and dark without a speck of mercy.

“You’re a monster!”

“I’m the Lord of Eriador.” Bilbo sneered back. Just as suddenly as it had arrived, the weight was gone, as if the flow of power had simply been cut off. “But power is nothing if one doesn’t know how to wield it. And I find I can manage just fine on a small allowance.”

The Blood Letter jumped to his feet, eyes wide with fear now as well as anger. He jumped at Bilbo suddenly, recklessly, at the same time two more ghouls ambushed him from other sides.

The hunter’s weren’t quite sure what happened next. There was a crash like thunder and a high pitched whistle when Thorin’s sword suddenly skewered two more ghouls to the cavern wall only inches away from where the hunter’s sat. A look around showed another ghoul, likely permanently embedded into the back cavern wall and the other lying lifeless at their vampire’s feet.

But the Blood Letter was gone and Thorin started to wonder if he had given up and ran away. Another boom sounded behind them, shaking the cavern. They spun around just in time to see Bilbo picking the taller vampire up out of a crater in the floor and flinging him back towards the throne.

The Blood Letter slammed into the throne, knocking the back clean off with the force of his impact. Bilbo skulked back towards him, looking more feral then the hunters had ever seen him. His face contorted in a vicious snarl, hunched over in a predatory prowl, claws and teeth bared, and his eyes coal black with a strange light glowing deep in the center.

The Blood Letter pulled himself up shakily, his flesh cracking from the recent impacts. “I-I concede!” He announced acting as if he had any dignity left to save. “T-take your hunter’s and go!”

Bilbo’s snarl turned into a deadly grin. “No.” He jumped at the taller vampire, grabbing him and flinging him once more off the platform.

He landed face down not more than a dozen feet away from the hunters. Before he could push himself up, Bilbo’s foot landed on his back shoving him hard into the floor.

“As your elder, I feel it is my responsibility to teach you some important life lessons.” Bilbo hissed, his snarl replaced with an angry scowl. “Always know your opponent.” He grabbed the the vampire’s arms, pulling them up with his foot still in the vampire’s back. “Never mess with another vampire’s property!” He hissed and tugged. There was a loud cracking as he snapped the taller vampire’s arms clean off.

The Blood Letter whimpered, muttering pathetically for mercy.

Bilbo threw the arms away irreverently. He grabbed the vampire by his hair and pulled him up until he was kneeling. Bilbo hunched down over the tall vampire, reaching out with his other hand over his shoulder to point at the hunters.

“Never. Touch. What’s. Mine!” Bilbo snarled low and dangerously. “Too bad your fate was sealed the moment you had them brought here. You won’t have the time to learn from your lessons.” He continued darkly. “But don’t worry. I’ll put what little power you have to good use.”

Bilbo bared his fangs in a feral snarl as he jerked the vampire’s head back and sunk his teeth deep
into his neck, much to everyone’s confusion.

The Ghoul Maker gasped at the invasion, whimpering out a moan as the smaller vampire’s teeth tightened on his neck. “What—what are you doing to me?”

The hunters stared in morbid fascination as the light in Bilbo’s eyes swirled and grew until there was no more dark in his eyes, only light.

The Blood Letter convulsed and, with a final long shriek, he disintegrated into a pile of ash.

Bilbo’s teeth snapped shut loudly, no more vampire holding them apart. He crouched and rocked himself still snarling and feral as the light gradually left his eyes, returning them to the black eyes typical of his kind.

The hunters stayed frozen in shock at what had just happened. They had never heard of a vampire that hunted and fed upon other vampires. And Thorin wasn’t entirely sure it was safe to move yet, considering their fight and the vampire’s state.

Bilbo dropped his head in his hands as he rocked, hissing at nothing in particular.

“Bilbo?” Of course Kili was the first to speak up.

He slowly looked up at the teen, eyes still dark but face having relaxed out of a snarl. “Nori!” He barked. “Get them out. I’ll deal with this mess.” He stood up and walked away not sparing the hunters another glance.

“Come on. Ya heard him.” He tugged them up, if a bit harder than necessary on Thorin. “He’s gonna bring this room down. We need ta be out.” Nori pushed and shoved them towards the exit.

Thorin glanced over his shoulder as they left but couldn’t locate the vampire. Nori continued to push them on until they were out of the caverns completely. Almost as soon as they stepped clear of the cave, a rumbling sounded from deep inside. The mountain shook as the vampire caved in the large cavern.

Thorin and his nephews stood and waited until a small figure casually emerged from the dark depths.

Bilbo glared up at the sky. Sunrise was only a couple hours away. “Get your things and go back to the inn. I just need a couple more days to finish my ore collecting.” He ordered with a sigh.

“Wait!” Kili grabbed the arm of his coat as if he was going to disappear. “Where are you going? The sun will be up soon. Come back to the inn with us.”

Bilbo gently pried the teen off. “I think I’ll be passing my day somewhere else. There are plenty of caves around here after all.”

Thorin winced both at the response and the glares his nephews were leveling him with. Well, the sooner he apologized the better. “Bilbo—"

“I told you if I saw your face again your life was mine. As I just snatched it from the Blood Letter, it is even more so. So, you will do as I say.” Bilbo warned lowly, startling Thorin. “You are going to get your things and go back to that inn and you will not leave until I say so.” He glared at the hunter.

Thorin nodded. “I was only going to say—“
“Don’t! I’m not interested in hearing anything you have to say right now!” Bilbo snapped.

Thorin flinched at the venom in the vampire’s voice but knew it was well deserved. He lowered his head in consent. He would have to wait for Bilbo to calm down before he tried again.

“Bilbo!” Kili grabbed for the vampire again, missing when Bilbo dodged his grasp. “I-I know you’re mad at Uncle and you have every right to be, but that doesn’t mean you have to go sleep in a cave! Come with us! You can stay in our bed when the sun comes up.” He nearly pleaded, face falling at Bilbo’s apparent rejection. Oh, he was never going to forgive his uncle for this!

Bilbo exhaled a deep sigh. “I’m not going to sleep, Kili. I will probably keep working on the ore until I’m done. It’s underground so the sun won’t bother me. I’m not rejecting your company. The Blood Letter was a bigger meal than I’ve had in a while, it will take time for the power to settle. Until it does, I might be a bit . . . off. It’s safer for you if I’m not around until his power fully integrates into my own.”

“So, vampires can eat other vampires?” Fili interest was piqued.

Bilbo chuckled tightly. “Ever the curious one aren’t you. The short answer is yes and no, but you’ll have to ask me some other time if you want details. Now, go. Try to get some rest. With the rising sun comes change.” Without waiting for an answer, he vanished.

The boys turned to go locate the packs they had abandoned when they were arrested, brushing by their uncle roughly with dark glares.

Thorin sighed. He had no one to blame but himself. His gaze met Nori’s who was waiting for him to follow after his nephews. The thief’s stance and glare radiated ‘told ya so’ and Thorin could only glare weakly back. He turned to follow his nephews and Nori ambled along behind him.

They found their things without any problems and made it back to the inn. The sun was almost up now and none of them seemed to feel like sleeping. Thorin sat on his bed and brooded while everyone else in the room seemed to be trying to ignite him into flames by the force of their glares alone.

This wouldn’t have happened if he had simply explained what was going on.” He eventually grumbled quietly.

“If ‘e had told ya what was goin’ on, ya would have tried to interfere and/or confront The Blood Letter because of yer, oh so, nobleness!” Nori snapped back.

“And why weren’t we! He was obviously no match for Bilbo! Why didn’t he just deal with the filth in the first place?!”

“Just because ya think they’re nothing but monsters, don’t mean they have no order within themselves! There’s an order of conduct they hold to! Breaking it can have serious consequences! Just cause ya think ya’ve got ‘im domesticated don’t mean ‘e ain’t a vampire no more! He’s tryin’ to keep ‘is head low!”

“Why?! With his power what difference does it make?!”

“Bilbo may be one of the most powerful, but ‘e ain’t the most powerful! He still has a sire! Have ya ever considered what Bilbo’s risking just bein’ with yer happy little hunting group?! The Blood Letter may have been weak compared to Bilbo, but ‘e was no small fry! He was two generations at most from being a low gen! He had a name, a reputation! He had connections! Do you have any idea what would happen if Bilbo’s sire found out ‘e was traipsing around with a bunch of hunters?!” That
'e might care about them?! Ya’d be dead! And Bilbo would likely be dragged back to sit as ‘is feet like a dog!"

Thorin’s heart dropped at the image. His beautiful, strong, fussy vampire cowering at the feet of another like a scolded dog. His vampire, his Bilbo should never be reduced to that! His anger reignited with full force at this ‘sire.’

“Why would he do that?” Fili asked, he and his brother equally distressed by the statement.

“Cause that’s the twisted kind of filth ‘e is.” Nori snarled, at the unnamed entity.

“Who is his sire?” Thorin’s voice was low and dark.

“I ain’t tellin’ ya that. It’s none o’ yer business.”

“Tell me so I can kill him.” Thorin growled.

Nori laughed, it coming out more of a scoffing sound. “Yeah, right. You and all yer hunter friends combined couldn’t have taken out the Blood Letter without major losses. And that’s assuming ya were all first rate hunters and actually managed to win at all. Bilbo could kill the lot o’ ya and ya wouldn’t even know it happened till ya woke up on the other side. Ya really think ya have a chance against someone stronger than him?”

Thorin grit his teeth at the uncomfortable truth. “I still want to know.”

“Well, I ain’t tellin’ ya. That’s Bilbo’s secret. Ya can ask him, but I doubt he’d tell ya even if ya hadn’t just royal screwed up with ‘im.”


“It’s only a secret to you. Every vampire who knows who ‘e is, knows who ‘is sire is.”

“Then why wouldn’t he tell us?” Fili asked, concerned that maybe the vampire didn’t trust them after all.

“Because ‘e hates ‘is sire. And fears ‘im just as much. ‘E hates even talking about ‘im.”

“Why?” Kili asked softly after a pause.

Nori shook his head. “I don’t know the details of Bilbo’s story, but I know the Laws of Siring. It’s a dark decree embedded in the magic of the vampire curse.” He continued at their curious looks. “When a vampire sires another, the new vampire is bound to the one who sired it. Always weaker because o’ the gen gap, they’re bound to absolute obedience.” He turned to Kili, “‘e told ya once, there’s only one thing a vampire has to do, has no choice but to do. It’s to obey its sire. The only freedom Bilbo has was granted by ‘is sire and it can be stripped away just as easily.” Nori ended softly.

Thorin felt as stricken as his nephews looked. Their vampire had always been under the pressure of his sire. A twisted vampire who could make him do anything. He ran a hand down his face. Thorin wasn’t quite sure how yet, but some of their previous conversations with the vampire were starting to make more sense.

“Is there no way to free him?” Thorin asked softly.

“There are only three ways for a vampire to be freed from its sire’s hold: the sire lets ‘em go, the sire
dies, or the vampire becomes strong enough to overpower their sire and break the bond.” Nori counted out. “The first two ain’t likely to happen. And even if Bilbo managed to gain enough power, ’e might not have it in ’im to outright rebel. Too much trauma.”

“I though you said you didn’t know his past?” Thorin challenged.

“I don’t. But I know trauma when I see it. Plus, I know what kind of sick, bastard ’is sire is.”

“Is there nothing we can do for him?”

“Ya can keep yer head low and stop messing with ’im! Now we’re all gonna have to deal with ’is foul temper!” Nori snapped.

“I . . . acted rashly.”

“I don’t want ta hear it and neither does he. Yer better off just forgetting whatever ya thought ya had with ’im.”

Thorin’s blood ran cold. Could he have really messed up what they had for good? Would Bilbo not even hear him out? Would he forgive him? Give him another chance? Oh, but Bilbo as only giving him a chance in the first place. Maybe it really was over then. Even if Bilbo got past it, it didn’t mean he would give Thorin another chance.

He stumbled back at the realization, hitting his bed just in time as his knees buckled under him. The pain was back, only worse. Bilbo had never betrayed him, it was all in his own head. And now he had ruined his one chance of proving himself to the vampire. Bilbo as right, Nori was right. He had hurt Bilbo in a terrible way, and now he had lost him.

His chest ached at the thought, like it was trying to cave in in order to fill a gaping hole that had been ripped out of his chest. His breaths became ragged as he struggled to breathe under the pressure. He had lost many in his family, but he had never felt this . . . broken before.

He knew he was still being watched, so he hid his pain the best that he could. He'd be getting no sympathy anyway. He didn’t deserve it, this was his own doing. He crawled into bed to cover his silent suffering.

He only lay there for a matter of minutes before he knew what he had to do. He would beg and grovel as much as he had to, but he needed Bilbo to know how sorry he was, how much he needed him! He wouldn’t stop begging for another chance. And he would start as soon as the vampire gave him the chance.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: The town's reaction to the Blood Letter's death isn't at all what the hunters had expected. Bilbo steps in to offer the town's people a solution.
I should write out an outline for my story before I start writing it someday just so I can look back on it and get a good laugh. XD

So, I had originally planned to turn this into a 2 or 3 part series with major milestones set as the cutoffs, but recently my story line has . . taken some adjustments. So, I think I'm just going to push through it till the end.

I do, however, have a modern-set sequel planned (that I am super excited about). It will NOT be a reincarnation theme, but I can't say anymore than that because of ~spoilers~.

:3

I am also considering a short prequel focusing on Bilbo's backstory.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They slept through the day, only emerging in the evening to fetch something to eat before returning to their room for the night. With nowhere to be and nothing to do, they let themselves rest and recover while they waited for the vampire to come back. Even Nori spent most of the time passed out on his bed. He likely hadn’t slept much since they had arrived at the town.

There was no sign of Bilbo and he never checked up on them. Thorin might have thought the vampire had ran off without them if he hadn’t known how possessive he was of the hunters.

As the second evening began to wind down, the town seemed to bustle to life as quite a racket could be heard from both outside and downstairs in the common room. The noise continued to increase until it sounded like an angry mob was invading the inn.

The hunters exchanged glances and strapped on their weapons. They weren’t going to be caught off guard again. They quietly made their way through the hall and down the stairs, straining their ears to figure out what all the ruckus was about.

“We know they’re here! What room are they in?!”

“We won’t put up with your stalling any longer! Tell us what room they’re in or we’ll bust down every door!”

“You will not disturb my guests! If they’re guilty of what ya say they are, then what do ya hope to accomplish by confronting them this way?!” The innkeeper boomed over the other angry voices.

The racket continued, men and women shouting over each other asking about the strangers who had come to town.

“What’s going on?” Thorin rumbled. He and his nephews stood at the bottom of the stairs, hands resting on their weapons non-threatening but ready.

The mob turned on them as one, pausing a moment in silence, before converging on the hunters and bombarding them with questions.
“Was it you?! Did you kill the Master?!”

“My son! My son is missing! Did you kill him too?!”

“And my husband?!”

“Are the caves safe again?!”

“What are we supposed to do now?!”

“Who will protect us now?!”

They continued to shout out over each other and every muscle in Thorin’s body tensed as he fought his instinct to lash out against the angry mob. He could scarcely believe it, but they almost seemed angry that the vampire was dead.

“Say something! Did you kill the Master or not?!?” One of the men in front shouted above the others.

“No. I did.” It was spoken softly, yet it cut through the cacophony like a sharpened blade through flesh.

Everyone’s attention was instantly drawn to the small figure standing just inside the inn door. The crowd parted for him as he casually walked into the common room.

“And who are you? What are you?” The same man questioned with a suspicious eye.

“I am the one who killed this town’s master. And if you lay a finger on my hunters, I’ll kill you next.” Bilbo’s voice lowered aggressively in warning and his eyes pooled with black before fading back into green.

The crowd pushed farther away from him at the demonstration, giving him a wider berth.

“You’re a vampire? You killed our master. Why? Are you going to be our master now?” Another man spoke up this time.

Bilbo scoffed. “I killed him because he touched something of mine.” He glanced at the hunters purposefully. “And, Technically, this town is already mine, since it’s in my territory, though it is on the border. And, no, I have no interest in ruling over you.”

The people began to murmur among themselves. The hunters watched in fascination as the people seemed to be unfazed by the vampire in their midst. Bilbo merely stood and waited.

“What will we do now? The master protected us from the vampires in the mountains. Without him they will all come down to feast on us!”

Bilbo shrugged unaffected. “I fail to see how that concerns me.”

“You said we’re in your territory! Help us!”

“For what? I don’t give charity for humans.”

“What do you want? A portion of the mines?”

“A monument?”

“A sacrifice?! A young virgin?!”
Bilbo’s eyes locked with Thorin’s, hard and with a brow only slightly raised. He didn’t say anything, but Thorin heard his message loud and clear. ‘Look at these humans. So quick to sacrifice others for their own safety. So willing to offer the lives of the innocent.’

“I don’t need your human sacrifices.” He shot down as the mob had seemed to favor the option. He rubbed his fingers over his lips in thought. “If you swear fealty to me I will count all of the people of this town as my possessions, not just individuals, but whole bloodlines. From this day on you and your descendants will be mine to do with as I see fit. I will put a mark on you, designating you as belonging to me, and it will pass to every generation. You will serve me, and I will protect you.” He held a hand out and flicked it, a scroll manifesting and unrolling from his hand. “The contract will be binding until my death or the end of your bloodline. You will sign in your own blood.” He walked over and pinned the contract to the unused community board, the people quickly moving out of his way.

“That is what I offer you. Take it or leave it. Anyone who does not sign is not granted my protection.” He walked back towards his hunters.

“What will you do with us?” A woman asked from the crowd.

“Make you mine for me, move for me, kill for me, die for me. Does it matter? You are asking me to save your lives and thus the lives of your future generations, therefore your lives and theirs will be mine to do with as I please.” He shrugged. “But the choice is yours. Die now like prey or live until I no longer have a use for you. After all, if I wanted to kill you, you’d all be dead.” He ended darkly. “You have until morning to sign it.”

The people began murmurings again as he walked over to his hunters. Just as he reached them, a woman shuffled up to him. She bowed respectfully. “My lord, my son and husband were among those who worked for the master. Are they . . gone?” She asked softly.

Thorin noticed the vampires eyes soften. “They were gone the moment they fell to the Blood Letter’s seductions. But, yes, I killed what was left of them.” He offered no apologies.

She bowed her head in morning. “Thank you. They were not themselves. Thank you, my lord.” She answered softly before disappearing back into the crowd.

Thorin looked up at Thorin who was standing between him and the stairs.

“Bilbo-“

“Go get something to eat. We’ll be leaving in the morning.” He reached out and effortlessly tugged Thorin aside by his belt so he could pass. “I’ll be upstairs.” He said over his shoulder as he ascended.

Thorin silently cursed the vampire’s strength before heading over to the innkeeper to order meals.

“So, he don’t seem so bad . . for a vampire.” The innkeeper ventured a conversation while the hunter’s waited for their meals.

“He is not like other vampires.” Thorin consented in agreement.

“But, you’re hunter’s, ain’t chya? How’d ya fall in with a vampire, if ya don’t mind me askin’?”

Thorin sighed. It was really a long story and he wasn’t in the mood to tell it.

“I guess we just fell in love with him.” Kili answered from beside him. “He’s sweet and patient, loves children and cares about those weaker than him and he’s full of mysteries. But he takes care of
those he sees as his. Will even rip his own kind to pieces for you.” Kili finished as their trays were brought out.

The room had gone quiet as he talked. The hunter’s each grabbed their trays and began to head back upstairs. That’s when it happened. The same woman who had approached Bilbo before pushed her way to the community board. The grabbed the sharp tipped pen stuck into the board next to the contract, pricked herself, and wrote her name.

The hunter’s watched as one by one the people came forward to write their names on the contract. Thorin shook his head as he led the way back upstairs. He wasn’t sure how he felt about it, though he supposed, if they were going to serve a vampire, Bilbo was the best choice.

Bilbo was sitting next to the window smoking when they got back to the room.

“What was all that about?” Fili asked curious as he settled on his bed.

“They presented a problem, requested a solution, and I gave them an option.” Bilbo answered blankly.

“Yeah, but why? What are you going to do with them? You don’t seem the master type.”

Bilbo sighed out a puff of smoke. “I don’t intend to do much of anything with them for now. But, should I ever decide I need it in the future, I’ll have the manpower at my disposal.”

“So, you’re helping them.” Kili rephrased with a smirk. “You just needed an excuse.”

Bilbo glanced over at him, his face still as blank as before. “If that’s how you want to see it.”

Kili’s grin faded and he sent an accusing glare at his uncle.

They fell into silence as they ate. Thorin wanted to talk to Bilbo. He needed to apologize and he had questions, about the contract and what Nori had told them. But he kept quiet. It didn’t seem like Bilbo was likely to listen or even let him talk.

They finished eating and got their things around in preparation for the morning before climbing into bed for one last night of sleep with beds and a roof over their heads. The next morning, They got up early and gathered their things. They stopped down in the common room for one last hot meal.

The hunters and Nori sat down with their meals while Bilbo retrieved the contract. He scanned over the names, probably aware of exactly how many in town did or didn’t sign. He grabbed the pen and slit his wrist with one of his own claws before dipping the pen into his own blood that lazily pooled in the gash and writing something on the bottom of the contract.

He pulled out a gold coin from his jacket, flicking it toward the startled innkeeper who barely managed to catch it. “I’m going to need one of your tables.” He said as an explanation.

The common room was empty save Thorin’s group and the innkeeper and they all watched in fascination as Bilbo began to scratch a magic circle into the surface of one of the tables. With one extended claw he began etching details into the circle.

Thorin could tell his nephews were itching to ask questions but were somehow managing to keep quiet. After a few minutes of scratching away at the table, he stopped and began removing his clothes. He removed his jacket, waistcoat, and shirt until he was stripped down to his long sleeve undershirt. His cravat also came off, revealing his usually hidden neckband and blood ruby.
He set the contract on one side of the circle before using a chair to step up onto the table. He stepped into the circle he had drawn, setting his feet just so. Rolling up his sleeve he began to chant in that eerie, haunting voice Thorin remembered from when he first met the vampire.

The circle glowed a deep red, the magic almost visible as it swirled around the small vampire. He held out his bare arm as strange shaped flakes began to brake free from inside the circle and mingle with the words peeling themselves off the page of the contract.

Names and shapes fluttered around, red and glowing like hot brands, as the vampire continued to chant. The first one landed with a hiss as it seared itself into the flesh of Bilbo’s arm. One after another, a shape and name would seem to merge before latching itself onto his skin, burning bright and hot like liquid metal.

Thorin's eyes darted to Bilbo’s face, searching for any sign of distress. His face was slack and his eyes were black, the only sign of his discomfort the tight fist his hand was clenched into. A few moments later, the last words seared into his flesh and Thorin hoped it was over.

It wasn’t. Bilbo took the claw of his thumb and sliced the inside of his arm open from elbow to palm. Dark shimmering shapes began to emerge from the gash. Each one taking flight before fluttering away, passing through walls and anything else in their way as they left.

Thorin was confused until one fluttered over to the innkeeper. The man tried to wave it away and evade as it closed in on him to no avail. He held his hands up with a yelp as it flew right at him. It landed harmlessly on the inside of his exposed wrist before melting and staining his wrist with a newly formed mark of ownership.

The innkeeper examined his new mark, seemingly no worse for the wear. Finally, the eerie light began to fade and the little fluttering shapes had all flown out to find their respective hosts.

When he was done, Bilbo let his arm down with a tired sigh, clenching and un-clenching his fist to flex his newly marked arm. He stepped off the table and began redressing.

“What was that?!” Kili exclaimed softly.

“Dark magic.” Fili ventured an answer.

“Blood magic.” Thorin corrected.

“Are you done yet?” Bilbo asked as he finished redressing.

“So, they are all . . bound to you now?” Fili asked, his curiosity too much to ignore his questions.

“Not them specifically, their bloodlines. But, yes, to a degree.” Bilbo humored him.

“Did it hurt?” Kili walked over sounding concerned.

“What is pain to a vampire, but a reminder of what we once were.”

Kili’s brows furrowed at the confusing philosophical answer.

“I’m fine, Kili. Are we ready?” He asked again slipping on his day cloak and gloves.

The company murmured or nodded the affirmative as they gathered their things again.

“I almost forgot.” The vampire walked over the the barkeeper. “If you need me, simply say my name. I will hear it. Let the others know, would you.”
“But . . what is your name, my lord?!” The innkeeper blustered after him as he turned to leave.

Bilbo turned back at the door. “Bilbo Baggins, but one or the other would be sufficient. Sorry about the table.” He threw over his shoulder as he marched out the door.

Fili and Kili rushed out after him, the thief close behind them at a more leisurely pace. Thorin paused at the bar. “May I see it?” He gestured to the man’s wrist.

The man shot him a startled glance before quickly pulling up his sleeve to reveal the mark. It was simple yet distinct, two elegantly written B’s inscribed into what looked like an acorn. The B’s made sense, but the acorn was just another mystery to wonder about.

“Thank you.” He nodded and followed after the others. They retrieved their horses, now laden with several new bags of dark iron ore.

The city was abuzz as they rode through it on their way out, the streets busy with more people than they even realized lived in the previously barren looking town. And every single one of them saluting or bowing as Thorin’s company rode by. He didn’t respond, save for an occasional nod. He knew they weren’t bowing to him, but their new ‘lord.’

Bilbo seemed to completely ignore it all as he walked swiftly alongside their horses. “We’ll be heading south-southeast once we get out of town. There are no roads this way so we’ll be cutting through the wilds.” He explained as they neared the edge of town.

Thorin nodded and spurred his horse into a trot as they left the town. They traveled quickly through the day, eager to leave to cold north behind, and didn’t stop after sundown that evening.

They set up their tent and settled in for the night, disappointed that it seemed the vampire wouldn’t be joining them. Thorin felt the loss most acutely. He already missed having the smaller body tucked up against him at night.

They woke and packed up early the next morning.

“The way we are going is going to bring us very close to Mount Gram. You will need to keep your eyes and ears open. I’m expecting some trouble.” Bilbo informed them as they packed their horses.

“Why? What’s at Mount Gram?” Kili asked for the group.

“A coven. A rather large one, or at least it was. I suspect I’ve cut their numbers considerably. Regardless, they aren’t going to let us pass peacefully.”

“You have? When did this happen?” Fili wondered.

“On our trip up. There were quite a few who I had to . . deal with for venturing too close. I didn’t leave any survivors, but it won’t take much for them to connect the dots. They’ll assume it was you.”

“Are we actually going to get to fight any?” Kili pouted. “We may be hunter’s but we haven’t exactly been getting to slay much lately.”

Bilbo huffed out a sudden chuckle, the first sign of positive emotion on the vampire since his and Thorin’s fallout. “Leave it to a hunter to be disappointed when there’s nothing to kill.” He shook his head with a small smirk. “I’ll leave you the small fries. But the coven leader is mine. And if you let any of them touch you, I’m going to slaughter them all. Understood?!”

The boys grinned cheerfully at the dark threat in no way dangerous to them and whooped in consent.
Bilbo shook his head at them indulgently as they mounted up.

Thorin felt warmed by the exchange and just a little bit encouraged. He hadn’t broken everything. Maybe it would just take time to mend what he had managed to break.

They continued their journey south, riding as hard as they could during the day and only stopping for the night. The snow quickly abated and the chilly weather slowly followed. Soon they wouldn’t have to be confined to a tent anymore and they might be able to start cooking simple meals again.

Bilbo stayed closed during the day, but seemed to always be absent at night. They knew he wasn’t far. He wouldn’t risk leaving his hunters unguarded. But he didn’t stay with them and that was the biggest sign of the rift that Thorin had ripped between them.

Everyday Thorin waited and hoped for an opportunity to engage the vampire, to speak privately or even openly as he became more desperate to right his wrongs. It was a terrible feeling, like a piece of him had been torn away. He could see it, yearn for it to be returned, but it was out of his reach, like a taunt.

His bedroll had never felt so cold nor his arms so empty. His fingers twitched with the need to reach out and his chest ached with the absence of the one of his desires. But he waited. His apologies and affections were not welcome. So, he waited, keeping the ache and yearning to himself.

Bilbo was sure to forgive him eventually. He had to. If he didn’t, well, Thorin was sure he would manage to continue on. Not well, it would be worse than losing his right arm, but he would survive, he supposed. But he truly hoped he wouldn’t have to live like that and he would be patient and make it up to the vampire for as long as he had to to return that piece of himself to its rightful place.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Nori has questions and he's out to find some answers. Bilbo's cooperative until he's not and his answers only seem to bring up more questions.

It's that time again! (man how time flies) Time to choose April's Sneak Peak. As before, cast your votes in the comments. :)

The King’s Harem (Concubine!Bilbo; Explicit)
One of a King (Single Parent!Bilbo; Smitten!Thorin)
Lost in Shadows (Devouring Ring!Verse)
The Crime Lord and the Warden (Modern!AU; from the prompt)
The Sea is My Home (Merpeople!AU; Modern!AU; Sequel to The Sea Calls to Me; Explicit)
Love at my Fingertips (Telepahic!Thorin; inspired by Yubisaki no Koi)
Questions

Chapter Notes

Today, I've decided to post all my written chapters!
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Just kidding! :P
Happy April Fool's Day everyone, but I do have a few treats for you today. ^_^

First off, Small, but Fierce has been posted as its own work! However! I am not actively posting new chapters for it yet. But I am actively working on it. I will begin posting chapters when I either finish it or have 24 chapters written (1 year's worth of posts). I already have several chapters done so I could start posting here within the next couple months. Be sure to subscribe so you don't miss it. ^_^

And, here is your sneak peak: The King's Harem:
The King of Erebor has a harem as instituted by Thror, King under the mountain. Thorin is the King of Erebor now and thus is expected to have a harem, much to his chagrin. He hates the harem, that is, until he is gifted with an exotically beautiful halfling to add to it. Thorin finds himself falling helplessly beard-over-boots for the soft hobbit and Bilbo seems pleased to have the kings attention. But things can never be that simple. Despite being his favorite, Bilbo is a hobbit, a commoner, an outsider and was gifted against his will. Thorin's going to have to fight politics, plots, tradition and even his own harem to keep the one he want's most by his side.

Bilbo/Thorin; Explicit

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nori lurked away from the camp. What had happened in Cardume kept running through his head and he had questions. Unfortunately, Bilbo had been in a foul mood ever since that idiot of a hunter had thrown him aside in the alley (figuratively speaking, it was Bilbo who had done the actual throwing). Nori had been giving the vampire some space, hoping that he would cool off eventually and be less likely to snap at Nori's questions.

But he wasn’t cooling off. At least, not the way Nori had hoped. He had hoped that Bilbo was just angry and insulted and that time and the boys would smooth it out. He had hoped that Bilbo was just having some fun with the hunter and would bounce back from the rejection. He was wrong.

Oh, Bilbo wasn't acting particularly angry or aggressive, at least not when he wasn’t being provoked, but he wasn’t getting better. He wasn’t cooling of, he was just becoming . . . cold. He was becoming blank and emotionally unresponsive, like his emotions were fading or being cut off. And that was more terrifying than anger in a vampire.

Bilbo’s capacity for emotion was what made him different, made him better. It wasn’t their strength that made vampires so dangerous. It was their lack of capacity to feel and relate. They were capable of the worst atrocities simply because they didn’t feel remorse or sympathy. They simply weren’t capable of it.
To see Bilbo devolving to such a state was deeply concerning. Nori hoped that it wasn’t as bad as it seemed. Hopefully, Bilbo was just closing himself off to protect himself from anymore damage from the hunter. But that in itself was also concerning. That would mean that he had already become attached to the hunter or, Eru forbid, in love with the hunter. That was a time bomb just waiting to happen.

Whatever was going on, Nori wouldn’t get any answers without asking, and Bilbo’s mood wasn’t getting any better. So, here he was on his way to bother an irate vampire with personal questions. Nori sent a quick prayer to . . whoever might be listening that he make it through it alive.

Nori cautiously approached the boulder that Bilbo had perched himself upon. It was far enough away from camp that the hunters couldn’t see him, but close enough that Bilbo could see everything going on at the campsite. Bilbo gazed distractedly down on his hunters while he blew laze puffs of pipe weed smoke. He gave no response to Nori’s approach.

Nori quietly took a seat next to him on the boulder. Maybe he should start with something a little less personal, but just as (if not more) concerning. “So, what was that? Back there with the Blood Letter. Never seen that before?” No point in beating around the bush.

Nori cautiously approached the boulder that Bilbo had perched himself upon. It was far enough away from camp that the hunters couldn’t see him, but close enough that Bilbo could see everything going on at the campsite. Bilbo gazed distractedly down on his hunters while he blew laze puffs of pipe weed smoke. He gave no response to Nori’s approach.

Bilbo still didn’t respond, eyes half-lidded and blank. He continued to puff on his pipe.

“Vampires can’t eat vampires. They can feed on each other, but it can’t kill them. Even if ya drained every last drop of blood from a vampire, it still won’t actually kill them. So, what did ya do back there.”

“Does it matter?” Bilbo finally returned, voice blank and monotone.

“Yeah, as a matter of fact it does. Of all the dark and fairy creatures in the world, I’ve never heard of any that could feed of other dark creatures and actually kill them in the process. And I know of a lot of different creatures.” Nori challenged.

Bilbo pulled the pipe from his mouth and let out a puff of smoke. “I wasn't what you think.” His tongue flicking out over his lip before he replaced his pipe.

“Oh really. I supposed it just looked like ya bit him and he disappeared.” Nori snarked back.

“I bit him and he died. That is what happened.”

“And how did that happen?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes!”

“I didn’t take his blood.”

“What? Then what did ya do? And why did yer eyes change?”

Bilbo heaved a sigh, puffing out a great cloud of smoke in the process. “Do you know why vampires eat blood?”

Nori eyed the vampire, not sure if he was explaining or trying to avoid the question. “Aye. They feed on life energy or life itself, one could say. The life is in the blood.”

“Where is the life of a vampire?” Bilbo questioned evenly.
Nori’s face pinched in confusion. “Vampires aren’t technically alive. That’s why they’re so hard to kill.”

“And yet we exist. So what is the source of that existence?”

Nori thought about the question. These questions were pointed, guiding. Bilbo was trying to make a point, Nori just wasn’t sure what it was. “Magic. Dark magic.” He finally answered. Vampires were born of magic, sustained by magic.

“So, one could say that the life of a vampire is in its magic.”

“Okay.” Nori was trying to follow, he really was.

“If you take the blood from a man, he dies. If you take the magic from a vampire, -“

“It dies.” Nori finished, eyes widening at the implications of what Bilbo was saying. “You took ‘is magic, you ate ‘is magic?”

“I did. His life energy, his dark magic.” Bilbo’s voice lowered darkly.

Nori’s head was spinning. He had heard of-of ‘magic eaters’ before, what magical creature hadn’t? It was like the fairy version of the boogie man. A monster to scare young fairies into behaving or the ‘magic eater’ would come and devour them. But it was just a myth! It didn’t actually exist! And Bilbo was a vampire, not some strange mythical creature! Nori knew his sire, for Eru’s sake! He was a vampire through and through!

“But yer a vampire?!?” Nori voiced his confusion, pushing down the ingrained fear of such a creature truly existing.

Bilbo just nodded.

“Vampires are not magic-eaters. How are you a magic eater?!” Nori almost hissed. He wanted an answer.

Bilbo shrugged. “Some vampires are gifted, you know that.”

“Not like this!”

“That you know of. The myth had to come from somewhere.” Bilbo responded soft and evenly, sounding as if he was starting to drift away from the conversation.

Nori gaped at the explanation. He didn’t believe for a second that that was all there was to it. Bilbo seemed to have far to many ‘gifts’ for any vampire and most of them were inconsistent with a vampire’s nature. Tolerance for pure elements, reception of fairy distress signals, and now this! Magic eating?!

It was true, powerful vampires were sometimes ‘reborn’ with gifts, but usually one and rarely two. This was too much to all be credited as simple ‘gifts.’ He eyed the vampire. He could push, but he doubted he would get anymore information. This seemed to be as far as Bilbo was willing to explain, and, frankly, he wasn’t sure he was ready for the truth.

So time to switch topics. Bilbo had seemed relatively open so far. “So, what about what happened in the alley?”

“What about it?” Bilbo’s voice dropped and his mood instantly darkened.
“It was just a misunderstanding, ya know. ‘e feels pretty bad about it.”

“Good.” Bilbo’s eyes were dark and his brows pulled down slightly in agitation.

The reaction was actually a relief, as dangerous as it was. It meant the Bilbo wasn’t numb but only suppressing his feelings. It also meant he could get hostile if Nori prodded too much.

“He’d apologize of ya just let ‘im. Might even grovel a bit if ya push it. It’s not like ya to hold grudges.”

“Why do you even care?” Bilbo turned a glare on the thief. “You’ve never liked him or my involvement with him. You should be happy now.”

Nori sighed. “I don’t like ‘im, but I hate yer moody arse more. And this is exactly why I said gettin’ close to ‘im was a bad idea. Ya knew it was gonna happen! Ya didn’t need me ta tell ya! So why are ya so angry when it does happen when ya knew it was only a matter of time?!”

Bilbo hissed but turned away defiantly, not offering an explanation willingly.

“And don’t try to tell me it’s because ‘e’s your blood siren, cause we both know that’s a load of bull.”

“He is my blood siren.”

“Yeah? Well that just makes things more confusing! Blood sirens are for eatin’, not lovin’! If ‘e’s yer blood siren, then why haven’t ya eaten ‘im?!”

“What difference does it make?!” Bilbo hissed back aggressively.

“It makes a difference when it leaves ya moody and snappish at everyone! The boys haven’t stopped pouting about your distance since we left Cardume!”

Bilbo winced at the mention of the boys. Nori knew he wasn’t avoiding them personally though, if he was, it was for their sake not his.

“Blood sirens are meant to be eaten. They’re the highest delicacy for a vampire and their blood is said to boost a vampire’s powers up to double what it was. Why didn’t ya eat him when ya first met ‘im? Ya could have had all that power! Ya could still have it!” Nori pushed. He had suspected that the hunter was Bilbo’s blood siren back in Belegost since Bilbo was so possessive, but it didn’t explain why he insisted on keeping the human alive and not even drinking from him. Bilbo wouldn’t have even lost control before if he had taken just a little from the hunter!

“You wouldn’t understand!” Bilbo hissed.

“Try me!”

“It’s none of your business, Nori!”

Nori sighed. He wasn’t getting anywhere. “Is it because ya love ‘im?!”

Bilbo turned a dark-eyed scowl on the thief. ‘Love’ was a touchy word for Bilbo. “Shut your mouth, Nori.” He threatened lowly.

“Ya know I don’t like him and I think it’s a stupid idea, but ya seemed happier when ya were with him. And, if it’s too late to stop this attachment ya got with him, I’d rather see ya happy than like this.”
Bilbo’s face had become almost deadly blank, that spark of light shining from deep in his eyes. “Don't make me rip out your tongue, thief.” His voice was cold and even.

Nori couldn’t quite suppress the shiver of fear that ran down his spine. This was the line. If he pushed any farther, he would likely start loosing body parts. “Fine. I just don’t like seeing ya suffer for yer own stubbornness... I don’t like sufferin’ for it either.” He added as he got up. He needed to vacate the area before Bilbo’s temper fanned into something aggressive.

Bilbo returned to his smoking as the thief left, Nori casting a glance back as he went. Bilbo was clearly in a far worse mood now. Nori sighed to himself. Other than the magic eater info, he hadn’t really managed to learn much. He still didn’t understand what was going on between Bilbo and the hunter. He just couldn’t wrap his head around it.

Sure, Bilbo as different, but he was still a vampire. He still functioned under the same principles. Leaving his blood siren alive was one thing, but choosing to stay close to him without eating him was another. So was developing an attachment to him. Nori was sure that it wasn’t ‘love’ that had spurred the vampire to spare the hunter. Bilbo showed no signs of personal attachment beyond possession back in Belegost.

The attachment seemed to be relatively recent. So what else would have caused him to spare the man. There was definitely something else going on here, he just didn’t have enough of the puzzle pieces to figure it out yet. And Bilbo certainly wasn’t going to offer any. Nori shrugged to himself with a small smirk. Well, good thing info gathering was his specialty. He needed a good challenge every now and then. Maybe the hunter could provide some pieces.

The walked their horses along the next day, keeping a slower pace in the rougher back country. Nori had been wracking his brain for clues about Bilbo’s strange behavior. It was time to start wracking the hunter’s. He brought his horse up to ride along Thorin, who sent him a confused glance.

“When ya first met Bilbo, what was it like?” Nori really wasn’t the bush beating type.

Thorin turned his full confusion on the thief. “Why?”

“Just humor me.”

Thorin shrugged. “He invited me in for tea.”

Nori raised an unimpressed brow. “If ya don’t want to answer, ya could just say so.”

“I am answering. He popped up behind me, I pointed my crossbow in his face and he invited me to tea.”

Nori gaped, still not entirely sure the hunter wasn’t messing with him. “Seriously?”

Thorin just nodded, no hint of humor on his face.

“And then what? Ya just agreed?” Nori asked incredulously.

Thorin shrugged again. “I guess so. Next thing I knew, we were sitting in old chairs in front of cold hearth and drinking tea.”

“Ya don’t remember how it happened?”

“I wasn’t enchanted, if that’s what you’re asking. I was just confused and everything was happening too fast to make any sense of it.”
“Okay? And then what?”

“He offered me a deal and I accepted.”

“Just like that?” Nori raised a brow.

“Of course not. I thought it over. I knew I couldn’t overpower him and if didn’t feel right to leave him alive, so I agreed.”

Nori pondered on that for a while. “He offered ya tea?” His mind kept getting stuck on that.

“Of course I offered him tea. It’s basic manners. Always offer tea to guests.” Bilbo chimed in from where he walked along with them. He had been more alert under the sun since he had ‘eaten’ well in Cardume.

Nori stared at him like he had never seen him before. He knew Bilbo had his little . . quirks, knew of his insistence on manners, but he hadn’t heard of this before. It was . . strange, even for a vampire. Nori briefly wondered if it was some lingering shadow from his human life. “Do you invite all hunters who come looking to kill you for tea?”

“Of course.” Bilbo's tone made it sound like it should be obvious.

“And then what?” Fili asked, his curiosity piqued.

“That depends on them. Most decline by trying to hack me into little bits or shoot me full of bolts.” Bilbo dead-panned.

“So you kill them.” Nori asked just to make sure.

“If they refuse to heed my warning and insist on fighting, then yes.”

“You give them a warning?” Kili asked this time.

“I give them options. Leave and live or stay and die. Some are smart enough to turn tail and run.”

“And if they don’t?” Fili asked cautiously.

“Then I snap their necks. I can’t have hunters lingering in my castle. I have a reputation to maintain.”

Nori understood, though he figured the hunters might not. Bilbo had to keep his head low to avoid his sire’s suspicions. Hence his castle had become known as quite the death trap for hunters. Clearly most chose to stay and fight, and those who ran were ashamed enough not to tell the story.

“Did anyone other than Uncle ever accept your offer?” Fili asked.

“A handful. Some where quite pleasant company, in fact.”

“What happened to them?” Kili wondered.

“After some good tea and a nice chat about life . . and death, most chose life.”

“But not all?” Fili prodded.

“There was one. An older hunter, past his prime. He felt that the shame of running away was worse than death. He said he had nothing to live for, so he chose to fight to the death.”
“That must have been short.” Nori mumbled.

Bilbo hummed. “I humored him. Gave him one last good fight. But, of course, the outcome was already decided.”

They were silent for a while as they walked.

“So, you killed them in self-defense.” Kili concluded.

Bilbo chuckled darkly. “If that’s how you want to see it. It’s hardly self-defense if I was never in any real danger.” His tone dripped with self-depreciation.

“But they came to kill you.” Kili insisted.

“And I could have easily avoided them without killing them.” Bilbo shrugged. “But like I said, I can’t have hunters hanging around my castle.”

Nori glanced around at the hunters. They seemed slightly concerned, though the boys seemed to quickly shake it off, Kili the fastest. Even Thorin’s pinched brow evened out more quickly than Nori expected. It seemed Bilbo had become important enough to them that they could overlook some of his . . . offenses.

“They were hunters. They knew there was a chance of death when they set out for the castle. If they ignored your warnings and chose death, it’s on their own heads.” Thorin ground out, confirming Nori’s suspicions.

Of course, Nori was pretty sure Thorin would forgive Bilbo for just about anything at the moment. He tried to hide it, but it was obvious that their separation was doing quite the number on the older hunter. He tossed and turned endlessly in the nights and often woke with a gasp reaching for someone who was no longer there.

Nori eyed him discretely for the corner of his eye. There seemed to be something strange going on on that end as well. It’s wasn’t unheard of for a human to fall in love with a vampire, but Thorin’s background, career, and convictions made him a highly unlike candidate for such a thing. It almost seem to pull at the hunter, overpower who and what he was.

Nori contemplated for a few moments. That wasn’t quite it. It wasn’t so much oppressing him as it was . . . rearranging perhaps? He was changing, as if being coaxed to realign himself . . . into something . . . compatible with the vampire without sacrificing who he was or what he believed.

Nori side-eyed him again then sent a quick glance at the vampire. If Nori didn’t know any better, he’d say they were gravitating to each other, being pulled together by some invisible force. Was there even such a thing? He had heard of soulmates, of course, but it only occurred in the magical realm. It was rare, but some fairy races were said to possess destined partners, soul bonds.

But Thorin was definitely human and Bilbo, though Nori was starting to have suspicions about his origins, was clearly a vampire. The closest thing dark magic could imitate to love and soul bonds were the mating bond and the blood siren bond. And both were considered tainted by the fairy peoples. And there was no such bonds among humans, magic, soul, or otherwise.

So what in middle-earth was going on here? Nori itched at his beard and pushed back a sigh. It seemed for every answer he dug up it just revealed two more questions. He briefly wondered if he would ever get to the bottom of these two mysteries.

He smirked to himself. Well, it certainly wouldn’t stop him from trying. “So you’ve met many
hunters then.” He aimed at the vampire. The best way to gather info was to get people to talk. “Any worth mentioning?”

Bilbo hummed, seemingly taking the bait. “Well, there was this one hunter. He was such a charming fellow, complimented my tea and everything. We hit it off almost immediately. He was more of a scholar than a hunter really. Said hunting was more the family business. He ended up staying two weeks, even borrowed some books from my library. Still used to drop in for tea when he was in the area. Haven’t seen him a while though.”

Nori raised a brow and sent a glance at the hunter at his side. Thorin’s face was pinched into an angry scowl, clearly not pleased with the information.

Nori couldn’t help but chuckle to himself as Bilbo continued to talk of his hunter friend and Thorin’s face continued to pinch. Jealousy was such an un-tamable beast. He didn’t know if he would ever truly get to the bottom of whatever was going on between these two, but he was going to have a lot of fun trying.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: The hunters encounter the coven of Mount Gram and meet a talented young vampire who has her sights on Bilbo. Thorin gets jealous. Bilbo gets enchanted?!
The hunters watched anxiously as Bilbo paced sedately around the edge of their camp, the tense line of his shoulders the only outward indication of his unease. Thorin kept one eye on the vampire while he casually sharpened his sword.

The abrupt change in Bilbo’s behavior had started a couple days ago. He stayed close during the day and, even at night, he never ventured far from camp. The night before had started the pacing, as if he meant to use his own body as a barrier to ward off whatever beasts he was anticipating.

Bilbo’s tension bled into the rest of them. If Bilbo was expecting trouble, trouble was surely on its way. It was only a matter of time, though Thorin wondered why the vampire didn’t just deal with whatever was out there. Maybe it had to do with the stuff that Nori had mentioned.

Whatever the reason, the vampire continued to pace, occasionally glaring out into the darkness as of daring something to make a move. When his nephews had asked about the sudden change, Bilbo had only said that they were being watched. It seemed he was waiting for their opponents to make the first move.

Needless to say, the hunters weren’t getting much sleep. The boys seem to manage to get a few solid hours of sleep every night, so complete was their confidence in the vampire, but Thorin couldn’t force the tightness out of his muscles for anything more than a light doze.

Soon dawn had come and they were on the move again. They traveled mostly in silence, partly from the tension and partly from their own exhaustion. Come that evening, they were settling down again. The night started out the same, Bilbo paced around the perimeter of their camp as the others settled down.

Things changed once the sun had fallen completely and darkness descended. Bilbo suddenly stopped his pacing and stiffened. “They are coming.” The hunters almost missed his quiet warning.

Thorin was the first to respond, unsheathing his sword even as he launched up from the ground. He spun to scan the area just in time to parry a swing from an attacking vampire. Fili and Kili were up and back to back in seconds even as more vampires converged on their camp.

Bilbo stood and watched as even more vampires emerged from the shadows. Thorin matched blows briefly with his current opponent before gaining the upper hand and dispatching the vampire with a clean slice through its neck. Bilbo’s un-moving figure caught his eye and he turned to give him a quizzical look.

But suddenly Bilbo was gone a loud crack sounded right behind him. He twisted around prepared to strike only to find Bilbo still holding the head of a vampire that had apparently aimed for the hunter’s back. Thorin glanced down to the head than back up to Bilbo.

Bilbo just raised a brow at him and tossed the head aside before vanishing, probably to deal with another troublesome vampire. Thorin couldn’t help his smirk. Bilbo was giving his nephews what they wanted, likely despite every instinct in the vampire’s body to slaughter the threats. He was letting the hunters have their fight while making sure they weren’t harmed.

It would have been a bit insulting of he wasn’t already aware of Bilbo’s power difference and the
potential power of their enemies. Instead he let the sentiment warm his chest. At least Bilbo still cared about him. He swiftly turned to engage two more vampires, determined to give Bilbo as little to do as possible.

Most of their opponents must have been small fries as Thorin was having little difficulty slaying one after another. Even his nephews had downed a few. But the more they killed, they tougher they seem to get.

With another quick swipe of his sword he downed another one. He heard one of his nephews yelp and glanced over to them at the distraction but whatever threat had been after them seemed to have already been dealt with. He turned back to his opponent just in time for the wind to be knocked out of him.

He skidded back several paces as he dug in his feet. Despite his attempt, he lost his footing and nearly landed right on top of their blazing campfire. A hand caught his wrist at the last second, the flames already licking at his loose hair, and yanked him back up to his feet.

Bilbo steadied him as he tried to suck the air back into his lungs. “You alright?” His mere presence seemingly warding off any more immediate attacks.

“Yeah. Got distracted.” Thorin’s grip hardened on his hilt.

“Don’t worry about them. I’ll slaughter them all before I let anything touch them.” For a fleeting moment, Thorin could feel the soft pressure of Bilbo’s hand on his back and then it was gone. The loss slammed into him all over again as if taking another blow to the chest.

He sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly and swung his sword in an agile display. He didn’t have time to deal with that right now. He needed to focus. “Sorry for making you wait. I’m ready to kill you now.” He addressed the vampire who was watching him expectantly.

The vampire snarled and launched at him. Thorin dodged and swung his sword in an attack of his own only to be parried. This one was definitely better than the others had been, but not so great that Thorin didn’t have a chance.

They continued in a deadly dance of fatal swings, near misses, and glancing blows. Thorin got a few scratches and took a few nicks but gave out just as many himself. Still Bilbo didn’t interfere. Thorin wanted to think that his vampire was confident in his abilities and not just busy elsewhere.

He slowly gained the advantage, having to switch to his short sword and a dagger for added agility and flexibility. Fortunately, vampires were rather straightforward in their strategies as a whole and Thorin was able to beat his opponent back with superior skill.

He took a play out of the vampires book and slammed into his chest with his shoulder. The vampire stumbled back, possibly more out of surprise than the actual force of the impact and Thorin lashed his sword across the vampire’s torso from hip to shoulder before he could recover.

The vampire stumbled back once again, hissing and grimacing against the pain of the silver tainting its blood and Thorin lifted his sword for the final strike.

“Enough!” A voiced boomed around them. Thorin flinched and his opponent was gone.

He twisted around to take in the rest of the scene. His nephews were huddled together and against Bilbo’s back as he stood, an immovable barrier between them and the near dozen vampires who were circling them. Nori was nowhere to be seen, as usual.
Thorin wasn’t sure what to do. His instinct was to join them, but, to do so, he would have to march right through the opposing circle. These vampires were clearly a higher caliber than the ones they had already defeated.

“Oakenshield! Come here.” Bilbo barked over at him.

Thorin raised his brows at the order, but couldn’t deny it’s where he wanted to be.

“They won’t touch you.” Bilbo assured as Thorin cautiously crept into the circle. Bilbo as right. The vampires actually moved aside to let him in. He sidled over to his nephews, weapons in hand and ready to retaliate. He wasn’t quite sure what to make of the standstill or of who had called it. Was it Bilbo? It hadn’t sounded like it. It had almost sounded-

“Well, isn’t this interesting.” A distinctly feminine voice cooed.

Bilbo took a few steps toward the voice as two cloaked figures emerged from the shadows.

“Who are you and where is The Duke?” Bilbo demanded, unfazed by the cage of vampires that was surrounding them.

The woman tsked at him, lowering her hood. “Is that any way to address a lady?” She had dark skin and full lips. Her hair was wild and kinky and framed her face with darkness. Even in the dim light of the campfire, Thorin could tell she was beautiful.

Bilbo was silent for a moment and Thorin wished he could see his face. Finally, he sighed softly and bowed. “Bilbo Baggins, at your service. And what might your name be, my lady?”

She giggled at the display. “So polite. You really are the Mannered Demon, aren’t you?”

Thorin raised a brow and met his nephews’ confused looks. Was this another one of his titles?

“I haven’t heard that name in a very long time. It has long been out of use. What have you done with the Duke?” His tone turned hard.

She giggled again. “Oh, he’s here.” With a flick of her hand, the figure beside her pulled off his hood. He had dark short hair and a trim beard, but his eyes were dark and his expression blank. “He has told me so much about you. I admit I was skeptical at first. You hardly look all that impressive. But your awareness is spot on and it seems he wasn’t exaggerating your power after all. You weren’t even fighting seriously against my coven, were you?”

Bilbo’s head tilted fractionally. “Your coven? This is Duke’s coven.” He said dropping the formal ‘the’ of the title. “What have you done to him?”

“Not anymore. It’s my coven now.” She braced her arm on the Duke’s shoulder and leaned into him. He didn’t even move.

“What’s your name?” Bilbo demanded once more.

“I go by the Enchantress.” She purred.

“You enchanted the Duke?” Skepticism coloring their vampire’s voice. “No, you’ve enchanted the entire coven.” He added after a pause, something suspiciously akin to awe in his voice. “I’m impressed.”

She smiled and preened at the praise. “Thank you.”
“That is quite a feat, considering you can’t be more than a couple hundred years old. Who is your sire? Your magic feels familiar.”

“My sire is dead. I’m beginning to suspect I have you to thank for that. Perhaps you met him in Cardume?”

“The Blood Letter. He was your sire?”

She nodded. “He left me here to ensure that the Duke and his coven didn’t interfere with his plans in Cardume. It was incredibly boring, but, as you can see, it gave me plenty of time to practice my gift. And now that he’s gone, the coven is all mine.” She smiled.

“Your gift is certainly . . . impressive. It has been . . . many years since I have encountered anyone with so much raw talent, so much potential. I suspect your sire didn’t truly understand the scope of your true talents.”

“Of course not.” She scoffed. “If he had, he would have never let me go. As it was, he left me here to practice in peace. I was planning to build up my power and defeat him myself, but you spared me from centuries of effort. We could be great friends, you and I.”

Bilbo hummed in thought. “You skills are certainly enviable. To enchant a vampire is far more difficult than enchanting a human, but, to enchant a vampire as powerful as the Duke, is an entirely different level. And to enchant this many all at once?” Bilbo shook his head. “You would be the envy of dark armies everywhere.” His tone darkened. “How interesting that someone as limp as the Blood Letter would find such a gem.”

She giggled again, taking the vampire’s comments as compliments. “You’re quite the flatterer, though, I admit, I don’t quite follow your comments about the Duke. He’s formidable, true, but hardly the standard for power.”

“Duke is much like you. His power is in his gift, not his raw energy. Duke has the power to sway wills and convictions, not just in humans but in vampires as well. He once commanded an army consisting of many vampires far stronger than himself, so great was his influence. There are few vampires born with such powerful inherent abilities. They are all highly coveted. Duke was no exception.”

The Enchantress looked at him, as if deciding of the vampire beside her was really as impressive as Bilbo said. “Then he has fallen drastically. All he had here was his coven and that simpering little mate of his. There is no greatness here.”

“Yes, well,” Bilbo shrugged. “Finding one’s mate can change a vampire. He chose a quieter life for her sake.”

She scoffed. “That pathetic weakling? For all her weakness, she was annoying enough. I cast her out as soon as my hold was strong enough.”

“Oh?” There was a strange tightness in Bilbo’s voice. “And what did you do with her?”

“She’s alive. She was just making it difficult for me to get a hold on the Duke, so I sent her away.” She sighed dramatically. “He wouldn’t even look at me with her around.” She pouted.

She pushed away from the still figure and stepped lightly towards them. “But he was just a pawn anyways. I’d much rather be bonded to someone more powerful.” She purred as she approached. Thorin bristled. Was she hitting on his vampire?
“You wish to work together?”

“You make it sound like business.” She pouted her beautiful full lips. “I’ve heard what others have said about you. But, if Duke knows anything about you, then I know enough to say that most greatly underestimate you. We could accomplish great things together.” She purred as she leaned into his ear. She was at least half a head taller. “I could bring you so much pleasure.” She dragged the tip of her finger down the shell of his outer ear and he tensed ramrod straight.

Thorin had to suppress the growl trying to claw its way out his throat. He suddenly had a soul deep desire to removed her pretty little head from her shoulders. How dare she touch Bilbo! Bilbo was his! His hands tightened on the hilts of his sword and dagger and his teeth ground together as he pushed back the violent impulses. He had no right to interfere he tried to remind himself. It wasn’t working very well.

“You want a partnership?” Bilbo’s voice was flat and she pulled back to study his reaction. “I decline.”

Her brow twitched, her smile slowly sliding off her face. A soft rumble of possessive satisfaction vibrated through Thorin’s chest. He thought he saw Bilbo’s ear twitch in his direction.

“In fact, I’m going to have to ask you to release the Duke and find your fun elsewhere. He and I have an agreement and he can’t keep it when you have him enchanted.”

The Enchantress’s face twisted, obviously not pleased with the answer. “It’s my coven now. I earned it.”

“Nevertheless, I must insist. I have no quarrel with you so you are free to go as long as you don’t stir up trouble on my lands.”

She studied him for a moment, seemingly assessing her options. She glanced back at the Duke and back to Bilbo. Suddenly her furrowed brows dissipated and she broke out into another grin. It looked just a little too sweet.

“Of course. After all, you are the Lord of Eriador.” She leaned back over their vampire.

A chill ran down Thorin’s spine at the sound of her voice. It had a sweet, seductive lilt to it. He could almost hear the power in it.

“Who could deny such a great and powerful being as yourself?” The Enchantress continued as she slowly circled their vampire, her hands running over his chest, shoulders and back with far too much familiarity. “You deserve so much more than this, this insignificant land. You could rule the world.” She breathe do into his ear. “The greatest beings of middle-earth would bow to you. I could give you that. I would offer you your greatest desires, set them at your feet like an offering for the gods.”

Thorin’s skin crawled and his nephews were clearly equally uneasy. Bilbo just stood there as she continued to whisper ridiculous promises into his ears. Frozen, transfixed as if he had lost the will to respond or, Mahal forbid, was actually considering her offers.

This was clearly magic. Was she . . enchanting him? Bilbo? Despite all his power? He had been impressed by her abilities but surely he wouldn’t leave himself wide open to such an attack. Unless he didn’t think it could affect him. Was he wrong? Was her latent gift even more than he could handle?

Thorin’s hands squeezed around his weapons. If she was enchanting their vampire, they needed to stop it. Without Bilbo they didn’t stand a chance against the entire coven. Then again, without Bilbo
could they even stop him from being enchanted?

His nephews were sending him rapid nervous glances. Thank Mahal they still followed his lead. “Bilbo?” Maybe Bilbo just needed a reason to snap out of it.

Bilbo didn’t respond, merely stood frozen as if in a daze. The Enchantress turned to him instead, wearing a smug grin on her beautiful features. “I’m afraid he won’t be answering you. It seems not even the Lord of Eriador is above my little enchantments.” She gloated.

“Release him.” Thorin growled.

“Oh, I think not.” She laughed. “Do you even understand what’s happening? I had this entire coven under my control. It was good, or at least decent. But there are no real big players. The Duke is washed up, whatever he may have been once. But this!” She ran a hand through Bilbo’s curls. “A vampire lord under my command? It’s only a matter of time before I’m the most powerful vampire in the world.” Her smile grew until it was eerie and all teeth.

“What would you do with him?” Thorin wasn’t sure he wanted to know, but he needed to keep her talking until he could think of a way to snap Bilbo out of it.

“With someone with his power, the possibilities are endless. Can you even imagine?! The Mannered Demon?! Under my control?!” She spoke giddily with wide eyes. “I could conquer the other vampire lords, put them all under my control. Even the great Firsts will hear of my power and come to fear me. Maybe even the dark King would recognize my power and promote me!” She squealed with excitement. “I could be the Dark queen with all of middle-earth at my feet!”

Thorin shivered at the thought. Hopefully she was just getting carried away and all that wasn’t really likely (or possible, preferably). “You keep calling him the Mannered Demon. Why?”

She seemed to drift back from her dreams as she refocused on the hunters. “It’s what the Duke called him. I guess they were friends. Supposedly, he was a real winner in his younger days, bloodthirsty and . . . thorough. He was even famous among humans. They called him the Grinning Death. Wiped out whole populations I hear.” She shrugged and glanced back at her prize.

Thorin shivered as images of Bilbo’s sharp smile as he prowled towards the Blood Letter flashed through his head. Thorin had assumed it was from the vampire’s anger. Perhaps it had more to do with the thrill of the hunt. Maybe there was an even greater beast then they suspected, carefully hidden under fancy clothes and good manners.

Thorin shook the thought from his head. It didn’t matter. Bilbo was Bilbo. The things she was talking could have been from centuries ago. He wasn’t like that anymore. He refocused with a start when he realized she was stalking towards them.

“It makes one wonder what he’s doing out here, wondering the wilds, with hunters, no less. You must be something special for the Mannered Demon to protect you as he does.”

Thorin stiffened, his grip tightening on his weapons and his skin crawling as that same seductive lilt entered her tone. Was she going to enchant them too? His nephews readied their stances, weapons prepared to retaliate. Thorin feared they wouldn’t get the chance.

“Tell me. What’s so special about you that you have such a powerful vampire escorting you about?” She didn’t even sound like she was trying that hard, like the sound of her voice alone would be enough to woo them.

Something seemed to pull at his mind, as if trying to lull it into complacency. ‘Bilbo. Don’t fall to this
weak woman. You’re better than her.’ He pleaded in the space of his own mind.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: We get a little peek into Bilbo's head and the Enchantress makes a fatal mistake. As the Enchantress's power dissipates the coven awakes and a new figure comes into play.

Next months Sneak Peek is going to be "One of a King."

Update!: I'm up to chapter 10 in Small, but Fierce! almost halfway to posting it! ^_^
Update! I'm on chapter 19 of Small, but Fierce! Almost there!! Trying to get done before I need to start working on the others again.

Your May Sneak Peak: **One of a King**
Bilbo moves to Erabor from Belegost with his daughter Dahlia looking for a fresh start. Shunned by his people and living as a lone hobbit among dwarrow, he faces hardship after hardship as he struggles to provide for his daughter. Broken and weary, he’s devoted himself to bringing what happiness he can to his daughter at the expense of any possibility of his own. A chance encounter with a dark haired stranger changes everything and knocks what little peace he has found off balance. The dwarf seems determined to be involved in Bilbo’s life and he finds himself unable to keep pushing him away. Suddenly his own happiness doesn’t seem so far out of reach.

Thorin/Bilbo, Hurt!Bilbo, No Smaug, Prince!Thorin, Romance, Slow Burn, Single Parent!Bilbo

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The Enchantress’s voice faded as Bilbo focused on the fog like sensation that seemed to creep up around him. It reached for him, tried to cling to him even as his own magic swatted it away like an annoyingly insect.

He tuned her out, forcing all his focus inward on this new experience. He suppressed his own magic, letting the soft, seducing tendrils climb and cling to him. It was . . fascinating.

It was a rare thing for him to encounter someone who’s magical power was enough to affect him, his own magic dense enough to ward off most attempts effortlessly. Enchanting, however, was a unique sort of magic for vampires. It relied on seduction and gentle coercion, unlike the many other aggressive (and sometimes violent) forms of dark magic.

Even still, the few rare attempts of others to enchant him had barely been noticeable. They had simply been too weak to even alert his awareness, but this . . this was remarkable.

He gently eased out his own magic, inspecting and prodding at the magical formless entity trying to wiggle its way into his mind and magic. It was so . . new . . and different. He couldn’t remember the last time he experienced such a thing and it fascinated him.

It wasn’t often he experienced *new* things. At his age, there was little he hadn’t experienced, witnessed, or done. That was a curse (one of many) of being a vampire. After a while, everything becomes dull and numb, which is why many pursued greater and greater atrocities as they grew older. Anything for just another thrill or high or any sensation really.

And that’s why he was so arrested by this new sensation. He focused on it until everything else faded away. He let it paw at him and even gave it just the slightest hold on his mind just to find out what it felt like to be enchanted. The Enchantress was truly talented. Her gift had catastrophic potential if allowed to reach its potential.
He idly wondered if he should allow it, if he shouldn’t snuff it out now before it became a problem even for him. He tugged and pulled at the magical fog he had given residence in his head, pulling it apart and dissecting it. He wondered if he could somehow duplicate the magical signature, copy it with his own magic. Of course, it would be much easier if he simple took her magic.

Ah, but she had such potential and she hadn’t quite done anything deserving of death yet. Even her attack on the hunters had been more of a test for him really. He played with the magical fog distractedly as he mused.

Suddenly a jolt shot through his being and his own magic retaliated on instinct, instantly dissipating the seductive fog. His magic shot out, assessing the situation and what had disturbed his new experience.

The fog was behind him now, pooling and grasping at new targets. He finally registered the light buzz of the magical fog being pulled and absorbed by three distinct points. She was trying to enchant his hunters then. A vain effort and not enough to cause his distraction.

He jolted again and his eyes snapped open, dark as obsidian, and teeth bared in a snarl. She had crossed the line! His lips curled up in a feral grin. At least he had an excuse to eat her now.

~Thorin~

The Enchantress continued to stalk towards them. Thorin tried to lift his sword defensively, but it felt like moving in a bog. His limbs felt heavy and resisted the movement. He felt the fog licking at his mind, but for some reason it wasn’t able to settle and his mind remained mostly clear.

His nephews seemed to be in the same predicament, judging by the distressed sounds of their own efforts to lift their weapons. Thorin was confused. Enchantment affected the body through the mind. How could their minds be clear but their bodies be enchanted?

He snarled as she came closer and she looked at them curiously. “Why are you not enchanted?”

“I guess you’re not as good as you think you are.” He ground out with some effort. Why did his body feel so heavy?

She tilted her head at him. “I know I wasn’t putting much into it, but it should have been enough to enchant a few humans. Perhaps you are special. I guess I’ll just have to put a little more effort into it.” She purred.

The weight multiplied instantly and his sword sagged under the force until the tip rested against the ground. He tried to lift it again but only got a few popping veins for the effort. Beside him, the boys were shaking. From fear or effort, he couldn’t tell, but, if they couldn’t shake off whatever this was, they were defenseless.

A burning sensation grew on his chest. He had ignored it at first, but it got hotter with every wave of magic the enchantress threw at them. It was getting uncomfortable and he briefly wondered if he was going to have a burn mark. Was it some affect of her magic?

She stepped into his space and he growled wishing he could do something about it. At this rate, she could leisurely rip his heart out and he couldn’t do anything about it. But at least she was targeting him and not his boys.

“How strange. You still aren’t under my spell, are you?” She mused as she ran a finger down his hairy jaw. “You are quite handsome. Is that why he keeps you around?” She smirked. “He can’t protect you any more.” She whispered into his ear.
His nephews watched with wide, frightened eyes as she ran her thumb over his scowling lips.

“Perhaps I will make you my lover instead, hmm?”

Another wave of mind numbing fog hit him and his features slacked under the assault. He struggled against it even as he felt himself drowning in it. He felt her lips softly caress against his. Anger, fangs, and dark eyes with specks of light shining dangerously were the last things his sluggish brain registered before everything faded into black.

He resurfaced into awareness to a ear splitting shriek, the burning on his chest intense. He blinked as his eyes refocused. Bilbo had the Enchantress by the hair and an arm. She looked as if he had dragged her back and down by her kinky locks. He leaned over her, teeth already embedded in her flesh and eyes swirling with a dangerous light.

She gave one more piercing shriek before she cracked and crumbled into a pile of dust.

Instantly the oppressive force around the hunters vanished. They lurched forward, their weapons swinging dramatically, as their tensed muscles were suddenly released from their invisible constrains.

Thorin took a deep breath and tensed all over again. They weren’t the only ones no longer under the Enchantress’s control. He glanced around as the vampires that were standing circle around them also came their senses.

The vampires looked at them and their surroundings in confusion, no doubt wondering where they were and what they were supposed to be doing. But confusion faded to contempt and hostility as they started to notice the nature of their circled prey.

Thorin made eye contact with one and it lunged at him. It was too fast for him to respond in time, but, the split second before it reached him their was a dull sounding boom and the vampire went skidding through the dirt.

“Touch them and I will slaughter every one of you!” Bilbo snarled a hissed warning at the remaining vampires, who all eyed him warily.

They seemed to think they had a chance with the superior numbers on their side as their faces hardened with intent.

Bilbo hissed again and tensed for another strike.

“Enough!! Stand down!” A new voice bellowed over them and the group of vampires actually seemed to relax out of their offensive stances.

Bilbo turned to the voice and Thorin followed his lead.

“It’s about time you woke up. I can’t believe you let the young blood enchant you.” Bilbo snapped.

“Bilbo? . . . What is happening? Why are you here? And who are they?” The figure that had arrived with the Enchantress stepped forward, shooting off questions in his confusion.

Bilbo sighed out his irritation before continuing in a much more civil tone. “You had an infiltrator in your coven. She enchanted the whole lot of you. Your coven’s a lot smaller now, by the way. You have her to thank for that, though I won’t deny my own involvement.”

The stranger’s eyes went wide and he cast his glance around at the survivors. His gaze widened further and his glances became more desperate. “Eliza?!”
“Alive. The Enchantress sent her away so she could strengthen her hold on you.”

The vampire relaxed slightly but became more wary. “Sent her where?”

“She didn’t say. Duke, what do you remember?”

The Duke seemed to struggle to focus on the question. “Uh, I’m not sure. Vampires come and go from the coven often.” He paused in thought. “There was one though, a dark female. After she came, the others started acting weird . . . I think I started acting weird.”

Bilbo nodded. “She was sent by the Blood Letter to keep you from interfering with his plans in Cardume.”


Bilbo chuckled. “Yes, he was her sire. She was a gifted.”

“And where is she now?” There was a simmering anger in the Duke’s voice.

“Dead.”

The Duke studied the shorter vampire briefly before glancing around at what was left of his coven. “Are these . . . the only survivors?”

“As far as I know.”

“And the castle?”

“Haven’t been.” Bilbo stood his ground as the other vampire seemed to size him up.

“Damian! Take the others and check the castle, see if there are any other survivors.” The Duke ordered. “I will take care of . . . our guests.”

The other vampires shared some glances before finally taking off towards their home, several sending one last wary glance at Bilbo.

There was silence for several moments as the remaining two vampires stared each other down. The hunters tensed, preparing for another battle.

Suddenly, the Duke fell to one knee and bowed his head with one hand on his chest. “My apologies, my lord, it seems I have not only failed to uphold our agreement but that you also had to come clean up the mess as a result of it.”

The hunters gaped. Vampires were proud, self-important beings. They did not simply bow their heads to another.

Bilbo snorted and waved off the display. “Get up, Duke. You know I hate this nonsense.”

“The Duke stayed where he was. “I have broken my side of the agreement, I accept my punishment.”

Bilbo sighed. “Your actions were not of your own doing. I suspected something had happened weeks ago when I started encountering your coven members out roaming the wilds indiscriminately. I suspected you were dead, I am pleased to find that isn’t the case.”

The Duke slowly rose to his feet. “I am undeserving of your mercy.”
“I gave no mercy.” Bilbo’s voice came out hard and cold. “I’ve already killed the one responsible for this mess.”

“I thank you for returning the coven to me . . . What of the Blood Letter?”

“He’s dead. We encountered him in Cardume. He had the gall to take what was mine. The Enchantress attempted the same mistake.” Bilbo explained darkly.

The Duke’s eyes flickered to the hunters. “Interesting company you’re keeping these days.”

“They are mine.” Bilbo's tone dripped with possessiveness.

The Duke raised his brows at the declaration, but didn’t comment. “And . . would you be willing to help me find what’s mine?”

“Eliza.”

“Yes, you said the Enchantress sent her away, but I cannot feel her. She must be hidden to me.”

“I will need a part of your bond.” Bilbo nodded.

“Of course.” The Duke pulled up his sleeve and slashed open his arm. Blood pooled lazily in the gash and he held out his arm to the smaller vampire.

Bilbo Walked over and dipped his finger in the blood. He stood near the Duke, facing perpendicular to both The Duke and his hunters. Thorin and his nephews watched in fascination as Bilbo put the blood to his lips.

His eyes turned black as he focused his magic. After a few moments, he grimaced, returning his focus to the present with a small groan.

“What?! What is it?! Is she all right?! Is she hurt?!” The Duke shot off desperately.

“She’s in Imladris.” Bilbo groaned.

“Imladris?! What-Why?! How?!”

“The Enchantress must have sent her there knowing your connection would be cut so you wouldn’t go looking for her.” Bilbo guessed.

The Duke stared wide-eyed, his hand covering his mouth in disbelief.

“Um, what’s Imladris?” Kili hesitantly asked.

“You might know of it by a different name. Are you familiar with Rivendell?”

“Rivendell? The hidden city?” Fili asked.

“The same.” Bilbo nodded.

“I thought it was just a peaceful commune. They claim to be separated from the evils of the world. Only those who know how to find it can get there.” Fili listed off what little they knew about it.

“That is all true. It’s a place of peace protected by a strong magical barrier that repels both dark magic and uninvited guests, though the second isn’t quite as painful. Only one with fairy magic and familiar with the barrier could hope to pass through it.”
“It has magic?” Thorin wondered.

“It’s doesn't just have magic. It’s a fairy sanctuary. A place of safety and rest for peaceful magical creatures.”

“Then how could a vampire be there?” Fili asked confusion warring with suspicion.

“Even creatures of dark magic are welcome as long as they uphold the rules of peace. In fact, there is a small coven that resides there, The Pacifists. They don’t believe in killing humans for much any reason really. Most will only feed from willing donors, though some go even as far as rejecting the act of biting and will only eat from collected blood, only from willing donors of course.” Bilbo explained with a hint of distaste.

“You don’t sound like you agree with them.” Thorin ventured cautiously.

Bilbo scoffed. “They’re still vampires. They believe the way they do out of their own sense of superiority. They see humans as lessor life forms in need of protecting. Instead of seeing humans as meat cattle they see them more as milking cows. They still see humans as a food source they just think it’s . . beneath them to kill such poor, pathetic creatures. They’re like the . . vegetarians of the vampire world. Give them the chance and they’d heard the humans around and milk them for blood.”

“But they’re still allowed at Rivendell?” Kili wondered.

Bilbo shrugged. “Well, they don’t intend harm on anyone and there’s not enough of them to carry out such a scheme. As I said, they’re a small coven. Little more than half a dozen last I knew.”

“And Eliza is with them?” The Duke seemed to have recovered.

“She must have been enchanted into the pacifists' ways.”

“How can I retrieve her if I cannot go to her?!” The Duke was clearly distressed.

“Calm down. At least she’s safe. And her mind has likely already cleared-“

“They will kill her! If she no longer keeps to the Pacifists' ways, they will kill her.” The Duke panicked.

Bilbo rolled his eyes. “Imladris is a place of peace. They will not kill her. They may restrain her, but they will not harm her. We only need to go request her release.”

“I-I have never been to Imladris. I don’t know how to find it! How will I contact them?!”

“And that’s why I said we, you lovesick moron! Stop panicking and start listening or I’ll decide to leave you to your own devices!” Bilbo snapped at the panicking vampire.

The Duke stared at him with wide eyes. “You will help me?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time.” Bilbo retorted shortly.

“You-you have done so much for me already-“

“And you will repay me for every bit of it.”

“Yes, yes, of course.” The Duke finally seemed to calm down and he nodded gratefully.
Bilbo sighed. “Mated vampires are such a pain in the arse.” He grumbled under his breath.

Thorin raised his brow. Did this mean what he thought this meant. “What about our plans?”

“Our plans do not change. Eliza is in no danger, so there’s no hurry. We were planning to pass by the sanctuary on our way anyway, so Duke can accompany us and I’ll help him retrieve his mate when we get close.”

“He’s going to . . . travel with us?” Fili asked, already eyeing the new vampire suspiciously.

“Yes, if he wants my help, he’ll have to get it on my time.”

“Is that . . . safe?” Thorin asked, glancing between his and the other vampire.

Bilbo raised a brow at him. “You’re already traveling with one vampire, what’s another one?” Bilbo must have read the difference in his eyes. “If he even thinks about touching any of you, I’ll kill him. He knows that. Don’t you, Duke?”

The Duke nodded seriously. “Never mess with another vampire’s property. Even if I didn’t owe Bilbo more than I could repay, I know better than to test his wrath. Besides, I swore fealty to him ages ago. If he gives a command, I obey.”

Bilbo turned a raised brow to his hunters. Kili was the first to respond.

“Cool.” He put his weapons away in a show of acceptance. Fili followed more cautiously and finally even Thorin sheathed his weapons.

“Duke, this is Oakenshield and his nephews.” Bilbo introduced, purposely leaving out their names. “Should they choose to give you their names, it will be their own decisions.” He explained.

Thorin was grateful for the censure. He still wasn’t comfortable giving out his name to a vampire. Kili, though, apparently had no problem with it.

“I’m Kili.” He stepped forward and held out his hand for a shake. “Bilbo’s Our vampire.”

The Duke raised a brow and carefully accepted the offered hand. “Your vampire?” He asked curiously, and raised a brow at Bilbo.

“That’s right.” Kili nodded confidently. Bilbo chuckled indulgently but didn’t deny it.

“There must be quite the story behind this.” The Duke mused.

“Yes, well. We can talk about it later. It’s late and my hunters are exhausted from your coven stalking us the past several nights. Go let your coven know you’ll be absent from a while. You still have that day cloak, I hope?”

“Yes, of course.” Duke turned to do as told.

“Oh, and Duke.” The vampire turned back around. “No one else is to know of this little incident.” Bilbo’s voice turned dark and threatening. “Make sure your coven keeps it quite or you won’t have one anymore.”

The Duke nodded, taking the threat for the promise it was. “It never happened. What’s there to talk about?”

Bilbo gave a short nod and The Duke disappeared into the darkness.
“Ya sure this is a good idea?” Nori slipped out of the shadows.

Bilbo glared at him. “It’s about time you showed back up.”

Nori just shrugged unrepentantly.

“Duke will not betray me.”

“And the rest of ‘em?”

Bilbo sighed. “Are under Duke’s influence. It was a large coven. Slaughtering them all would be just as likely to draw attention.”

Nori nodded but didn’t seem pleased by it.

“Get some sleep.” Bilbo waved his hunter’s to their bedrolls. “I will keep watch.”

The hunters hesitantly obeyed and were soon settling down for some much needed rest.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: The company has a rather awkward dinner after their first day of travel and The Duke proves to be quite the valuable information source, especially about a particular curly haired vampire.

So, I started playing Xanje recently. If any of you happen to play you can look me up (under the same name). I started a forum thread there that's sort of a progress blog where I just talk about what I'm working on and how it's going. It's just my thoughts and updates, really. I don't have anyone in rl I can talk to about my writing, so I just needed a outlet to ramble, I guess. XD Of course you are welcome to chat, comment, leave suggestion/requests or whatever.

If your curious, Xanje is a pet breeding/collection game that focuses on community. So you grow your pets by interacting on the forums (or playing games).

You can find it [here](http://example.com) if you're interested.
I was so, so close!! I was trying really hard to have "Small, but Fierce" ready to start posting by today, but I just missed my goal. I'm on chapter 24!! But I won't be done with chapter 25 until sometime this week. XD I though about starting the posts anyways, but decided to just wait to start posting it next month.

So, I can definitely say that bi-monthly updates for "Small, but Fierce" will begin in June. Yay! I'm so excited to start posting it! It's really taken on a life of it's own and I think I've decided to make it longer than I originally intended. It's recently taken some plot adjustments. XD

Anyway, I know you're here to read a fic so I won't go into it. If you want to find out more about progress and development, you can always check out my thread on Xanje.

Thorin still didn’t sleep deeply, nerves still too wound up to do much more than doze. He awoke even before the sun to find Bilbo and a new heavily cloaked figure conversing quietly near the edge of their camp. He did his best to stomp down the jealousy as they huddled together, their voices inaudible.

He got up with stretch, hoping his alert presence alone would be enough to separate them at least a few inches. It wasn’t. Bilbo glanced over at him briefly before returning to his conversation with the Duke.

Thorin went about getting things ready to go and, a few moments later, the vampires finally broke and Bilbo started waking up the others. By the time the sun was fully up, they were already on the move.

Thorin glanced over at the two vampires walking along beside them. Well, Bilbo was walking. The Duke looked like he was just being dragged along for the ride. By mid-morning, the Duke’s feet weren’t even moving.

Bilbo huffed a sigh of annoyance and hoisted the larger vampire up over his shoulders like an errant lamb. It was a rather comical sight.

"Is he okay?" Kili spurred his horse closer to ask.

"No, Kili. He’s a vampire. Vampires aren’t meant to be out under the sun."

"You seem to take it better than he does." Fili added.

"Yes, well, I am significantly older and more powerful than he is. And I have a little more tolerance for the sun than most. Not to say that it’s pleasant, even for me, but it doesn’t weigh on me quite as much and the clothes Dori made for me help a great deal."

"Well, we can put him on a horse, if you want. You don’t have to carry him." Kili offered.
Bilbo huffed. “I doubt even your horses, as accustomed to my presence as they are, would want to carry a vampire. I can carry him just fine.”

The subject was dropped and they continued on in silence. Thorin had been concerned that the invalid vampire was going to slow them down, but Bilbo made sure to keep up with their usual pace.

Later that evening, after the sun went down and the camp was set, the Duke finally emerged from his coverings with a groan. “I don’t know how you stand day travel, Bilbo. It’s absolutely horrid.”

Bilbo chuckled. “It does put an itch in your throat, doesn’t it?”


Bilbo raised a brow at him. “Do you need to feed?”

The Duke swallowed almost audibly and glanced around at the hunters. “It might be best.”

Bilbo nodded. He paused in thought for a moment. “Wait here. Guard my hunters, would you?”

The Duke nodded and Bilbo as gone. The hunters kept glancing warily at the new vampire as Bilbo’s absence continued to drag on. About fifteen minutes later, Bilbo re-emerged with a man in tow. The said human immediately doubled over and vomited.

“Sorry about that.” Bilbo patted the man’s back sympathetically. “Speed was a necessity.”

“Bilbo? What are you doing?” Thorin asked cautiously.

“This is Jacob from Cardume. He signed my contract. He’s agreed to donate some blood for the Duke here. However,” he turned to the other vampire, “you may only take as much as is safe. He is not to be harmed.”

“Of course.” The Duke agreed before tilting his head quizzically. “You made a contract with the people of Cardume?”

“Most of them, yes. You can keep that in mind while you’re watching over it in the future.” Bilbo turned back to the human. “Whenever you’re ready Jacob.”

The man straightened a little unsteadily but nodded as he wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

Bilbo waved the two out of the camp. “No harm, Duke.” Bilbo warned one more time as the vampire led his meal into the darkness and out of sight.

“Are you sure-“ Thorin approached cautiously.

“He’ll be fine.” Bilbo cut him off, rolling his shoulders and huffing out a breath. “Nori! I think I need a bite myself.” He announced before heading away from the camp in a different direction than the Duke.

Nori’s brows shot up as he glanced from Bilbo on Thorin and back before taking off after the vampire.

“What?” Thorin tried to ask in vain as the two disappeared into the darkness and he was left standing where he was.

“What was that all about?” Kili wondered. “Why didn’t they just eat here? It’s not like we’ve never seen Bilbo eat before.”
There was a loud moan from the direction the duke had gone and Thorin wondered if he needed to interfere. He glanced at his nephews to gauge their reactions. Kili looked confused but Fili’s head was lowered and he was picking at the grass by his feet where he sat. Was he blushing?

Thorin suddenly remembered that Fili seemed to know more than he should. “What do you know, Fili?” Thorin asked in a tone that would accept nothing but the truth.

There was a scream now, echoed by a cry in the other direction.

“Don’t!” Fili stopped Thorin in his tracks before he could charge into the darkness.

“What?! Why?! Tell me what you know!” Thorin snapped. He needed answers now!

“They aren’t hurting them.” Fili blushed furiously. “They-They’re . . . pleasuring them.” His volume dropping.

Thorin’s brain skidded to a halt. “What?”

Fili sighed. “When . . powerful vampires bite their . . victims . . it makes them feel good . . like really good . . like sex good.” Fili continued haltingly when his uncle didn’t seem to be catching on.

Thorin’s jaw dropped.


Fili rolled his eyes. “I don’t know. I don’t know how other vampires do it, but Bilbo just eats while Nori jerks himself off.” His mouth snapped shut as soon as the words left his mouth and he paled and looked wide-eyed at his uncle. Clearly he hadn’t meant to reveal that much.

“What?” Thorin’s tone dropped into a growl.

“Um-“

“How long has this been happening? And how do you know of it?” Even Thorin had somehow missed it.

“It, uh, started after Annuminas, as far as I know, and I kind of, um, followed Nori out of camp and, uh . . spied on them.”

Thorin’s eyes widened. Since Annuminas?! He had known Nori was ‘helping’ Bilbo, but this is not what he thought was going on. His mind zipped back to all those nights when Bilbo and Nori would both disappear for a while. Is this why? Where they sneaking off to rendezvous right under his nose?! Would Bilbo come back to his arms right after his fling with Nori?!

He rubbed a hand over his gaping mouth, hurt and betrayal resurfacing in his chest. The whole time he had been pursuing Bilbo and the vampire had been sneaking off with someone else!

“It’s not like that, Uncle.” Fili interrupted his thoughts, voice strong with confidence.

“Like what?” Thorin’s voice was weak from shock.

“They’re not together like that. Bilbo needs to eat. Nori just gets a good time out of it, but they don’t do anything more. . . . At least, they didn’t.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”
Fili shrugged. “Bilbo was discrete about it before. I don’t think he wanted you to know about it, but he doesn’t seem to care anymore considering he called Nori out right in front of you.”

Thorin sat heavily onto his bedroll, his mind swimming. Had Bilbo hidden it from him because he knew the hunter wouldn’t understand? Did the fact that he wasn’t hiding it now mean that he didn’t care what Thorin thought anymore? Was he even now using the thief to work out some of his pent up tension?

Thorin’s chest burned with anger and jealousy at the though of the thief’s hands on his vampire.

Just then the Duke returned, supporting a dazed but satisfied looking young man against his side. “Sorry about that. Didn’t realize he was a screamer.” He smirked.

Before Thorin could think to be disgusted, Bilbo reappeared dragging a blissfully boneless Nori in his wake. He dropped him into his bedroll rather unceremoniously and walked over to the Duke and his young man. “Ready to go home.”

The man nodded and Bilbo wrapped his arm around his waist. “Try closing your eyes this time, it might help with the nausea.” In the next blink, Bilbo and the human were gone.

Thorin couldn’t help it. He glared darkly over at the thief, who just grinned back smugly.

“Guess the boy told ya, huh?”

Thorin’s glare only darkened.

Nori shrugged. “No point glaring at me for what you messed up.”

“Did you touch him?” Thorin’s question came out low and threatening.

“Wouldn’t ya like ta know.” Nori sneered back. “Ain’t none ‘o yer business anymore, is it?”

Thorin scowled but turned away. His muscles were tense, he wanted to knock that condescending sneer right off the thief’s face.

“This sounds interesting.” The Duke commented, having watched the little exchange. “Are the two of you his... lovers?”

Thorin’s scowl deepened.

“Nah, I’m just a friend and convenient meal, though it does come with benefits.” Nori winked. “Oakenshield, here, tried to make it to lover status, but royally screwed up his chances.”

“Oh, how so?” The Duke asked curiously.

“He found Bilbo killing a villager, Accused him of lying and basically being evil incarnate. Turns out it was a ghoul.” Kili answered bitterly. He clearly still hadn’t really forgiven his uncle yet.

“Were you close?” The Duke asked.

Thorin shrugged. “Somewhat.” Was the most he was willing to give.

“I see.” Duke hummed then paused for a moment. “So you think you’ve lost your chance now?” He aimed at Thorin.

Thorin crossed his arms. It wasn’t really any of this new vampire’s business. “He hasn’t let me
The Duke nodded in understanding. “And, yet, here you are. . . alive, I might add.”

Thorin’s eyes narrowed at the vampire. “What are you suggesting?”

“Well,” Duke began, “If it were me, or just about any other vampire out there, there are several reactions one could expect from such situation. If you were just a convenient source of entertainment, I’d have let you walk away and moved on to the next good time. If I had come to consider you a possession, I would simple enchant you and take away your will to leave or disobey. If I had come to love you, and you did something so terrible that it broke that love, then I would rip your heart out while it was till beating and eat it.” His voice dropped dangerously and the hunter’s looked at him warily. “If, however, the offense wasn’t that bad, I would probably just give you the cold shoulder while secretly making sure you weren’t in any danger until you came groveling back for forgiveness.”

Thorin studied the vampire. “Are you saying I still have a chance?”

The Duke shrugged. “From what I understand, he killed nearly half of my coven for your sake, even after your fallout. He remains by your side, despite the distance he’s put between you. And you’re still alive. I admit that Bilbo is a bit of an anomaly in the world of vampires, so it’s hard to say for sure, but the evidence is certainly in your favor.”

Thorin was silent as he considered the new information.

“Are you saying that Bilbo’s strange, even for a vampire?” Fili asked curiously.

The Duke chuckled. “All vampires have their little eccentricities. It’s kind of a thing for us, but Bilbo seems more eccentric than typical most of the time.”

“So all vampires are eccentric? How is that different from just being weird?” Kili wondered.

The Duke chuckled again. “Eccentricities are much like gifts, only every vampire has at least one. An eccentricity is something about us, either preference, habit or trait that doesn’t quite . . fit with our vampire nature. It can be something unnecessary, redundant or even outright counter to our nature in severe cases.”

“Some believe that they are distorted or magnified aspects of our former human personas or possibly connected to a trauma from our previous life that bled into our new existence. No one really knows. It doesn’t help that we don’t really remember our human lives.”

The hunters were silent for a moment as they thought. “Like his tea drinking!” Kili piped up excitedly.

The Duke chuckled and nodded. “A pointless habit for a blood drinker, but he’s quite obsessive about it, is he not? Bilbo has many such eccentricities, including some that would be considered of the severe variety. It makes him . . unpredictable, even by vampire standards.”

“Like what?” Fili pried, eager to learn more.

“Like his denial. Bilbo has a habit of ignoring his needs and denying himself of his wants. A very un-vampire like thing to do. After all, what’s the point of having power if not to take what we want? And we are, at our cores, creatures of pleasure and desire.”

“What does any of this have to do with my relationship with him?” Thorin asked. The information
was interesting but he didn’t see how it related to his situation.

“It relates, Mr. Oakenshield, because Bilbo has told me many times that he has no intention of having a partner or taking a mate and yet you seem to have, at least started to, weaken that resolve. But, because of his tendencies to deny himself that which he desires, your . . . offenses may have driven him deep into the source of the mindset, whatever it may be, to the point where you might not be able to draw him back out again.”

“To summarize,” the Duke sighed, “What might seem encouraging if it were any other vampire, doesn’t necessarily mean the same with Bilbo. He seems to have a habitual tendency towards self-abuse. Another severe eccentricity of his.”

“If you’re going to insist on talking about me in my absence, I wish you would at least leave my name out of it.” Bilbo ambled casually back into the camp.

“Ah, Bilbo! I was giving your hunters a little lesson on vampire eccentricities.” Duke greeted.

“Yes, I know.” Bilbo replied flatly. “At least use a namesake, would you? It’s distracting.”

“And which namesake would you like me to use, Master Bilbo. ‘Halfling?’”

Bilbo brow twitched.

“Mannered Demon?”

Bilbo grimaced in disgust.

“Or would you prefer-“

“Don’t!” Bilbo ordered darkly. “Don’t even say it.”

The Duke shrugged.

“Just use pronouns or something or make something up.”


“Names hold power.” The Duke explained. “When a powerful being uses the true name of a weaker being, they gain power over that individual. Is that not why hunters never reveal their true names to outsiders?”

“Yeah, but Bilbo’s more powerful than you.”

“Well, when a powerful being’s name is spoken by a lessor being, rather than giving power over the stronger being, it simply draws the stronger being’s awareness to the lesser being. Think of it as a sort of summoning. Whenever you speak his name, it drags his awareness back to you, no matter where or how far away he is.”

“That is also why certain names are considered taboo. The Dark Lord’s name, for example. It has been forbidden to speak it for so long that few even remember it. It was forbidden so as to not draw his attention back to the world.” Bilbo added.

“So, that’s why you told the innkeeper at Cardume that they just had to say your name and you’d hear them.” Fili deducted and Bilbo nodded as he pulled out his pipe.

“Wait . . . does that mean that you’re eavesdropping on every conversation we have about you?” Kili
asked suspiciously.

Bilbo smirked in reply. “I honestly don’t know why that surprises you. We’re typically in such close proximity that I couldn’t not hear your whispers even if I was trying.” He huffed.

Kili spluttered and Bilbo chuckled. “Honestly, though, I do my best to tune out most of it. So most of your secrets are probably safe. But saying my name automatically means you will have my attention for at least the next few seconds after saying it.”

“So you can hear your name even if you can’t actually . . . hear it?” Fili wondered.

“It’s more like a feeling. A tug on my magic which sort of displaces my awareness to the source of the summon . . . magically, of course.”

“Huh.”

“Where you really called the Mannered Demon?” Kili suddenly switched topics.

“I think that’s enough questions for tonight.” Bilbo smoothly cut off before they could pry anymore answers out of him. “We still have a long ways to go before we reach Imladris and I’m sure Duke is eager to get his mate back.”

“Aww, but we were finally learning more about you.” Kili whined.

“I know.” Bilbo grumbled under his breath and waved the boys into their bed rolls regardless. “It’s possible to know too much, you know.”

“Not with you.” Kili disagreed. “I want to know everything. It’s too bad you can’t tell us about your human life. I wonder what you were like then.”

“Weak and pathetic, probably.” Bilbo retorted distractedly.

“No way.” Kili laughed. “I bet you were the sweetest, cutest little thing. Drinking tea and fussing over fancy clothes.”

“How is that any different than now, Kili?” Fili asked with a smirk.

Bilbo spluttered indignantly and ordered them to sleep as if by ordering it he could make it happen faster.

They laughed at his expense and settled down into their bedrolls. Some of the tension over the camp seemed to drain at the friendly bantering and even Thorin found himself relaxing just a little more.

He glanced over at the two vampires sitting side-by-side. Bilbo was watching over the boys with the barest hint of a smirk on his lips. The Duke was eyeing Bilbo with a blatant look of curiosuty and fascination.

Thorin suppressed another growl. They weren’t actually doing anything, aside from sitting together. And the Duke was obviously already mated, but Thorin still couldn’t stop the reaction. It rankled him to see Bilbo with or even next to anyone else. He suspected part of it was due to his own insecurity about his standing with Bilbo, like he feared someone would take advantage and step in and woo his vampire away at any time.

He knew it was his own fault. He had created the distance, and, if someone else stepped in, it was only as much as he deserved. The knowledge still didn’t quell his instinctive desire to possess, to
ward off anyone who so much as looked at his vampire, his mate! Mahal! He was starting to act like a vampire himself! Where was this-this . . possession, this need coming from?! He needed Bilbo like he needed air and it was getting stronger everyday.

He wasn’t sure how much longer he could stay silent. How much longer he could let the vampire keep brushing him off before he did something daringly stupid. Forget Nori, forget him being a vampire, Thorin was starting to think he would even be able to overlook it if Bilbo had been killing the villagers soon, so desperate he was to get that piece of himself back.

He glanced up at Bilbo and their eyes met. Thorin refused to look away and held his stare. Bilbo’s gaze was mostly blank as they stared each other down. Finally Bilbo looked away, but not before Thorin caught a flicker of something in his eyes. Was that . . fondness? Hope swelled in his chest and he finally relaxed back into his bedroll. Maybe he did still have a chance after all.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Thorin's getting fed up and the hunters get a history lesson. The Duke confronts Bilbo on the true nature of his continued distance from Thorin.

I'm not sure what Sneak Peek to post next month, so go ahead and cast a vote if you have a preference.

Lost in Shadows (Devouring Ring!Verse)
The Crime Lord and the Warden (Modern!AU; from the prompt)
The Sea is My Home (Merpeople!AU; Modern!AU; Sequel to 'The Sea Calls to Me'; Explicit)
Love at my Fingertips (Telepahic!Thorin; inspired by Yubisaki no Koi)
History

Chapter Notes

The second chapter of Small, but Fierce has been posted and you can expect bi-monthly updates from here on out. :D

June's Sneak Peek: Lost in Shadows
Bilbo discovers the ring in the goblin tunnels and is grateful for the help in his escape. Only now he can’t get it off and all of his dwarrow seem to think he is dead. Thorin thinks he is being haunted by the halfling he failed to protect and his company begin to question his sanity. Bilbo suffers the longer he wears the cursed ring, mind and body wasting away from constant exposure to its poison. Imprisoned in a world of cold shadows, can his dwarrow rescue him before its too late?

Thorin/Bilbo, hurt!Bilbo, Invisible!Bilbo

They continued their steady southward travel with their new vampire companion in tow. Literally, considering that Bilbo had to carry him most of the time as they traveled. They passed around the mountain that was the home of the Duke’s coven before continuing south towards the forest near the Misty Mountains where Rivendell was located.

The travel was . . interesting. Aside from the Duke’s lack of day travelling prowess, he made up for his daytime gangliness by offering stories and interesting tid-bits in the evening after feeding, which he had to do every evening after being under the sun all day.

His complete vulnerability was only further emphasizing Bilbo’s own power and unique traits. As far as the hunter’s could tell, the Duke was not a weak vampire. He had a namesake and, based on his stories, was older than the Blood Letter. And yet, Bilbo still seemed to make him look like a helpless child in comparison. It was no wonder the vampire had sworn fealty as it was likely out of self preservation as much as anything else.

Though the hunters did wonder why there weren’t more vampires under his influence, if he really was so powerful. A question that Duke had been happy to answer.

“Bilbo’s a bit of an isolationist. He likes to be left alone and doesn’t like getting involved with others. It’s why so few know of his true power. He rarely displays it.”

“So how did you manage to attain his friendship?” Thorin had asked a bit petulantly.

“I would never flatter myself by claiming to have such a connection. Bilbo is my benefactor. I owe him my loyalty, if nothing else.”

That had been the end of that conversation. Indeed, the Duke was an excellent source of information both directly and indirectly. Though it was obvious Bilbo didn’t enjoy certain topics, particularly the ones involving him, he didn’t interfere and the Duke seemed to know when to stop the flow of information before Bilbo would step in and do it for him.
They sat around their campfire listening and questioning as they did most evenings. The boys were a constant flow of questions and requests. Nori didn’t seem to show much interest in the activity (he didn’t typically show much interest anything), though he was probably listening with an active ear.

Thorin, well, he was listening . . . mostly. When his eyes weren’t wondering to a particular curly haired vampire who was still giving him the cold shoulder. Oh, sure, he had opened up some, would engage more with the boys and stick closer to camp, at least until they all settled down for the night. But he never lingered in Thorin’s proximity and only responded enough that it couldn’t be said that he was ignoring the hunter.

Thorin’s frustration grew with every passing day. They needed to talk, he needed to apologize, but, every time he brought it up, Bilbo shot it down and moved on. He knew they really needed to talk about what happened in Cardume. They couldn’t just ignore it, not if they wanted things to get better. And Thorin did, desperately, but it was beginning to look like Bilbo didn’t.

Thorin clenched his fists repetitively, the only sign of his growing tension beside the near constant line of his shoulders now. He had been prepared to beg, to grovel, but he was starting to lean more towards giving the vampire a piece of his mind whether he wanted it or not.

The only problem with that plan was that he couldn’t exactly control the vampire, keep him from just walking off or ignoring him like he had been. He could easily overpower Thorin if he wanted. Thorin needed to find a way to keep the vampire . . . contained or at least subdued so that he would have time to say what he wanted to say. Which was easier said than done and the reason he hadn’t done anything yet.

“So why the ‘Blood Letter?’” He tuned back into the conversation to hear Kili ask. “I get ‘Ghoul Maker’ but what do blood letters have to do with anything?”

The vampires looked at him in confusion for a few moments before Bilbo ventured an answer. “Because he was a Blood Letter.”

“What? I didn’t see any blood letters?”

Bilbo’s eyes widened in understanding and he chuckled, puffing out clouds of smoke with the action. “Not-not letters, Kili, like writing letters. Blood letting.”

It was Kili’s turn to look confused. “What? What other kind of letters are there? Letting blood what?”

Bilbo chuckled again. “N-no, Kili. Blood letting was a medical procedure used many years ago.”

Both boys looked at him quizzically and even Thorin found his interest peaked. He hadn’t much thought of the origins of vampire namesakes beyond the obvious. Of course, he hadn’t been thinking of much of anything besides a certain vampire lately.

“A long time ago, by human standards anyway, it became a common belief among humans that sickness in the body was a result of bad blood. So, to heal the body, physicians would cut their patient’s wrist to let out the bad blood. It was called blood letting. It became a very popular medical procedure for a while.” Bilbo explained.

The boys stared at him looking stuck between horrified and morbidly fascinated.

“He was called the Blood Letter because he drained his own blood in order to make his ghouls.” Bilbo further explained.
“That’s a horrible thing to do! How is blood loss going to make someone better?!” Fili was outraged. “Wouldn’t that just kill them faster than whatever was making them sick in the first place?!”

Bilbo nodded. “There was a particularly high mortality rate during that time, but people just blamed it on not getting treated soon enough.”

“Who even came up with such a stupid idea?” Kili wondered. “Bad blood? Who would come up with that? It almost sounds like something—“

“A vampire would say?” Bilbo finished his thought for him, a spark of amusement in his eyes and a small smirk on his lips.

The hunters gaped at him. “Really?” Fili asked, though it was obvious it was true.

Bilbo nodded. “The original Blood Letter, the one whom the procedure was named after, unknowingly to the humans. He masqueraded as a healer among humans. He was a superb physician, having been one in his previous life combined with a vampire’s speed and steadiness. In fact, his transition from human doctor to vampire doctor was so seamless, most vampires didn’t even notice his ‘rebirth.’”

“Fascination with medicine was his eccentricity and it drove him even to continue treating humans. But he was still a vampire, he needed to feed and he discovered a way to harvest the blood with social approval. He used his renown as a superior and innovative doctor to convince humans of his ‘bad blood theory.’ The humans bought into it and he was able to harvest from willing patients who would never be any the wiser. Of course, occasionally his patients would die, due to being weakened from blood loss on top of their illnesses, but he would simply claim the blood was too bad to be saved.”

“The theory and practice became popular and soon physicians everywhere were basically performing a vampire harvesting ritual on their patients for everything from the common cold to fatal diseases.”

“Someone must have figured out what was going on. What happened to him?” Fili asked after a thoughtful pause.

“Well.” Bilbo chuckled. “That’s where the story gets even more interesting. ‘You see, he was also the one who first discovered the affects of dead man’s blood on vampires.” Bilbo took another puff off his pipe. “He had a patient die on him one day, before he could perform the blood letting procedure. Vampires aren’t drawn to the blood of the dead. It lacks the life energy that we need to support our own shallow semblance of life. But he thought it a shame to waste, so he drained the patients blood anyway, or as much of it as he could get.”

“He drank it some time later and the villagers found him ‘dead’ in his home. There was a great deal of mourning and whole town put on an elaborate funeral for him. Casket, funeral march, respects, reserved burial plot and everything.” Bilbo’s voice dripped with amusement. “It took several days to arrange, of course. Finally, they were just preparing to lower him into his grave when he woke up in a panic. He burst out of the casket, right there in front of the whole town, hissing and snarling!” Bilbo voiced dramatically. “Only to burst into flames and fizzle out in a screaming pile of ash! They had decided to bury him in the middle of the day so the whole town could attend.” Bilbo chuckled in amusement.

The hunters were fascinated. They hadn’t seen this story-teller side of Bilbo. “Were you there for it?” Fili asked curiously.

“Not in close proximity, but I was around. I saw him go up in flames, the idiot. I warned him he
was going to get himself killed.”

“You didn’t try to help him?” Kili wondered.

Bilbo gave the teen a confused look. “Why would I help him? I kept an eye on him for academic reasons. It was a fascinating little experiment, but it ended the way I told him it would.”

“So, you didn’t agree with the way he did things?” Fili pried.

Bilbo puffed another cloud of smoke. “Vampires are hunters and humans are their prey. For a vampire to try to live among humans and not be found out, it’s like a wolf pretending to be a sheep while eating them a bit on the side and believing that they won’t figure it out. Sheep may be stupid, but they have instincts too, survival instincts. People were going to notice sooner or later. All it took was one little slip-up.”

“Hey, who are you calling stupid?!” Kili protested but his brother spoke over him. “So, people stopped blood letting after that?”

Bilbo sent Kili a playful wink before answering the question. “It was far worse than that. Word spread fast and there was a massive backlash that affected several regions. Many doctors who had practiced blood letting were apprehended and executed on charges of being a vampire or in league with vampires. Physicians as a whole were regarded with suspicion and distrust. Most were either killed or cast out.”

“With such a shortage of doctors, disease and illness ran rampant. People were dropping like flies from even easily treated conditions. Populations dropped which in turn affected the vampire world. Fewer humans means more competition, more deaths due to over feeding, more aggression between vampires. It got so bad it turned into a sort of civil war among us. Those who understood the necessity of not killing to feed and damaging the food population any more and those who didn’t care and just wanted to eat their fill indiscriminately.”

“Powerful vampires and covens started ‘claiming’ towns, protecting them from other vampires in order to protect their own food source. Territories were fought over and established. Humans accepted their new masters in fear and desperation. Believe it or not, it was vampire interference that brought back balance, ended those dark days.”

“In the end, a lot of humans and vampires alike died because of one foolish vampire’s eccentricities. Triggered a sort of mini ‘dark ages.’ But, with a little help, the humans were able to bounce back. Populations flourished in most protected territories. More humans meant more food, more food meant fewer reasons for vampires to fight among themselves. Slowly things returned to normal. Smaller territories began to merge into larger ones held by the most powerful vampires who act more as balance control now more than anything. Many covens exist within each territory these days but they risk the lord’s wrath if they cause too much damage.”

Bilbo finished and puffed on his pipe, his eyes staring blankly out into the darkness as if he could see those days long ago.

The hunters were quite as they processed the new information. This was a side of history one would never find in any library. A first hand account, judging by the way Bilbo was telling it, a merging of both human and dark history.

“It sounds like Cardume.” Thorin murmured.

Bilbo’s eyes refocused and he threw Thorin a curious brow.
“They treated the Blood Letter like a guardian.” He clarified.

Bilbo nodded in comprehension. “Cardume is more isolated than most towns. They are vulnerable because of it and rely more on supernatural interference. They haven’t . . . developed at the same rate as other towns. You could say that they still haven’t fully escaped the dark ages.”

“That’s what you meant when you said they ‘embraced’ the monster?”

Bilbo nodded absently. “He was their protection as much as their affliction. Removing him meant leaving them vulnerable. I was planning to have Duke take care of him after finding out what was going on with him, but you forced my hand.”

Thorin felt he should apologize, but it didn’t feel right to do so . . casually. Bilbo would likely just shrug it off.


“Because it’s his job.” Bilbo answered flatly and the Duke winced. “He and his coven are supposed to manage this area of my territory in exchange for feeding rights.”

“It won’t happen again.” The Duke apologized once again.

“Oh, hush. It wasn’t entirely your fault.” Bilbo dismissed it.

Thorin felt bitterness blossom in his chest at the new vampire. Why did he get to apologize and be forgiven so easily and Thorin wasn’t even allowed to bring up what happened? He hid his scowl behind an arm set on his knee.

“Enough stories for tonight. It’s time for bed.” Bilbo announced. The teens groaned and complained but more out of duty than any real desire to stay awake any longer. They were sporting huge yawns and droopy eyes before they even settled into their bedrolls.

Bilbo smirked at the boys and their superficial complaining before glancing over at Thorin. He seemed to be doing that a lot lately and Thorin boldly met and held his gaze. Something flickered in Bilbo’s eyes, but then he blinked and it was gone. He turned away and wondered into the darkness once the boys were settled, snug and snoring away in their bedrolls.

Bilbo regarded him as he cautiously approached. He was seeing so many new sides to Bilbo, so

~The Duke~

He stalked out into the darkness. He knew Bilbo was nearby, he never seemed to venture far from his hunters, except for when he was retrieving food and Duke knew letting anything happen to them on his watch would most certainly end in his demise.

He spotted the smaller vampire perched on a good sized boulder, pipe held firm between his teeth while he fiddled with something in his fingers, lazy puffs of smoke rising about him. He had been smoking almost non-stop lately. He set his pipe as soon as they stopped for the night and typically continued puffing on it until almost sunrise the next morning.

Duke regarded him as he cautiously approached. He was seeing so many new sides to Bilbo, so
many changes. At first he was confused, but, after hearing the spat between the hunter and the thief, well, it was obvious what had happened. There was only one thing that could change a vampire so much.

The Duke took a seat on the boulder, briefly glancing the nature of the trinket Bilbo seemed so distracted by. “Is that a blood ruby?” He asked in fascination.

Instantly the ring (yes, he was sure it was a ring) was gone and Bilbo’s hands were empty. “Duke.” Bilbo greeted.

“A blood ruby. Set into a ring. How romantic. I wonder who could have given you such a token.” Duke continued undeterred.

Bilbo shot him a side-long glare. “It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“If that were true, you wouldn’t be fiddling with it like some memento of a long lost lover.”

Bilbo scowled into the darkness. “I keep it because it’s a blood ruby.”

“If that were true, you’d be wearing it.”

Bilbo’s scowl deepened but he didn’t reply.

“I may not know you very well, but I know enough. And you’re different than before. A kind of different that can only be caused by one thing.”

“Don’t say it.” It was an order despite how whispered it came out.

The Duke paused a moment, testing the waters. “This isn’t about your argument in Cardume anymore, is it?”

“He lied to me. He proved he was exactly what I said he was.” Bilbo tried to divert the question.

“You wouldn’t be angry about that. Well, maybe at first, but, obviously, he was only doing what you already knew he was going to do. You probably already forgave him before it happened.”

“Really. Well, since you know so much why don’t you tell me what this is really about.” Bilbo huffed in annoyance.

Duke huffed a quiet laugh but quickly sobered. “I know what it’s like to love a human. You . . fear for him, his fragility . . his mortality. You want to protect him from our world but can’t bring yourself to do the one thing necessary to separate him from it: you can’t just leave him.”

Duke paused in silence. Bilbo’s eyes were glazed, his face set in just the barest hint of a pained grimace.

“You’re afraid he’ll find out, especially after all this mess with the Blood Letter and the Enchantress. You’re afraid it’s only a matter of time before he catches wind of your ‘attachment’ and decides your better off without it.”

Bilbo let out a shaker puff of smoke. “I fear nothing.” He had attempted for a flat delivery, but there was a quiver in his voice that belied his proud statement. But he wouldn’t be a vampire if he didn’t deny it, didn’t at least attempt to keep up appearances.

“Of course not.” The Duke superficially agreed. Vampires didn’t fear after all. They were power, they were death. He idly wondered if loving a human somehow evolved them (or crippled, some
would say), made them more susceptible to human emotions, more sympathetic. Or perhaps it was all superficial and vampires were just really good at pretending to be what their mates needed.

“You’re . . . concerns are valid.” He reassured. “But there’s not much point in distancing yourself now. If your sire finds out you have any amount of any sort of attachment to any of them . . . well, you know far better than I what he’ll do.”

Bilbo’s mouth clenched over his pipe. His face was tight in a pained scowl, but his eyes were empty and blank.

Duke shook his head in sympathy. He hadn’t had to deal with his sire in ages, Bilbo had been the one to free him from that. Just another reason he owed him. Bilbo had helped him more times than he knew what to do with. If any vampire deserved happiness, wouldn’t it be Bilbo?

“You’re going to suffer if or when he finds out anyway, why suffer unnecessarily now? Worse yet, why deprive yourself when there’s a chance he may never find out? . . . Or better, why not just eliminate the threat?” The suggestion came out as a dark, menacing whisper. Even he didn’t know the true extent of Bilbo’s power. Who knew what he was capable of if he set his mind to it?

As Bilbo’s face began to lax in thought, Duke got up and quietly made his way back to the camp. Bilbo would never think to oppose his sire on his own, but maybe he just needed a little push in the right direction.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: The Duke gets jittery with excitement as they draw closer to retrieving his mate, much the hunters’ amusement. Thorin learns more about his connection to their vampire.
Blood Sirens

Chapter Notes

So, I've been working on a sneak peek for a new idea that hit me and wouldn't leave me alone. What I intended to be a normal length 1st chapter, has turned into 3 chapters (so far), and the first two are over sized.

... this is why I can't write short stories. XD

Anyway~ If you want to know more, you can check out my thread on Xanje. ;p

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The days passed in their strange new routine as they continued their travels south. The vampires were a wealth of information, both historical and magical, and The boys prodded them for as much as they could get.

Bilbo’s temper had clearly cooled. He was being more open and interactive with the others again but he was still keeping his distance from Thorin. They still hadn't talked and Thorin was reaching the end of his rope.

Some of the pain in his chest had dimmed now that he knew Bilbo didn’t hate him. But it still hurt to have such a rift between them. What had felt like a gaping wound before now felt scabbed over. He didn’t feel like his heart was going to fall out now but it wasn’t healing right either.

He knew it would never be right until he had Bilbo back in his arms. He didn’t know how he knew and he didn't even flinch over the intensity of his need or desire anymore. He knew he needed Bilbo like he needed his right arm, his heart or even air! Bilbo was a part of him now and he couldn’t even bare to think of permanent separation. The thought of never reconciling hurt, not just a heart hurt, but a soul deep hurt. His very being ached at the idea.

That’s why he was so confident he needed the vampire. He had grown up to stories of Ones. He still wasn’t sure how much truth was involved in their telling. Wasn’t sure if such a thing even existed, at least for humans. It seemed almost magical in nature and thus more fitting for beings of magic, not humans.

No, he didn’t know what it was, but he knew it was there and it was making him miserable. Bilbo too. There was something there for him too. Thorin could see it in his eyes on the rare occasions that their gazes would meet anymore. Bilbo was either being more discreet or was avoiding his gaze. Another sign that something was off with the vampire.

He sighed in frustration as he sat tensely in his bed roll. He stared into the fire, but not really. The true target of his intense gaze was the short curly haired vampire who happened to be sitting directly across from him. He wondered if Bilbo knew he always sat directly across from him on purpose or if he could feel the weight of Thorin’s stares. He suspected he could, he had always been aware of his gazes before.

Bilbo would sit facing the fire more often now, but always avoided staring into the flame itself. The Duke sat down giddily next to Bilbo, rubbing his hands in excited anticipation. “We’re so close!
How many more days, Bilbo? When will we be close enough?” The vampire's excitement about having his mate back was building to annoying levels.

Bilbo sighed. He had been answering the same question every night for almost a week now. “A few more now. I won’t leave my hunters out here in the open. We’ll get them settled in the small forest south of here where they will at least be out of sight while I’m helping you get your mate back.”

“Why don’t we all just go to Rivendell? Wouldn’t that be easier?” Kili asked.

The corner of Bilbo’s mouth twitched. Thorin could spot most of his tells these days after spending so many hours studying his features. “You could . . go to Imladris, if you wanted, but you would have to leave your weapons outside of the barrier. I’m sure I could . . arrange an escort for you.” His voice fell and he looked down and fiddled with his pipe.

“What do you mean an ‘escort?’ Couldn’t you just show us the way?” Fili pried.

“I cannot.”

“Why not?” Kili wondered.

“I am . . forbidden from entering that space. I have a . . truce with the elven king who rules there. They will not grant me entry.”

“What?!” The boys looked disgusted and insulted on his behalf. “They let other vampires in, but not you?” Fili clarified.

“Yes.”

“Even though you’re not like the others?” Kili insisted.

“It’s not a matter of my nature, though it too was in question at one point. It’s a matter of my rank and . . connections.”

The teens seemed confused, but Thorin could read between the lines. Bilbo may not intend any harm, but there was someone who could use him to cause harm. His sire. Thorin’s blood boiled at the unnamed entity for probably the hundredth time since hearing of him in Cardume.

“But what if you needed sanctuary? They’d have to let you in!” Kili insisted.

Bilbo shook his head. “There is no sanctuary for me. It’s safer for them this way and, frankly, I don’t really need it. There is only one true . . threat for me and there is no where I could go to escape it.”

Even the boys seem to understand that as they dropped the conversation. “So, how are you going to get his mate back?” Fili wondered.

“I may not be allowed to enter, but I am well known there. I’ll send a message through one of their border patrols and they’ll escort her out to us.”

“I cannot wait! Oh, my sweet Eliza! How I have missed you!”

Bilbo rolled his eyes and shook his head at the sappy vampire’s outburst, but still wore a hint of a smirk.

The teens found him interesting enough and switched over their attention. “So, what’s she like?” Kili ventured.
“Now ya’ve Done it.” Nori groaned and mumbled as he turned away in his bedroll covering his ears with his pillow.

The boys only managed a brief quizzical look at the thief.

“Oh, my darling Love! She has hair black as night that’s spills about her like inky black falls of darkness! She has the warmest soft hazel eyes you could ever find. And her lips,” he groaned, “as red and sweet as blood itself!”

“Would it kill you to keep her description normal?” Bilbo huffed in exasperation. The hunters were all eyeing the Duke with raised eyebrows.

“And do her a disservice?! I would rather rip off my own limbs!”

Bilbo’s eyes rolled again and Nori snickered.

“I didn’t know vampires could be so . . . romantic.” Kili remarked offhandedly.

“Sappy is more like it.” Nori grumbled.

“There is little that can compare to a vampire who has found his love. Even dark magic cannot overpower love.” The Duke asserted.

“No, but it can taint it.” Bilbo murmured quietly, drawing Thorin’s eyes back to him. Their eyes met for a brief moment before Bilbo quickly looked away.

“So, how did you meet her?” Kili asked curiously.

“Oh, well, I was feeding on her, of course. Her blood was exquisite. Not like a blood siren’s but close. She was so delicious I enchanted her so I could return and feed on her again-”

“Wait. What?” Fili interrupted. “You were feeding on another vampire?”

“What? No, of course not. Vampires may bite each other but they can’t truly feed on each other. We bite for the sensation not the blood. Vampire blood lacks the life energy we need.” The Duke corrected.

The teens sent confused glances at their vampire. Bilbo ignored them but Thorin saw his little button nose twitch.

“Anyway-“

“What’s a blood siren?” Kili interrupted before the Duke could get started again.

The Duke huffed in exasperation. He would obviously rather be talking about his Eliza. “A blood siren is like the dark version of a soul mate. When we feed, we are only able to absorb a percentage of the life energy from our victims blood, depending on their compatibility to us. That’s why we have preferences, we instinctively seek out those with the highest compatibility to make our hunting more effective, not that their aren’t exceptions.”

“Anyway, a blood siren is someone whose life energy is one hundred percent compatible with us. As a result, their flavor is beyond compare and they grant us with the most energy and power when we feed on them. In theory, every vampire has one, but most never encounter their blood siren. Most vampires who do find their blood siren are so overwhelmed by the flavor and power they devour them on the spot.”
“They . . kill their soul-mate?” Kili asked confused.

Duke shook his head. “Don’t get so caught up on that term. A soul-mate is simply one who completes you, though humans typically use the term more symbolically. Even with true soul-mates among fairies, it doesn’t always result in romantic unions, though they are considered the norm. I guess you could say that vampires take a much more . . practical approach to finding the other half of our souls. We devour them. We absorb every speck of their life energy and merge it with our own. After all, a soul is far stronger whole and complete. Though some have argued that vampires have no souls. Regardless, the power of a vampire who has united with his blood siren can as much as double. It doesn’t sound all that impressive on paper, but image if some one like Bilbo, for example, was able to double his power.”

By the time Duke had finished his explanation, all three of the hunters were staring at Bilbo with eyes like saucers. Duke seemed to think they were imagining Bilbo with twice as much power and didn’t find it all that strange.

Bilbo shifted uncomfortably under their gazes, he knew what drove their stares.

“Is it possible for a vampire to become . . attached to his blood siren and choose not to eat them?” Thorin asked while staring intently at his tense vampire. He hadn’t used the words he wanted to, but it was better to not presume too much.

The Duke scoffed. “I doubt it. I’ve never heard of such a thing. Blood sirens are meant to be eaten. To stay in proximity to one’s siren without feeding would be akin to torture. The scent and call of power is just too much. There’s only one vampire I can think of who would even attempt such a thing let alone be even remotely capable of—” Duke trailed off as he took in the stares being directed at his fellow vampire.

Thorin’s daze was boring into Bilbo who was resolutely not returning it and puffing out smoke like a chimney.

The Duke’s brows shot up and his mouth fell open. “No. . . No, that’s not possible.” He glanced between Bilbo and Thorin quickly.

“Bilbo told the Blood Letter that Uncle was his blood siren.” Fili confirmed quietly.

Duke sent one quick glance between them before relaxing back into his seat in shock. Bilbo sat back straight and shoulders tense at the scrutiny. Duke ran a hand over his mouth and short trimmed beard as he stared forward at nothing. “By the Dark Lord, Bilbo, I never imagined your eccentricities were this severe.” He murmured.

Bilbo snorted, his body having almost completely lost its tension. “Please. Eccentricities have nothing to do with it. You know I don’t kill the humans I feed from. It’s simply a matter of not tasting.”

“And the scent?”

“Is wonderful. Why would I want to snuff it out?”

“And the power?!” Duke questioned almost desperately now.

“I already have more power than I use.”

“But what about your sire?! If your power was doubled you could stand a chance, maybe even overpower him?!” The Duke hissed.
Bilbo’s face and eyes instantly went blank. His posture became tense and deathly still, even the smoke ceased pouring from his lungs.

The hunters eyed their vampire with concern but Duke threw his hands in the air in exasperation before crossing them over his chest. “This is why your eccentricities are so severe. They keep you from what you want most! Freedom! For what?! Some human hunter?! You’re a glutton for punishment, Bilbo.”

Bilbo stayed frozen in his sudden tension. His gaze remaining forward in a daze, or so it seemed. Suddenly, Thorin realized the vampire’s eyes were set on him. Their gazes locked and Bilbo seemed to slowly ease out of his tension.

“Some things aren’t worth the sacrifice.” Bilbo’s voice was little more than a whisper, his eyes still locked with Thorin’s as if in a trance. Anyone who hadn’t been paying attention would have missed the soft confession.

The Duke huffed a dramatic sigh and shook his head. “And the thief thinks I’m sappy.” He grumbled.

Bilbo’s arm shot out and punched Duke in the arm in protest. Duke hissed at the heavy thud and rubbed his arm looking chastised.

A small smirk made its way onto Bilbo’s face, his eyes still locked on Thorin’s. Thorin’s own stare had lost it’s intensity. Bilbo’s was seeking something, comfort, strength, reassurance? He wasn’t sure what, but he offered everything. Anything Bilbo needed he would give. He felt a small smile of his own blossom discreetly, only for his vampire.

Bilbo eyes flickered to it before matching his gaze with a small, barely-there smile of his own. When he finally turned away, his posture was relaxed and his mood lightened.

Conversations were brought to an end as Bilbo shooed the boys into their bedrolls. Thorin felt lighter than he had in a while. He mulled over what he had learned. He knew at least part of what was going on now. Bilbo had an undeniable connection to him, though it sounded rather grim in nature. It only brought up more questions in his mind.

What was his connection to Bilbo? They hadn’t indicated that the blood siren bond had any affect on humans. Why had Bilbo spared Thorin in the first place? Especially when it could have gained him his freedom by simply making an exception and devouring a lone annoying hunter?

Again Thorin found himself lost with more questions than answers. He slept easily nonetheless, after all, Bilbo had deemed (still deemed) Thorin’s life more valuable than his own freedom. And that was a good sign that not everything was broken between them.

The next evening when they settled down for the night, they were nearly to the edge of the woods. Surprisingly, it was Bilbo who started up the conversation for the night. “I don’t think it’s necessary for us to travel down to Moria.”

The hunters paused to look at him in confusion. “But it’s the only place to get mythril.” Fili replied.

“It is, and I didn’t say we wouldn’t get it, just that we don’t all need to go.”

“What are you saying?” Kili asked suspiciously.

Bilbo sighed, like he thought they were being difficult. “After I help Duke retrieve Eliza from Imladris, I can make a run down to Moria while you wait here. It’s the only stop farther south we
need to make and it will add weeks of travel just for a quick stop at Moria, which I personally don’t want any of you anywhere near. I’ll flit down, grab some mythril, and flit back up within a couple of days and we can continue back west from here.”

“You want us to wait here? While you go into Moria?” Thorin asked unimpressed with the idea.

“You’re going to have to wait somewhere. I’m not taking you in with me. Why travel for weeks to do what you can do here?”

The boys didn’t look overly accepting of the idea either.

“I’ll be gone two nights at the most. I’m sure Elrond would be happy to host you for a couple of nights, if you’d like.”


“You mean where we can’t take our weapons?” Fili scoffed.

“You won’t need them there. There are no threats or dangers there.” Bilbo assured.

“Weapons or not, we will not pass our time where you are not welcome.” Thorin spoke with finality.

Bilbo lowered his head slightly in acceptance. “Then you can wait here in the woods or even start heading for Bree and I can catch up.”

Thorin considered their options. True, what Bilbo was proposing could cut off up to a month of unnecessary traveling, part of which was over rough country and crossing several rivers. But he didn’t like the idea of Bilbo leaving them either, not for so long. He glanced over at Bilbo who was watching him patiently. Bilbo was letting him make the call.

As much as he didn’t particularly like it, it was the smarter way to go. Besides, he knew Bilbo could take care off himself and would definitely come back. “I agree the travel is unnecessary. We can discuss what we’ll do while your gone after you get the vampire his mate back.”

Bilbo nodded shortly in confirmation.

“Oh, Eliza!” The Duke crooned.

“Oh, great! Here we go again.” Nori grumbled and Bilbo rolled his eyes.

The boys were snickering at the two when Kili suddenly stopped. “Wait. You said she was human?” He accused in confusion.

“Yes, of course she was.” The Duke answered matter-of-factly.

“But she’s not now, though.” Fili confirmed.

“No, of course not. I met her many, many years ago, by humans standards. She would be long dead if she were still human.”

“So, . . . did you turn her?” Kili asked cautiously.

“Me personally? No. We romanced for several years while she was still human. Eventually, she agreed to be turned before she aged anymore so we could stay together.”
“What was it like? You know, being a vampire in love with a human?” Kili pushed excitedly.

“It was . . difficult. Lovely, but difficult. Humans are so fragile, so weak . . and so delicious. It was a constant struggle to not accidentally crush her or drink too much from her. But it had its . . perks. We lose so many things as vampires, human-y things. Blushes, the warmth of skin, a beating heart . . It truly is an exotic experience.”

“I would have waited longer to turn her, but she was afraid of losing her youth, so we agreed to find a way. I almost despaired. I wanted her to join me, but I didn’t want to lose who she was. I also didn’t want to be her sire but I didn’t trust anyone else to have that hold over her either.”

“So what did you do?” Fili encouraged.

“I went to Bilbo.” He waved over the the other vampire who just raised a brow as smoke streamed from his mouth.

“Bilbo turned her?” Thorin asked, he wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

“No, he refused. Said it would create a ‘power imbalance’ between us. He said if she only wanted to be turned to be with me, she didn’t need so much power.”

“So then, what happened?” Kili pushed.

“He offered an alternative. He . . ‘acquired’ another vampire, a generation higher than myself and . . ‘requested’ he turn her. Bilbo oversaw the change, using his magic to preserve as much of what made her human and inhibit as much of the vampire nature as possible. When her change was complete he . . ‘dismissed’ her sire . . . permanently so she wouldn’t be subject to a sire’s control. And we not-lived happily ever after.” He ended with a flourish.

“You can do that? Affect the change like that?” Thorin wondered, not so much interested in the love story as the logistics.

“It’s not perfect. I can’t erase what we are or preserve everything we once were, but I can . . tweak it. It’s a very difficult and draining process.”

“Why does such a spell even exist? I mean, I doubt other vampires or dark creatures much care about such things. Vampire/human pairings aren’t exactly common.” Fili questioned.

“Genuine such pairings are very rare, yes. And it exists because I created it.”


Bilbo shrugged. “I was motivated at the time. I’ve only used the spell twice.”

The hunters shared looks between themselves. “Who did you turn?” It was Thorin who softly posed the question.

Bilbo huffed. “‘Who did I turn?’ Not ‘did I turn?’”

“Have you?”

“Once! And it was the first and last time I will ever do it.” Bilbo spoke with conviction.

“So, who was it? Where are they now?” Kili wondered.

“It doesn’t matter. He is safe and hidden, that is all that matters.” Bilbo answered quietly.
The mood became somber. The hunters were left to wonder and speculate before finally settling in for the night. Thorin tried to catch Bilbo’s gaze one last time, but the vampire seemed distracted and dazed. He wondered with a hint of jealousy about the mysterious person and what their connection to Bilbo was.

He settled into his bedroll and watched the vampire stare blankly into the darkness until he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: One word . . . 'trolls.' ;3
Trolls

Chapter Notes

Warning: This one gets kinda gory. . . trolls are a lot squishier than vampires. >.<

Switchin' gears to work on this again after spending some time on Herd of Durin. Time to get ahead again. :3

July's Sneak Peek: The Crime Lord and the Warden
Thorin Durin is a crime lord known as "Oakenshield" in the underworld and is currently serving time in prison. Not that he has to really. He can get out anytime he wants but is biding his time because of a certain curly haired warden. Waiting for the ideal time to scoop up the cute little warden, he spends his time causing mischief so the warden has to come deal with it. Finally, the perfect opportunity arises and Thorin makes his break with curly haired warden in tow.

Bilbo Baggins is a just warden who believes in the ethical treatment of his inmates. As such, he strives to keep his prison in top shape while not neglecting the welfare of his inmates. The inmates respect him (and kinda think he's cute), so typically don't cause him too much trouble. Thorin Durin, however, seems to always be upsetting the peace Bilbo strives so hard for. Every time some mischief happens, Thorin seems to somehow be involved and Bilbo always has to step in and deal with the situation. Sometimes Bilbo thinks he does it just to get under his skin.

Suddenly, it seems, Bilbo's and Thorin's roles are reversed. Bilbo is now Thorin's prisoner and Thorin is not quite as ethical a warden. Thorin is determined to wear down the warden's ethical resolves with his advances and seductions until Bilbo is permanently his. Bilbo is torn between the ethical dilemma of getting involved with an inmate (not to mention a crime lord and escaped criminal) and his undeniable attraction to the crime lord (besides Thorin's a pretty good guy if you ignore the whole crime lord thing).

Sorry the summary's long. It was written as a prompt. >.>

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They pitched camp for the night. Finally tonight was the night that Bilbo would help get Duke’s mate back. The taller vampire was near vibrating with excitement as Bilbo made him wait until the camp was set.

Or rather, he was procrastinating. He didn’t seem eager to leave the hunters behind. Finally, after a quick word with Nori, Bilbo warned the hunters to ‘stay safe and don’t do anything stupid’ before disappearing with Duke.

The hunters sat around their fire. They had found some old logs and rocks to serve as seats, for once being able to sit off the ground. They had no intention of going to sleep before their vampire came back, even if they had to wait all night.

Which they might. Bilbo had mentioned that it would take time to retrieve Eliza from the sanctuary.
But the hunters didn’t care, they wouldn’t rest easy until their vampire was back anyway.

Thorin sharpened his blades as he watched over his nephews as they practiced. Kili was practicing his bow, a difficult task in the dark, but he was getting surprising good with it despite it. Bilbo had him practicing shooting while swinging his bow to simulate a moving target. Said it was easier than shooting an actual moving target that moved unpredictably, but it would help him get comfortable with shooting while in motion.

Fili was running through several of the practice routines that Bilbo had taught him. His face was all concentration and seriousness. Thorin smirked as he remembered one of Bilbo’s earliest lessons with the teen.

‘Stop, Stop, Stop.’ Bilbo had sighed. ‘Stop swinging it around like it’s a sword, Fili.’

Fili had looked at the weapon in confusion and back to the vampire. ‘But it is a sword.’

‘No, Fili, it is not a sword.’ Bilbo had sighed again, taking the blade from the teen. He had swung it around flawlessly, his movements fluid and filled with a grace that made even Thorin envious. ‘It is an extension of you. . . your body. . . your soul.’ He accented each statement with a graceful swing. ‘It is a part of you. Stop treating it like it’s nothing more than a tool.’

Bilbo had handed the sword back and Fili had accepted it with a look of awe and respect.

Thorin remembered that lesson vividly, because he had taken it to heart as well. Listening in on Bilbo’s lessons with the boys had resulted in improvements of his own skills and techniques. One of the perks of having someone as old and experienced as Bilbo round.

Speaking of old, they still hadn’t discovered how old Bilbo really was or what his generation was. All they knew for sure was that he was older and higher gen then every vampire they had met so far, including the Duke.

The Duke had let it slip that he was about eight hundred years, ‘give or take, we don’t really keep track,’ but he was considered young compared to Bilbo. Eight hundred! It was a dizzying number and Bilbo was even older than that! To live so long and watch as the world changed around you, always staying the same. Thorin couldn’t even imagine it. No wonder older vampires tended to have sanity (or lack there-of) issues.

Not for the first time, Thorin wondered exactly what he was thinking when he set his sights on a vampire. He scoffed. Nothing. He hadn’t been thinking anything. In fact, he had been trying very hard not to think about it and ignore the ageless being completely. So much for wasted effort.

Suddenly, Thorin tensed, the hairs on his arms and the back of his neck rising at the chilling sensation. Something was wrong. He stilled as all his senses went on the alert. Nothing stuck out as strange at first. It was quiet . . too quiet. “Fili, Kili! Go check on the horses.” He ordered. Something was definitely amiss.

The boys stopped what they were doing and sent each other a glance before hurrying off to do as they were told. Thorin got up, reattaching his weapons as he listened and watched for whatever it was that could have alerted him. Nori was missing.

Thorin rolled his eyes. Of course, he was. He always disappeared when there was trouble. Just another confirmation that something was going on.

Suddenly his nephews burst through the brush. “The horses!” “They’re missing!” They spoke over each other.
“What?! You lost the horses?! Again?!” Seriously?! Couldn’t they handle this one thing?!

“We didn’t lose them!” Kili yelped defensively. “They were taken! They had to have been!” Fili agreed. “We tied them up! They couldn’t have just wandered off!” Kili explained.

Thorin rubbed a hand down his face and growled. They needed those horses. Bilbo might be fine running everywhere, but it would take forever for the hunters to get anywhere on foot. “We need to find them. We’ll split up. Stay quiet and out of sight. If you find an enemy, don’t engage! Return to me. Understood?!”

The boys nodded quickly and snatched up their weapons before taking off in different directions. Thorin groaned to himself, so much for staying out of trouble, and stalked into the darkness.

He crept about trying to find tracks or any other sign of who or what might have taken their horses. He was wondering around for a while when he found a strangely uprooted tree. It was . . . a big tree, and healthy looking. There was no reason such a big tree should be uprooted in the middle of the woods. He looked around, a sinking feeling in his gut. This was looking less and less like a case of bandits.

A rustle behind him had him swinging around, sword in hand, only to come face to face with Fili.

“Uncle!” Fili completely ignored the weapon aimed for his face. “There’s a light . . . in the woods!”

Thorin dropped his arms. “Show me.”

Fili ran through the woods with his uncle close behind until they could see a flicker through the trees and brush. Thorin took the lead and they slowly crept toward the large campfire.

Thorin groaned, again, when they peered up over a rotten log. Trolls. Why did it have to be trolls? Not particularly smart beings but they were strong and their hides were tough and thick. Even with the best weapons, the chances of three hunters taking out two trolls was slim to none.

Thorin spotted their horses being kept in a makeshift pen. They needed to find Kili. Maybe Nori could steal back the horses.

The ground shook from nearby and Thorin and Fili ducked behind the log. There was a scuffle and shout before another troll ambled into the camp.

“Oy! Look a’ wha’ I found! Tryin’ to steal ours dinner, ‘e was.” The new troll announced.

“Wha’ is it? Can we ea’ i’?” Another asked

“I’s not much more than a mouthful.” The one stirring and over sized pot grumbled.

“E looks like a ‘unter. Is you a ‘unter, li’le thief?” The troll held up his prisoner.

The prisoner yelped as he was dangled by his legs. “I’ll be your death, you ugly troll, if you don’t let me go!”

Thorin closed his eyes and groaned inwardly. Kili, that idiot. Thorin had told him not to engage! He glanced at Fili, who’s eyes were wide and scared, before peering back over the fallen tree.

“E’s a mouthy one, ain’t ‘e?”

“You and wha’ army, li’le thief? Is there more o’ ya?”
“Yes. No! Just me! I came to hunt trolls!” Kili yelped as he was flipped back over.

Thorin palmed his face.

“You? Came ta hun’ trolls?” The troll whose hand was now wrapped around him laughed. “Why ya ain’t more than a pup.”

“There’s more a’right. Wha’s one ‘unter gonna do with all dem ‘orses? Take off ‘is weapons and put ‘im in the stew. The two of ya can look for the others.”

“What? So ya can eat ‘im while we’s runnin’ aroun’? Think i’ll take a bite now, if ya don’ mind.”

“A li’le ‘unter like tha’ll go farther in a stew!” The cooking troll rebuked and made to grab for the teen.

“You just wan’ ‘im fer yerself!”

“Yous the one whose tryin’ ta eat ‘im all yerself!”

The argument turned into a scuffle and Thorin feared that Kili would end up squashed in the midst of it. He sent a silent wish for Bilbo to get back.

Suddenly the cooking troll landed a hit on the one holding his nephew and its grip loosened. Kili flew from his hand with a yelp and landed nearby. Thorin took the opportunity and bolted out while the trolls were distracted. Fili scrambled out after him. Kili still lay there trying to suck back in the air that had been knocked out of his lungs.

Thorin lifted him by his shoulders until he could wrap an arm around his chest. While Kili was still gasping for air, Thorin started hauling him back towards the tree line with Fili covering them.

They had almost made it when one of the trolls spotted them making their getaway. “Oy! They’s gettin’ away!” The troll that hadn’t been engaged in the fight was the quickest to respond and came bumbling after them. They weren’t going to make it.

Thorin dropped the teen unceremoniously. “Grab him and go!” He order to Fili as he grabbed for his sword. He unsheathed it into a swing just as a giant troll hand was reaching for them, slicing a neat cut across the trolls hand.

The troll reeled back with a ugly shout. “Ow! ‘E cu’ me, ‘e did!” It complained to the other trolls. The other two had broken from their argument and arrived to help. “Oh, no, ya don’t.” One had cut off the teens before they could make it back to the tree line.

“Yous ain’t goin’ nowhere bu’ in our stomachs.” The trolls leered down at them, having them surrounded.

Thorin held his weapons ready, staring defiantly at the overwhelming odds. Kili had mostly recovered and he and Fili were now back to back with him, they too had their weapons drawn and ready.

“Uncle?” Fili barely whispered.

“We need to stall for time.” He whispered back.

Before they could do anything, the cooking troll reached down for them. “Into da pot ya go.”

Suddenly Nori appeared at its feet and slammed his dagger into the flesh above its heel. It screamed
and thrashed as it stomped around in a rage, distracting the others only to send them all into a frenzy.

The hunters and Nori weaved and dodged, getting in blows when they could but mostly just trying not to get grabbed or stepped on. They aimed for the ankles of the angry trolls but seemed to only make them angrier as they cut and stabbed into their flesh.

A big ugly foot seem to come out of nowhere and nearly slammed into Kili when he was distracted. Thorin screamed at him, tried to warn him, but he was too far away to do anything. Suddenly, Kili was sprawled out on the ground and Nori was flying through the air and slamming into the nearest tree. He crumpled into the ground unconscious.

The troll grabbed Kili in their distraction and turned to the others. ‘Tha’s enough o’ tha’! put down yer weapons or I squash ‘im into jelly.” It threatened.

Thorin looked around. Nori lay unconscious from saving his nephew. Fili was tiring and Kili was caught. He threw down his weapons. There was no getting out of this. Fili quickly did the same.

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“This didn’t work out quite like I’d planned.” Kili commented as they were slowly turned on the spit. The trolls had decided roasted hunter sounded better than hunter stew. So here they were, being slowly turned over the fire for dinner.

“And how exactly did you think it was going to turn out.” Thorin growled at his nephew.

“Well, I was hoping to get the the horses away without them noticing. It would have worked if that third one hadn’t shown up.”

“Of all the harebrained ideas, Kili!” Fili joined in.

“We already have a bloody thief! How did you think you could do better?!” Thorin tried to yell at the teen who was tied to the other side of the spit. Nori was still unconscious and Thorin just hoped he wasn’t dead. Considering he had been hit while protecting Thorin’s nephew, he couldn’t exactly wish any ill upon the changeling.

“I admit it was stupid, okay! But it’s fine! Bilbo will be here any minute! And then these big, ugly trolls will know what it’s like to fight someone stronger than them!” Kili shouted the last bit at their captors.

“Did ‘e say there’s more comin’?” One of them asked.

“I sure ‘ope so. Four li’le ‘unters ain’t all tha’ much.”

There was a groan from Nori and Thorin sighed in relief. Fairy magic must make him more durable. “Shtop yellin,’ kid.” He slurred at Kili. They were tied to the same side of the spit.

“Nori!” Fili greeted excitedly. “Can you get us down?” He shouted to the other side.

Nori groaned again. “Ya mean straight into the toasty campfire? Sure.”

“Maybe we could find a way to put it out first!” Kili suggested.

“Sure thing, Kili. Start spitting when you come back around!” Fili rebutted sarcastically.

“Hey! It was just a suggestion, Okay! I’m trying to help!”
“You could have helped by staying away from a bloody TROLL CAMP!!” Thorin shouted. He was doing his best hold himself up away from the fire but even so it was licking at his long loose hair as it hung around him.

“I’m sorry, Okay!”

“Anytime, Bilbo!” Nori yelped when it was his turn over the flame.

“Really? I can’t leave you alone for five minutes without you getting into some sort of trouble, can I?” Bilbo asked as he stared up at them, just outside of the campfire. His face was caught in a strange combination of fury and amusement.

“Bilbo!” “Thank Mahal!” “I knew you’d come!” “It’s getting kinda hot up here!” They all shouted at him over each other.

“O’s tha’? Ano’er ‘unter?”

“E don’ look like a ‘unter.”

“Can we ea’ ‘im, too?”

Bilbo ignored them as amusement finally won over his anger. He broke out into one of those rare genuinely amused smiles and laughed at the whole situation. “Even you too, Nori?” He chuckled. “I swear, I don’t know how the lot of you survived before you met me.”

“Wha’s ‘e talkin’ abou’?”

“We didn’t run into so much trouble then.” Thorin countered without any heat while the boys just yelped indignantly at being laughed at. It was hard to be angry or much of anything when Bilbo was smiling like that.

”Still cookin’ up here, Bilbo!” Nori reminded, as he made another trip around on the spit.

Bilbo chuckled again and nodded. “Yes, yes. I’ll have you down in a moment.”

“Grab ‘im, quick! ‘For ‘e gets away!”

In the blink of an eye, he grabbed one of the large logs that fed the fire and slammed it upright into the ground a little ways away. It continued to burn as it was, set like a massive torch. The next moment, he had muttered something in a dark tongue and a gust of freezing air whooshed over the campfire, putting it out and leaving a layer of frost on the partially burned logs.

“Oy!” The trolls were at full attention now. “‘Ow’s we supposed ta cook ours dinner now?!”

“Tha’s our dinner, ya’s messin’ with, ya li’le ferret.” One troll growled as he reached for the vampire.

There was a whoosh and the troll pulled his hand back with a scream, three of his fingers left lying on the ground. He grabbed his hand as it oozed a nasty green blood.

“Yous no ‘unter! Wha’ are ya?!”

“Ferret?” Bilbo’s fury was back, no trace of the previous amusement left on his face. He glared darkly at the trolls. “I am the Lord of Eriador. And you have touched something of mine!” He hissed.

“Yous a vampire?” One asked. They shared glances looking like they were wondering if they could
take the little vampire.

“We didn’ know, they’s was yers.” One of them whimpered.

“It doesn’t matter. I have to kill you all now, for touching what’s mine, you understand.’ Bilbo stated matter-of-factly.

“We ain’t goin’ down without’ a fight.” The cooking troll growled, wielding his ladle like a weapon.

Bilbo shrugged. “Good luck.” He said sweetly as that familiar dangerous grin blossomed on his face.

Suddenly, there was a sickening squashing sound followed by the pained wail of the first troll that had tried to grab Bilbo. It stumbled back screaming and clawing at it’s face where the cut ends of two of its severed figures were only barely visible from where they stuck out from the trolls eye sockets.

The other trolls ignore it in favor of attacking their enemy and the cooking troll came down on Bilbo with an angry swing of its ladle. With a nearly invisible swing from Bilbo, the hand holding the ladle fell to the ground. The troll pulled back a pained bellow staring at the oozing stub.

Bilbo leaped up smacking the troll's elbow with a dull thud. The troll's bleedin stub slammed into its mouth, knocking several rotten teeth out in the process. With another leap and powerful push the trolls arm disappeared down its throat and it gurgled and gagged as it choked on it’s own limb.

There was a heavy thud followed by another as the first two trolls collapsed from their injuries. The final troll was left gaping in absolute terror. Bilbo just smiled.

“I-I didn' touch 'em! I swear it! I’ was all Bill and Tom!”

“But your we’re going to eat them, were you not?” Bilbo asked deceptively calm.

“We’s trolls! We gotta eat! We didn’ knows they were yers! Honest!” The lone troll backed away from the vampire.

Bilbo paused and seemed to consider the troll. “You weren’t as aggressive as the others. I suppose I can show you some mercy.” He turned around and started walking away.

“Y-You gonna le’ me go?” The troll asked hopefully.

“Of course not.” Bilbo pulled Thorin’s sword out from where the trolls had set all there weapons and gear aside. “I'm just going to kill you quickly.”

The last troll glanced at the sword and turned to run, but he didn’t even make it two steps before Bilbo appeared behind him. Bilbo made one powerful swing in midair before bouncing off the trolls back and landing near the doused campfire.

The troll fell dead where it landed as it’s head continued to roll several yards away, it’s face still contorted in fear. Bilbo swung the sword, using the force of the swing to clean the nasty green ooze off the blade, before turning back to his hunters.

Bilbo smirked at their wide eyed stares and walked over to them. He looked up at Thorin, his amusement was back, his rage having been satisfied. “You’re a trouble magnet.” He pointed accusingly at Thorin with a smirk.

“This is not my fault.” Thorin defended. “It was Kili who decided to try stealing from trolls!” He
yelled back at his nephew. Kili yelped more apologies from the other side of the spit. Bilbo laughed softly, almost giggled and Thorin couldn’t help his stare. He smiled back at Bilbo’s fond gaze despite himself (and his situation).

Bilbo shook his head in fond exasperation. “Well, I guess I should get you all down from there and then you can explain to me just how this whole mess happened.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Bilbo gets his hunters out of a tight spot and makes up with Thorin . . . mostly.

Oh, hey! I just thought I should mention, if you follow my thread on Xanje, you can get sneak peeks of future Sneak Peeks. XD Like, when I get new ideas, I usually write a bit about where they came from, what the premise of the story is and stuff like that. It's never too early to give feedback (even if I haven't written it yet). ^_^

Find me here . ;)


Forgiven

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bilbo picked up one end of spit and rotated it until the hunters were no longer hanging over the dead fire and braced it back up. Kili and Nori had rolled to the bottom in the motion, so Bilbo started by quickly slicing the ropes holding Kili up. He fell with a yelp but on top of Bilbo and his waiting arms.

“Thanks, Bilbo! You’re a life saver!” Kili planted a kiss on the vampire’s cheek in gratitude.

Bilbo scoffed and made sure Kili could stand on his own before moving on to Nori. A repeat of the process had Nori landing heavily in his arms with a pained grunt. Nori was not ready to stand on his own so Bilbo walked him over to their pile of gear and set him down before returning for the others.

Next he released Fili who grabbed him and squeezed him in a grateful hug. Bilbo indulged him and patted his back till the boy was satisfied and ready to go check on his brother. Finally, it was Thorin’s turn.

Bilbo stepped under him and stared up at him with dark eyes and a mischievous smirk, making no move to cut him down.

Despite himself, Thorin felt his blood rush to a location he didn’t really need it right now considering his limbs were already going to sleep. “Are you waiting for something?” He asked quietly.

“Nope.” Bilbo quipped. “Just enjoying the view. Not quite straps but they seem to do the job.”

Thorin huffed a surprised laugh. His heart swelled with relief and elation. He had feared that such flirty teasing was behind them. Hope grew in his chest. “I’m not sure this would be the best angle.”

He retorted

Bilbo shrugged. “I’m a vampire. I’m sure I could make it work.”

“I still think they’d look better on you.”

Bilbo’s eyes darkened further and he lifted the sword but instead of aiming for the bindings he trailed it feather lightly down Thorin’s chest before stopping at the ties of his pants. Bilbo fiddled with the ties with the sharp tip, threatening to cut them loose and unleash the obvious growing bulge in Thorin's pants with a wicked grin.

Thorin stared transfixed by the desire and intent in Bilbo’s eyes. His breathes were coming out in soft pants. As uncomfortable as he was, he almost hoped Bilbo would continue just so he could find out what the vampire would do next. If this is what it took to break the wall that had gone up between them, He would tie himself up and put himself at Bilbo’s mercy any day.

Finally, Bilbo’s wicked smirk fell into a small resigned smile and he removed the blade from Thorin. With a quick flick the Thorin wasn’t ready for, his bindings were cut and he fell into the vampire’s arms with a grunt. He groaned as the blood returned to his limbs making them tingle with thousands of little pin pricks.

“Are you Alright? Perhaps I should have let you down sooner.” Bilbo murmured.
Thorin forced his legs under him but Bilbo arms around his middle were all that was really holding him up. He braced himself on the vampire’s shoulder so he could lean back enough to face him. His heart thundered in his chest and the lines in Bilbo’s brow indicated that he was well aware of it.

Thorin couldn’t help it, he hadn’t been this close to Bilbo since Cardume. Thorin continued to let Bilbo hold his weight as he brought up a hand and cupped the vampire’s face, leaning in slowly.

Bilbo’s eyes were wide, the inward struggle of wanting to flee but not wanting to drop Thorin evident in his beautiful green orbs. Bilbo hesitated too long and Thorin’s lips met his.

It was like kissing pure energy. Pleasure and excitement pulsed through his veins and stole his breath away. Mahal, how he had missed the overwhelming feeling of completeness, of home.

He kept it chaste at first, gauging the vampire’s response before going any farther. Bilbo stiffened but didn’t pull away or drop the hunter. Finally, Bilbo’s lips fell open and his tension left him in a sigh. He swayed under the hunter’s weight and Thorin briefly wondered if they were going to fall over.

They didn’t, despite Bilbo’s relaxed stance he held them up easily. Thorin wrapped his hand around into those silky curls as he hardened the kiss. Bilbo returned it more hesitantly as if still considering pulling away. He took a step back to pull away but Thorin followed after him, his legs finally working again.

Bilbo’s eyes were heavy lidded and glassy, but he still tried to push the hunter away. “Th-Thorin . . stop.” He barely whispered.

Thorin tried to ignore the command but couldn’t when a small hand landed over his mouth. Thorin panted as he rested their foreheads together, desperately trying to maintain what contact he could. “Bilbo, please.” He mumbled from under the hand. “Forgive me. For what happened in Cardume. I was an idiot and a fool and I don’t—”

“Shhh.” Bilbo shushed him. “If I hadn’t forgiven you, you would have landed with your face in the dirt.”

Thorin’s hands ran over the vampire’s shoulders and down his arms until he could wrap them around his waist. “Then why do you keep from me?”

“Just because I’ve forgiven you, Thorin, doesn’t mean everything is going to go back to the way it was.”

“Why not? I know you want it as much as I do.” Thorin tugged him closer.

“Because,” Bilbo sighed, “what happened in Cardume reminded me of how foolish I was being. I should have known better. It could never work between us, not in the long run.”

Thorin growled in frustration. It felt like he was back to square one. “You don’t know that!”

“I do, Thorin, because you are human and, one of these days, you are going to die regardless of what I do to stop it! And I will not turn you! I could never do that to you.” Bilbo pulled away out of the hunter’s grasp.

“I wouldn’t want you to. But, is that it? You’re going to deny yourself, deny us, years worth, even decades possibly, of happiness because of future loss?!” Thorin argued. It seemed he really was back to square one.

“Easy for you to say!” Bilbo hissed back. “I’m the one who will be losing! What is a few decades of
happiness when compared to an eternity of suffering?!”

“And if I died today, would you hurt any less?!”

Bilbo’s eyes widened in rage. “I will not let that happen.”

“But what if it did and you couldn’t stop it, would it hurt any less?!”

Bilbo winced as if in pain and his stance faltered. “I would not let it happen.” He whispered.

Thorin didn’t ask again. They both knew the answer. He reached out and gently tugged the vampire back to him. “If you’re going to suffer regardless, why not enjoy the happiness while you can?”

Bilbo’s face scrunched up like he wanted to argue but couldn’t think of a good comeback so it fell into a scowl instead. “It’s not that simple.”

“Maybe you’re just stubborn.” Thorin murmured into his curls with a smirk.

Bilbo huffed and gently pushed him away. “Your nephews are coming.”

Thorin’s brow furrowed in confusion and he looked around. Indeed, they were alone. He was so caught up in Bilbo he had forgotten about the others. “Where did they go?”

“I sent them with Nori to collect what they could from your campsite while I, uh, got you down.” The vampire ended sheepishly.

Thorin smirked mischievously. “In other words, you sent them away so you could be naughty.”

Bilbo tutted. “I didn’t actually do anything.”

“No, but you wanted to.” Thorin rumbled quietly into his ear as his nephews and Nori bumbled back into the clearing.

“Oh, hush.”

“We got what we could carry, but most of the heavy stuff is still back there.” Fili announced as they set down their bags.

“I’ll get the rest of it. Go ahead and remake camp. Might as well leave the horses in the pen. The log should burn for a while yet and I can always set up another one. You should try to at least get some sleep tonight and Nori, you need to rest.”

Nori grumbled something about being sent to fetch bags, but Bilbo was already gone. Nori threw out his bedroll on the first patch of grass he found and lay down for the night while the other set there things up more carefully.

“So,” Kili ventured as they were rearranging their bags. “Did you and Bilbo make up or something?”

“Or something.” Thorin sighed. It seemed it was always one step forward and two steps back with Bilbo.

“So, he’s not mad at you anymore?” Fili wondered.

“I don’t believe so.”

“I think he forgave you too easily.” Kili asserted. “He should have made you beg for it.”
“I was prepared to.”

“But you didn’t, did you? Have you even done anything to make it up to him?!” Kili asked angrily. “I didn’t think so.” He added when Thorin didn’t respond and stomped away.

“He’ll get over it.” Fili sighed. “But Bilbo’s as much an uncle to us now as you are, so if you ever hurt him again, just know we’re not going to stand for it.”

Thorin watched as he too left to lay out his bed roll. He didn’t know if he should be jealous that they would sooner side with Bilbo than their own flesh and blood or proud that they had claimed the vampire as family. He decided on proud.

“You alright?” Bilbo popped up at his side and set down the final load. He had already made two trips, appearing and disappearing within moments.

“Yeah... I think you’ve stolen my nephews.”

Bilbo cocked a brow.

“But it’s not a bad thing.” Thorin finished with a smile at his vampire.

“Get some rest.” Bilbo gently squeezed his forearm. “We have a lot to do tomorrow.”

“What are you going to do?” Thorin grabbed his hand as he pulled it away, giving it a squeeze.

Bilbo waved towards the dead trolls win his other hand. “I have to get rid of this filth. They smell bad enough alive. You don’t want to smell them when their dead.”

“That won’t take you all night.” Thorin placed a kiss to the back of Bilbo’s hand.

“There’s not much night left, Thorin. The sun will be up in a few hours.”

“But would you share it with me?”

Bilbo sighed and looked conflicted. “I think I need a smoke, actually.” He finally said. “Maybe it will help mask some of this troll stench.”

Thorin nodded. He knew he was asking for too much too soon. But he couldn’t help but hope. “Alright. Stay close though.” He squeezed Bilbo’s hand one more time before grabbing his bedroll and finding a soft spot to lay down for a few hours.

Bilbo watched him go before disappearing to deal with the trolls. Later, when he was done and the hunters and Nori were all fast asleep, he sat down near Thorin’s head to smoke away at his pipe.

Thorin groaned when the sun hit his eyelids. He wasn’t ready to get up yet, but he couldn’t sleep all day either. He opened his eyes slowly as they adjusted to the light, he wasn’t in any particular hurry.

His vision cleared and he spotted his nephews still in their bed rolls, their heads covered to keep out the sun’s annoying rays. Nori, too, remained tucked into to his bedroll.

“Morning, sleepy-head.”

Thorin rolled onto his back and found Bilbo sitting mere inches from his head. If he was any closer, he’d have Thorin’s head in his lap. He peered down from under his low hood, the stem of his pipe lifting it up slightly on one side.
“Bilbo.” He croaked, voice still gravelly from sleep.

“You could sleep longer, you know. It’s not that late and the others don’t seem like their going to stir anytime soon.”

“Perhaps I would, if you were to join me.” Thorin dug his hand under the vampire's heavy robe, wrapped it around the bare ankle closest to his head and rubbed at it with his thumb.

Bilbo scoffed, a puff of smoke leaving him in the process. “I can’t laze around all day. There’s work to do. I have a troll hoard to raid and arrangements to make before I head down to Moria.”

At the mention of Moria, Thorin was fully awake. In the excitement last night, he had forgotten that Bilbo would be leaving. He sat himself up with a groan, the hard ground wasn’t getting more forgiving as he got older. He paused. “What troll hoard?”

“Every troll has a hoard. It’s just a matter of finding it and accessing it.”

“And how do you propose to do that?” He couldn’t see Bilbo’s face anymore, now that he was sitting up, but he could almost hear the smirk in his voice.

“Oh, I already found it . . . and the key.” He held up a large iron key with a gloved hand.

Thorin’s brows rose. “I’m surprised you haven’t already raided it.”

Bilbo tucked the key away again. “I thought you and the boys might appreciate the experience.”

Thorin nodded. “I’m sure the boys would be all over it.”

Bilbo chuckled softly and knocked the ash out of his pipe before he stood up, offering a hand to the hunter. “Come, the river isn’t far. You can wash up while we wait for the lazy ones to wake up.”

Thorin took his hand and let the vampire pull him up. “Are you telling me I stink, Bilbo?” He asked with a smirk.

“You’ve smelled better.” Bilbo nodded. “But I just figured you’d enjoy the time to wash without having to get done before it’s too dark to see what you’re doing.” He quipped.

Thorin chuckled and retrieved a bar of soap and some cleaner clothes. Traveling for weeks at a time between towns didn’t lend to the cleanest hygiene. With one last glance back at the others, he followed Bilbo to the river.

Bilbo sat on a rock on the bank as Thorin stripped and waded into the chilly water. He wished Bilbo could join him, but, seeing as the sun was up, it was a moot thought. “I take it everything went well last night? Getting Duke’s mate back?”

“It went as I expected.” Bilbo puffed, having pulled out his pipe again. “Though there was an unexpected surprise.” He mumbled

“A surprise? Good or bad?” Thorin interrogated.

“Good, I suppose. It’s the reason I was a bit late, though I would have come sooner if you had just called me. Why didn’t you, exactly?” Bilbo chided.

Thorin huffed. “I didn’t want to interrupt what you were doing. Besides, we could have -“

“Handled it?” Bilbo cut him off. “Oh, yes. You were doing a marvelous job of being cooked for
dinner with no escape in sight.”

Thorin scoffed but couldn’t really argue. “You got there in time, didn’t you?” He took his time working up a good lather.

“Only because Kili mentioned me. And I would have preferred to show up before you were roasting over a spit, thank you very much!”

Thorin tried to suppress a smirk then realized he didn’t have to. Bilbo was effectively blind during the day since he had to keep his hood pulled down past his chin. He really did look like a wraith sometimes. “Were you able to finish everything with Rivendell?”

Bilbo huffed at the avoidance. “I had to cut my meeting short, but, yes, otherwise I was done.”

“What meeting?” Thorin wondered if he had missed something.

“I have a . . . connection who lives in Imladris. I don’t see him very often. When he heard I was waiting at the border, he volunteered to escort Eliza out so we could meet.” Bilbo fiddled with his pipe.

“What kind of connection?” Thorin voice lowered, indicating his jealousy and suspicion.

Bilbo chuckled. “Not that kind. A sort of . . . family relation you might say.”

“But you’re a vampire.” Thorin stated in confusion.

Bilbo just shrugged and wouldn’t divulge any further.

Thorin dropped the subject. He could revisit it later. He dunked under the water to wet his hair. “And Eliza was well?”

“Quite. Though she was rather distraught at being separated from her mate for so long. But I suspect they’ll be making up for lost time.”

“Is that what it’s like for all vampires with mates?” Thorin wondered. “Being that sappy and clingy?”

“Yes and no. They are openly sappy even for a truly mated pair, but the mating bond for vampires is a very . . . deep and intimate thing. It effects us on a magical level, it . . . changes us. Duke was right. Even Dark magic cannot overcome love, but it can twist it. Vampire love is very . . . possessive, all-encompassing, it can be violent and selfish, and, when broken, it can become catastrophic.”

“Most vampires never truly mate, because it takes deep levels of affection to even make it possible. Some will form . . . partnerships, of convenience or desire, and many will dominate a weaker partner, but very few enter into a true mating bond. Those, like Duke, who have, are often looked down upon as being weakened, compromised, because their priorities shift to their partner.”

Thorin dipped to rinse out his hair as he considered the information. “Is that why you don’t want a mate?” He asked quietly after wiping the water from his face from resurfacing.

Bilbo was quiet and Thorin had to turn to make sure he was still there. “I suppose, essentially, yes. I can’t afford any weakness.” He finally answered quietly.

“And a partnership?” Thorin pressed.

Bilbo huffed. “Still weakens me, but not as devastatingly. I’d rather none of the above, but it seems fate has different ideas.” He mumbled towards the end.
Thorin had a small smile as he waded out and started getting redressed. “I would be honored to have a partnership with you.” He mumbled humbly.

“We already have one, Thorin.”

“You know that’s not the kind I meant.”

“It already more than it should be.” Bilbo joined him as he slipped his tunic back on and tied his hair back.

“I wish it were more.” Thorin murmured.

“Yes, well, I wish things were different.” Bilbo returned quietly before heading back to their camp and leaving Thorin to follow.

They returned to camp and started a small fire. Bilbo split some wood from the trolls’ campfire and left it for Thorin to get it started while he went hunting. By the time Thorin had a fire going, Bilbo was back with a handful of plump rabbits for roasting. Thorin made short work of skinning them while Bilbo put together a small roasting spit for cooking their rabbits.

Soon the rabbits were sizzling over the fire and Thorin’s nephews finally started to stir. Someone’s nose stuck out from under their shared blankets. “I smell meat.” A groggy voice slurred.

Thorin and Bilbo chuckled as the two boys fought their way out of their blanket cocoon at the prospect of fresh meat for breakfast. Bilbo had brought out some logs to use a small seats around the fire and Thorin sat on one as he turned the rabbits every now and then. Bilbo sat beside him sideways on the log, nearly on the edge, cross legged and leaning back against the hunter as he smoked his pipe.

“That smells delicious.” Fili commented as he and his brother ambled clumsily over to sit. Kili glanced between his uncle and the vampire, settling with a disapproving look at Thorin.

“What are we celebrating?” Fili wondered, ignoring his brother’s disgruntlement.


Fili nodded. “Fair enough.”

“We have a busy day ahead of us. Might as well get a good start, even if it is a bit late.” Bilbo further explained.

Kili perked up. “Why? What do we have to do today?”

“We have a troll hoard to explore.” Bilbo answered, the smirk clear in his voice.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: They investigate the troll hoard and find some goodies. Bilbo and our hunters begrudgingly part ways for a while.
The Troll Hoard

Chapter Notes

Hey there! I feel like it's been a while! Well, three weeks anyway. It happens sometimes on the long months. I start feeling disconnected over the three week gaps. :( Remember, you can always check out my Xanje thread and chat me up there (or just check up on my progress and make sure I'm still alive and writing XD). But the wait is finally over and here's your first August update! Yay! :D

August's Sneak Peek: The Sea is my Home
Thorin is adjusting to his new place in Bilbo’s world while trying to find balance between his new life and his old one. But responsibilities are holding him back and dangers lurk on the horizon. Struggling between his heart and his head, will he discover where his true priorities lie before he loses his husband forever?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bilbo shooed the boys away to wash while the rabbits cooked. By the time they came back, Bilbo was rousing Nori and offering (ordering) him to come eat something. The food was devoured quickly. The hunters hadn’t had much more than dried fruits, nuts, jerky and stale bread since they left Cardume and fresh meat was eagerly welcomed.

The boys were bubbling with excitement and were shooting off questions before their last bites we’re even swallowed.

“So, what’s a troll hoard?”

“Where is it?”

“Is it as smelly as they are?”

“We’re not gonna find just a bunch of old bones, are we?”

“Boys!” Bilbo shushed them. “Finish eating and clean up and you will discover the answers to all your questions.”

The boys shot up, cleaning their own hands and faces before picking up around the camp. They were popping back up eager to leave before Thorin could even get his own hands washed.

“Boys! When your uncle is ready, we will go.”

Thorin shook his head at their antics, but dried his hands and face. He grabbed his sword, just in case, and walked over with a nod indicating he was ready.

Bilbo led them away in the direction that the third troll had tried to run away in. They marched for maybe ten minutes until Bilbo came to a stop in front of a large bolder sticking out from the side of a hill.

“Well, here we are.” Bilbo raised his hands to indicate the spot.
The hunters looked around confused. “There’s nothing here.” Fili ventured cautiously. Maybe the vampire was confused since he couldn’t see anything.

“This is definitely the place. Can’t you smell it?”

The boys sniffed at the air but shook their heads. Thorin was eyeing the boulder suspiciously.

“Oh, well, trust me. You’ll smell it when I open the door. . . In fact, you might want to wrap your noses and mouths . . and breath through you mouth . . as disgusting as that will be, it’ll be better than breathing through your nose.” He turned towards the boulder.

“What door?” Kili wondered just as Bilbo slid the big iron key into a recess in the rock, standing on his toes to reach it. He turned it and it clicked. “Ready?” He asked before pulling the giant boulder away from the hill effortlessly.

The boys doubled over hacking and gagging as the force of the stench hit them. Thorin held up a little better as he had heeded the warning, but even he couldn’t help a gag as he pressed a rag over his nose and mouth.

“Fragrant, isn’t it.” Bilbo quipped as the boys scrambled to get their faces covered. He grabbed a large torch set just inside the door and handed it to Thorin to ignite. Once it was lit, he took it back and led the way into the cave.

The hunters followed him in cautiously, expecting nothing but filth and bones, but, as Bilbo found and lit more torches, the cave started to glimmer with a metallic light.

“Is this . . gold.” Kili kicked at a large sack making it jangle. “And weapons?” Fili lifted a sword off the dirty floor.

“Well, of course. Trolls are collectors. They kept valuables from their victims, including other hunters that have attempted to slay them.” He pulled his hood off no longer needing it. “Gold, silver, gems, weapons. All things that can be put to good use.” He lifted a large mace, the spikes of which seemed to be made of silver.

“What are we going to do with it? We can’t carry all this?” Thorin wondered as he pulled out a high quality silver sword with a mythril edge. He swung it around a bit to test it.

“We’ll take what we need for now and I’ll come back for the rest later. I have the key. There’s no hurry. If nothing else, you can restock your money bags and take any weapons you fancy.” Bilbo squatted down and brushed the dirt away from some kind of leather pouch.

“Clearly these trolls have taken out quite a few hunters.” Thorin strapped his new sword to his side. He spotted another smaller sheath in the process and tugged it loose from where it was partially buried.

“Yes, well, trolls are a little more than most hunters can manage. Their size, strength and hide make them more resistant to the pure elements and harder to kill. Even more so when they travel in groups. As stupid as they are, mountain trolls such as these are actually among the smarter of the troll races.” Bilbo explained as he closed the leather pouch and tugged it under his arm.

“They were smart trolls?” Kili asked with a cough as the stench seemed to try to slide down his throat. “Mahal, Bilbo! Your sense of smell is stronger than ours! How can you stand to not even cover your face?!?”

“Easy.” Bilbo returned. “I stopped breathing.” He tossed away something he had been looking at.
Kili scoffed and turned back to his explorations. Thorin wandered over to his vampire, holding out his discovery. “Here. I found something for you.”

Bilbo raised a brow but took the small sheath. He pulled out the small blade. It was beautifully made with a gently curved blade and had an edge of Mythril, like the others Thorin had found.

“It’s just your size.” Thorin couldn’t fight back the smirk or the mirth in his eyes.

Bilbo looked up at him unimpressed. “Is this a short joke?”

Thorin’s mirth broke out into laughter at Bilbo’s flat unimpressed look until the stench once again gagged him. “Yes, it was a joke.” He chuckled. “But you can have if you want it. Actually, I found this one you might like.” He pulled the strap of another full length sword off his shoulder and offered it to the vampire.

Bilbo handed back the short sword (long dagger really) with a scolding look and pulled the new sword out of its sheath.

“You’re always borrowing mine. You might as well have your own.” Thorin encouraged as Bilbo inspected the blade.

“And you?”

“I found another one like it.” He tapped the hilt at his waist. “I don’t need two full length swords.”

“What about Fili or Kili?”

Thorin glanced over at his nephews both seemed to have already found some new upgrades. “I think they’ve found their own.”

Bilbo nodded. “Alright. I suppose I can’t be borrowing yours all the time. And you can keep the dagger. You’ll need a match for your new sword.” Bilbo gave him a look.

Thorin smirked but nodded, it was better quality than his other dagger.

Bilbo threw his hood back over his head. “While you boys keep looking, I’m going to transfer some of our bags in. There’s no need for you to carry any more than necessary on your way to Bree.”

Thorin’s head snapped up. “Wait!” But the vampire was gone. Thorin waited, He would be back in a few moments. Just as he expected, Bilbo returned with several of their bags of gems and silver. “We haven’t discussed this yet.”

“There’s no point in waiting around for me in the woods when you could be making your way to an inn with warm meals and beds.” Bilbo disappeared again only to return a few seconds later.

“But we hadn’t talked about it yet.”

“I thought you couldn’t move like that during the day?” Fili interrupted, changing the subject. “That fast I mean.”

“I am slower during the day, but the shade from the trees helps and I’ve eaten better recently. I’m still not as fast as at night though. And Thorin, whether you decide to head for Bree or not, though I can’t image why you wouldn’t, you don’t need to lug all this around when I can just flit back and get it later. You’ll be able to move faster without it.”

“Fine, but we will be talking about it.” Thorin conceded.
Bilbo rolled his eyes and vanished for one more trip. When he returned, they hauled out their new prizes and grab some more gold coins to fill their money bags. Bilbo shut the door and locked the cave before they headed back to the camp.

The hunters sat around what was left of the campfire admiring their new weapons after making it back to camp. Bilbo delivered the leather pouch that he had found to Nori, taking a moment to check on his health before he let Thorin pull them into the ‘discussion.’

Nori seemed pleased with his gift and waved off his concern, meaning Bilbo had nothing else to do to put off the talk. He sat down near Thorin with a sigh. Thorin heard it and sent him a disgruntled look.

“I don’t know why we have to talk about this. There’s no reason for you all to sit around in the woods while I’m down in Moria. It will take you a couple days to get there. By the time you get there I should be joining you.” Bilbo started the inevitable.

“What? You want us to go to Bree while you’re down in Moria?” Kili asked in disbelief.

“Why wouldn’t you?”

“Because you’re not with us! And you’re in Moria!” He retorted as if it should be obvious.

“It won’t be any different than staying in the woods, except you’ll be able to get to an inn faster if you don’t wait for me.”

“Yeah, but-but you’ll be in Moria! Maybe we should just travel down with you.”

“Traveling that far will add at least another two weeks to our travels.” Thorin interjected.

“So? It’s not like we have anywhere to be!”

“Be reasonable, Kili. Even if you came down with me. You can’t go into Moria. There are things in there that make even my skin crawl. There’s no way I’m taking any of you in there.”

“But what if you need help? Or you get injured?”

“What would you be able to do about it?”

“We . . . we could-“

“Nothing. You are all skilled hunters, but if something can hurt me, there’s nothing you could do to help.”

Kili looked put out, but knew in his head that it was true, however much he didn’t like it.

“So, the real question is do we wait for you here or head to Bree and meet up with you?” Fili recapped.

“Yes.” Thorin confirmed.

Fili thought for a few moments. “I think we should head to Bree.”

Kili squawked and even Thorin raised a brow at his nephew. “Why?”

“Because if he is hurt, weakened, or even just tired, when he gets back, at least we’ll have a bed and access to new supplies should we need anything for him.”
Thorin and Kili looked more thoughtful at the suggestion. Bilbo snorted. “There is a flaw in your logic, but I agree with your conclusion.”

“What flaw?” Fili sounded insulted. He was the strategic one after all. Bilbo waved it off. “It doesn’t matter. I agree you should head to Bree.”

“But . . what about you?” Kili directed at the vampire in concern.

“What about me?”

“Do you need anything? I mean, Morin isn’t safe and, if even you’re scared of it, it must be super dangerous.”

“I’m not scared of it. I simply don’t want to get into any unnecessary painful fights.” Bilbo corrected. Vampires did not get scared.

“Painful? Does that mean there’s something in there that could actually hurt you?” Now Thorin was concerned.

“Of course, there is. Moria’s like the number two cesspit of evil in the world. Mordor being number one. There’s all kind of vile things in there. And, as confident as I am that I could win against the worse of them (probably),” he muttered, “I don’t enjoy testing my limits just for the fun of it.”

“Probably.” Thorin repeated flatly. “Maybe we should just skip it. We can make do without mythril.”

Bilbo tutted. “I’m going for Ori, not you. I’ll be fine. I’m not planning on announcing my presence and looking for challengers. I’m going to slip in, get the ore and slip back out. Hopefully, nothing . . . significant will notice I’m there.”

“You’re not boosting our confidence.” Thorin shook his head.

Bilbo scoffed. “It doesn’t matter. Fili has the right idea.”

“I’m beginning to agree.” Thorin mumbled.

“Me too.” Kili looked beyond concerned. He was on the edge of fear now.

“Then it’s settled! I’ll leave for Moria tonight and you can head out to Bree in the morning.”

The hunters didn’t look all that pleased with the decision, but nodded in agreement.

“Good.”

The hunters busied themselves with this and that as they waited for the day to end, growing more and more tense as it passed. Bilbo settled against a thickly branched tree and dozed, trying to get some rest before he took off for Moria.

Finally, the sun set and the hunters were more anxious than ever.

“You’ll take you’re sword.” Thorin ordered more than asked as Bilbo stripped off his day cloak and rolled his shoulders.

Bilbo gave the hunter an unimpressed look. “Yes, of course. It may come in handy.” He consented.
“You have three days. If you’re not back by the morning of the fourth day, we’re coming after you.”

Bilbo gave him an incredulous look. “No, you’re not! If the worse should happen, though it won’t, you will forget about me and move on.”

“That’s not possible.” Thorin rebutted easily.

Bilbo huffed, but the boys looked just as determined to charge into the depths of Moria as their uncle. “Look. I will be back, even if I have to carry my pieces back in a sack. Promise me you will stay away from Moria.”

The hunters looked more stricken than reassured. Kili looked like he might cry.

“I don’t know if I can do that.” Thorin looked at his feet and mumbled.

“You will. Or I will enchant you and make sure you never go near the place again.” There was steel in Bilbo’s voice.

“That’s not fair!” Fili accused.

Bilbo scoffed. “I have more reason to be concerned for you than you have to be concerned for me. I have given my word to be careful for your peace of mind. Do this for mine.”

The boys nodded looking chastised and even Thorin mumbled a begrudging affirmative.

“Thank you. Honestly, you’re making me wish I had asked Duke to stay with you.”

“We don’t need a babysitter.” Thorin grumbled.

“Then prove it by not doing anything stupid or I will start having you ‘babysat’ whenever we have to separate.” Bilbo gave them each a look to show he meant it. Thorin and Fili’s heads were lowered and Kili looked like he might start crying. “Oh, for Eru’s sake! I’m only going to be gone two days, three at the most. Stop acting like I’m not coming back.” He chided.

The hunters didn’t reply, but Kili threw himself at the vampire, wrapping him in a tight hug. He sniffled into Bilbo’s shoulder.

“Alright, alright.” Bilbo patted him and decided to let the boy get it out of his system. “Everything is going to be fine.” He reassured.

When Kili finally let go, it was Fili’s turn and Bilbo humored his as well.

“Alright that’s enough of that. I feel like I’m being mourned before I’m even dead. Figuratively speaking, of course.” Bilbo patted them each one more time before shoving them back to their bedrolls.

Once the boys were gone (having slunk away sullenly), it was just Thorin and Bilbo. Thorin finally lifted his gaze from his feet and sent the vampire and almost pleading look.

“Oh, Thorin.” Bilbo huffed. “You’re as bad as your nephews.”

“I don’t like being separated, even more so knowing you’re going someplace dangerous. It . . . unsettles me. It doesn’t feel right.” The hunter admitted quietly.

“Thorin.” Bilbo wrapped his hand around Thorin’s. Thorin returned the grip like he was holding on for dear life. “I will be back and I will be fine. Like I said, I’m not out to prove anything. If I run into
trouble, I’ll just hightail it out of there. You know there isn’t much that can match my speed.”

“You promise.”

“Yes, yes.” Bilbo nodded.

Thorin took a deep breath, the air coming easier with the knowledge. “Thank you.”

Bilbo stared at him, a look of exasperation on his face but fondness in his eyes. Thorin wondered what he was thinking, but then the vampire shook himself and it was gone.

“I guess I should get going. The sooner I go, the sooner I’ll get back.”

Thorin nodded, expecting the vampire to vanish, but he was still there, staring at Thorin again.

“Wha-“ Before he could get his question out, Bilbo grabbed him by his coat and pulled him down into a desperate kiss.

Thorin reciprocated eagerly, burying his fingers in silky curls and wrapping an arm around the vampire to pull him closer.

The kiss gradually lost its desperate edge and became more chaste, their lips moving together in gentle reassurance. Bilbo pulled away and, when Thorin tried to chase him, held him back with a pet to his beard.

“Stay safe. Please don’t to anything stupid this time.” Bilbo pleaded quietly, sounding no less disturbed by the separation as the hunters had.

“We will head straight to Bree and stay on the road.” It was Thorin’s turn to reassure as he leaned their foreheads together.

Bilbo nodded with a sigh and ran his hand over Thorin’s beard in a gentle caress one more time. He pulled Thorin’s arms away until he was no longer trapped in his embrace and stretched up to give him one more sweet kiss before he disappeared.

Thorin stared into the darkness for a while after Bilbo had gone. He couldn’t help but feel like a vital piece of himself was being carried away beyond his reach. Finally, he shook himself from his stupor and returned to the camp to take first watch.

Two days. Three at the most. He only had to make it that long.

The next morning everyone was up early, the hunters to restless to sleep any longer. So, they picked up camp and headed toward Bree. They stuck to the road and pushed hard, eager to get to a town. They stopped at the Weathertop travelers inn on the first night. Other than the occasional passing traveler or traders caravan, they encounter nothing and made good time, arriving at the inn late.

They were off again early the next morning. They planned to get to Bree and pay for a room so Bilbo would have someplace to rest when he got back. They refused to consider that he wouldn’t be coming back.

They trotted into Bree that evening. After putting their horses up at the stable, they payed for a room and ate a quick hot meal. They settled into their room for the night to wait for their vampire, none of them, even Nori, seemed particularly inclined to sleep.

The hours passed and soon the sun was inching its way back over the horizon. Bilbo hadn’t made it
back. They boys looked at their uncle, fear and anxiety filling their eyes.

“He has one more day.” Thorin reassured them. “If he is not back by tonight . . . we will decide what
to do.”

They ate something light, too anxious to stomach much and tried to get some sleep for another’s
night of waiting. Thorin couldn’t sleep, fear was churning in his gut. He rubbed a hand over his
beard, remembering the way Bilbo’s fingers had run through it before they hand parted.

Thorin had made a promise, but so had Bilbo. If Bilbo didn’t keep his promise to come back, then
Thorin didn’t need to keep his promise to stay away from Moria. Bilbo had asked for the impossible.
There was no way Thorin could just ‘move on’ now. He was fairly certain it was the same for his
nephews. If Bilbo didn’t come back, Thorin could see all three of them charging into those black
depths to find him.

Bilbo had better come back.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Bilbo returns to our hunters' relief. Nori gets a message that not all is well in
Belegost.

Oh hey! Progress update! I'm up to chapter 52 now. :D
They ate another quick dinner that evening before setting up in their room to wait out the night. The boys sat huddled together in silence, comforting each other of their anxiety. Nori lay on the bed lazily as if he wasn’t concerned, but the edgy look in his eyes belied his relaxed demeanor.

Thorin sat against the head board of his own bed, focusing every ounce of his concentration on not turning into a tight bundle of nerves. He practiced various calming techniques he had learned, none of them really getting the job done.

The time passed slowly, fear and anxiety tying his guts into tighter and tighter knots as the night passed without any sign of their vampire. Yet, they continued, sitting in the dark and waiting.

A couple of hours before dawn, the handle to their door moved. Someone was trying to open it. The hunters rolled silently out of their beds, already unsheathing their blades. The door was locked, but that wouldn’t deter a determined thief.

Thorin crept towards the door, stopping when a click sounded from inside the lock. A thief with a key?

The door slowly swung open and Bilbo stepped in with several full sacks over his shoulder. He shut the door behind him and set them down with a tired sigh. “What? No welcome back? I told you I’d be back.”

The hunters jolted out of their surprised stupor and rushed forward. Thorin got to him first and scooped him up in a bear hug that would surely have crushed any living recipient.
Bilbo yelped at the sudden man-handling, but Thorin returned him to the floor before he could start seriously protesting. Not that he didn’t get the chance when Fili and Kili glomped onto him unceremoniously.

Kili was near vibrating with excitement and actually started bouncing with the vampire still in his grasp.

“Yes, yes. Alright. Alright! Off if you can’t sit still!” Bilbo ordered but couldn't suppress a small excited giggle of his own. He smiled (a real one) at the warm welcome, the haunted look in his eyes slowly fading.

Thorin had noticed it, but he wasn’t sure if it was something he should mention. “What took you so long?” He asked instead.

Bilbo scoffed as if three days was a a long time for someone to travel to Moria, mine a vein and travel back to Bree. “I just spent the past three nights and days playing cat and mouse with a . . . well it doesn’t matter. The point is, it was making things difficult. I spent half the time luring it away from the vein I was trying to mine so I could actually mine it!” He huffed, still annoyed at the unnamed entity.

“What was it?” Kili wondered.

“Annoying! Beyond that, it doesn’t matter.” Bilbo retorted. “And draining. I’m ready for a nap.”

“Now that you’re back, I think we could do with some rest ourselves.” Thorin agreed as Fili tried to stifle a yawn.

Bilbo looked at each of them. “Please tell me you weren’t staying up all night every night just to wait for me.”

Thorin shrugged. “Only since we got to Bree.”

“Eru above! I swear I leave you for five minutes and you lot do something stupid.”

The hunters squawked indignantly (while Nori pretended he was sleeping so he didn’t look quite as stupid). “It’s not stupid! We were worried about you.” Fili argued.

“Unnecessarily! And you lost sleep over it. Sweet Yavanna! The stubbornness of these hunters. Go! Go to bed! I’m going myself the sun will be up soon anyway.”

Thorin chuckled as the boys sulked back to their bed.

“I was talking to you too.” Bilbo turned on him.

“And where will you sleep?”

“Your bed is big enough for two, is it not?” Bilbo raised a brow at the hunter.

Thorin couldn’t suppress his elated smile. “Yes, of course.”

“Good.” Bilbo started readying for bed, taking off his outer layers and setting them aside. “I feel like I’ll never get the cold of Moria out of my bones.” He murmured.

Thorin let Bilbo crawl in first and climbed in beside him. He was hesitant at first, unsure of how much he was allowed. But Bilbo’s quiet words came back to him and he wrapped an arm around the vampire’s waist and tugged him close until they were spooning.
Bilbo was tense and rigid but he didn’t pull away, so Thorin wrapped around him, encasing the vampire in his own heat. At first it was like cuddling a statue. Bilbo’s hard flesh made even firmer by the tension under his skin. Slowly, the tension leaked out and he relaxed, becoming softer and limp in Thorin’s arms.

Thorin tugged him even closer, now that he was more malleable, and nuzzled into his hair. He had thought he had lost this. He didn’t know if it would last this time, but he would enjoy every moment of it while he could. He wished he could stay awake, and not miss a second of it, but he was exhausted and sleep dragged him down. He hoped Bilbo would still be in his arms when he woke up.

He was. Even better. When Thorin woke up and groggily looked down to check on his vampire he found himself instantly awake (some parts of him becoming a little too awake). Bilbo had rolled over at some point to face him and was now securely wrapped around Thorin. His face was snug against Thorin’s chest, an arm thrown over his side possessively and even one of his legs had wandered up to rest on top of Thorin’s. Thorin’s leg had also drifted and now lay snugly between Bilbo’s thighs.

He cleared his throat, desperately trying to douse the growing fire in his belly without having to rearrange (or, Mahal forbid, leave) the vampire’s embrace. He squirmed as he tried to rearrange himself so his . . . desire wouldn’t be quite so obvious.

His shifting caused his leg to move and rub against Bilbo’s inner thighs. Bilbo let out a small moan into his chest, a sound that did not help Thorin’s situation.

“If you keep moving around, I’m going to have to bite you.” Bilbo murmured into Thorin’s chest quietly, like he wasn’t quite awake yet.

Thorin huffed a surprised laugh. “I was trying to, uh, get comfortable.” He replied, trying to resettle into the bed.

“That’s gonna be hard with that sword sticking up between your legs.” Bilbo moaned. “Now you’ve got me all excited.”

Sure enough, Thorin registered something hard pressed into his belly. “Oh?” Was the only breathless reply he could muster, his own interest twitching to attention.

Now Bilbo was wiggling and Thorin sucked in a gasp as their groins rubbed together. He thought they were gonna have a repeat of last time until Bilbo pulled his hips away and relieved the pressure.

Thorin was trying to steady his breathes when he heard a ripping sound. He was confused until Bilbo laid a rag (that look suspiciously just like their blanket) between them and started pulling at Thorin’s small clothes. He gasped and stifled his moan into his pillow when a small hand wrapped around his cock and gave it a pull.

“Bilbo.” He rasped when Bilbo’s hand disappeared after a few tugs.

“Shh. You’ll wake the boys.” Bilbo rebuked softly.

There was a new sensation rubbing against his cock and he looked down. Bilbo had freed his own and was rocking his hips to rub them together. Thorin groaned and reached down eagerly to take hold of them both but Bilbo swatted his hand away. Bilbo grabbed them instead, his small hand barely wrapping around the two of them, and Thorin hissed as he started pumping them together.

Bilbo pressed his face into Thorin’s chest, his eyes closed but his fangs bared in a quiet snarl as he pumped their shafts, occasionally pausing to rub his palm over the heads of their cocks or grind them
Thorin watched every stroke, putting every ounce of control into his breathing and not making a
sound. He grabbed the vampire’s waist and squeezed, his hand slipped around until he could grab
Bilbo’s arse. He panted, the pressure building low in his belly, as Bilbo started pumping them faster.
He slid a finger down between Bilbo’s cheeks and gently rubbed over his hole.

Bilbo hissed into his chest and bucked against him.

Thorin was so close, he was having trouble keeping his eyes open and focused, but he managed to
dig his finger between the vampire’s cheeks and grind it against his hole just as he tipped over the
edge. Bilbo stifled a snarl into Thorin’s chest and came with a shudder. Thorin bit his fist to muffle
his own deep guttural groan as his eyes rolled back and he spilled himself between them on the
waiting rag.

He lay there panting as the pleasure slowly abated. Bilbo lay still against him, not even breathing
hard but looking satisfied nonetheless. When Thorin looked for the mess they had made, it had
already been taken care of. The rag was gone and they were both tucked back into their small
clothes.

Bilbo squirmed up against him, returning them to their previous position and wrapping around his
hunter. “There, now go back to sleep.” He murmured drowsily into Thorin’s chest.

Thorin huffed a sleepy, satistued laugh and relaxed as he re-wrapped himself around his vampire. Sleep
came quickly and he drifted back into darkness.

The next time he woke up, it was to the sound of the door clicking shut. He drowsily looked around
before pulling himself up out of bed. A lamp was lit, so it must be dark outside again.

“The boys went down to fetch some . . . dinner? Or would it be breakfast now?”

Thorin turned to the sound of his vampire’s voice. He was refreshing himself in the wash basin and
getting dressed.

“Nori’s been up a while, out doing his thing, whatever that is. The boys woke up a little while ago,
but weren’t doing a very good job of keeping quiet so I sent them out to do something useful.
Though, if you’re awake now, we could always join them and eat in the common room.”

Thorin stared as Bilbo spoke, barely registering what he was saying. He was far to preoccupied
tracing the subtle curves of the vampire’s arse. For his life, he couldn’t figure out of what happened
had been real or a dream.

“Are you alright?” Bilbo was looking at him now.

Thorin cleared his throat. “Yes . . . it’s just . . . did we . . . “ he trailed off, not wanting to mention it if
it hadn’t been real.

“Did we what?”

“. . . Nothing. Never mind.” It must have been a dream after all. He looked away and got up to start
getting dressed himself. As he did, he missed the small mischievous smirk and knowing look in the
vampire’s eyes.

Thorin got himself dressed and around quickly so they could join the boys down in the common
room to eat. After being cooped up so long, they were all ready to get out and stretch a bit.
They found a free table and waved the boys over as they returned with the trays.

“Uncle, you’re up! We thought you were gonna sleep all night.” Kili greeted as he set Bilbo’s cup of hot water down for him.

“I admit I was sleeping quite well.”

“I can’t image why.” Fili retorted sarcastically and glanced at the vampire.

Thorin sent him a mild glare, but Fili was still staring at Bilbo. He turned to check on the vampire at his side. Bilbo was staring at nothing, his eyes glazed and unfocused. Thorin noticed the slight twitching of his ear.

“Are you alright?” Thorin rumbled quietly in question, but Bilbo didn’t respond. He exchanged looks with his boys.

“Bilbo?” Kili ventured.

The vampire’s ear twitched noticeably and his eyes slowly came back into focus. He blinked and turned to Kili. “Yes?”

“Everything okay?” Thorin asked.

Bilbo sighed. “No, it seems not.” He dipped a tea bag into his cup.

Before the hunter’s could ask him to elaborate, the door to the inn slammed open and Nori burst through. He marched right to their table like a man on a mission and slammed a piece of paper on the table in front of Bilbo, knocking some tea from his cup. “I have to go.” He said as way of explanation as Bilbo tutted at the loss of tea.

Nori turned to leave, offering nothing more in the way of explanation, but Bilbo reached out and yanked him back. Nori landed on the bench with a grunt and nearly fell back off from the force.

Bilbo casually picked up the paper and read it, keeping one hand firmly on the thief’s shoulder. He didn’t seem nearly as perturbed by whatever information lay on the parchment. “You knew it was only a matter of time. Why the concern?”

“It’s not a matter of time anymore, it’s now! And I’m not there! I have to get back before something happens!” Nori barked, agitated at the vampire who was holding him back.

Bilbo scoffed. “Your protectiveness over your family is admirable, but we both know Dori is more than capable of handling things.”

Nori huffed and crossed his arms defiantly.

“And where will you take them? You can’t stay in Belegost and Nogrod is too close as well. Too much traffic between the two.”

“I don’t know yet. Bree’s too close. We can go to Imladris for a while, or even up to Cardume or down to Gondor. I’ll figure it out when I get there.”

Bilbo nodded, but still didn’t let him go. Nori’s leg bounced anxiously. "Ori won’t like Imladris, they’ll find his tinkering vulgar. Dori won’t like Cardume as it’s not refined enough and Gondor is another vampire’s territory.”

“It’s better than bein’ dead!” The thief retorted hotly.
Bilbo tapped the paper on the table in thought, completely undisturbed or rushed by Nori’s urgency and attitude. “And what if I could offer you a safe place?”

Nori froze and stared at the vampire suspiciously. “What kind of place?”

“A safe one.” Bilbo smiled his superficially charming smile.

Nori eyed him for a moment. “I’m listening.”

Bilbo stirred what remained of the tea in his cup, finally releasing the thief as he didn’t seem like he would try to bolt any second. “I’ve been considering some things.” He started slowly. “Belegost is a bit out of the way for a base.”

“And?” Nori tried to hurry him along.

“And I have found you and your brothers’ services to be quite invaluable.”

“For Eru’s sake! Just get to the point!”

“And I still have quite a bit of services I am still waiting on to be finished,” Bilbo continued sedately. “And as you cannot stay in Belegost any longer . . .”

Nori rolled his eyes and growled in frustration.

“I had considered offering your family the chance to stay with me in my castle.” He finally finished.

Nori gaped at the vampire. “Us? Stay in that dump?”

Bilbo squawked indignantly. “You should know me well enough by now to know I wouldn’t simply drift around some ruins like a wraith! My home is very comfortable, thank you very much!”

“But . . . what about . . . ‘him?’”

“My home is my sanctuary. It wouldn’t be any such thing if he knew of it or had access to it, would it?” Bilbo retorted quietly.

“But, if he ever comes, he’ll smell us.”

“I’m not taking you in the front door.” Bilbo scoffed.

“But it’s your sanctuary?!” Nori pressed flabbergasted at the offer.

“And you and your brothers are likely the closest thing to a coven that I’ll ever have.”

Nori’s mouth hung open in a gobsamcked gape.

“I have more than enough space, luxurious accommodations, I can build Ori a new workshop, Dori can decorate and host to his heart’s content, you’ll be in range of several large towns for managing your network and you won’t have to worry about living in close proximity with humans.”

“On the rare chance that ‘he’ shows up, my home is magically sealed and hidden. Even he won’t be able to detect it. You’ll be safe.”

“And the chances that he does show up?” Nori asked cautiously.

Bilbo shrugged. “Slim. The last time he stopped by was several hundred years ago and he only
stayed for one night. I think he just wanted to make sure I wasn’t too comfortable.” Bilbo admitted bitterly before sipping at his tea. “If he wants something, he usually calls me to him.”

Nori continued to eye him as he thought over the offer. “Alright, I’ll mention it ta the others.”

Bilbo chuckled like he had already won. “Ori has been dying to see my library since we met. And Dori would dress me daily if I let him. I doubt they’ll have any objections.”

Nori grumbled something and stood to leave. “I’m still gonna leave tonight.”

“That’s fine. I have some things to take care of in the area anyway. Since we’ll be regrouping at my castle, I’ll deliver these three there and then go grab our loot from the troll’s horde. Tell your brothers to only bring what they can carry and I’ll retrieve the rest. Bring them back here and I’ll show you the way in.”

Nori nodded, but lingered. “Thanks.” He mumbled out before turning to leave without waiting for a reply.

Bilbo just smiled softly and sipped his tea.

“What was that all about?” Kili wondered.

“Are the others okay?” Fili asked.

“They’re fine for now. They just can’t stay in Belegost any longer.”

“Why not?” Thorin reached for the paper, picking it up and turning it over when he met no rebuke or resistance. Not that it mattered. He couldn’t read the strange scrawl scratched over the surface.

“It’s no longer safe for them. As you know, they are not true humans—“

“What? I didn’t know that? What are they then?” Fili asked incredulously.

“You didn’t notice that he disappears and reappears pretty much at will?” Fili asked incredulously.

“Well, yeah, but I just figured he was a really good thief!” Kili defended.

Bilbo chuckled. “Nori is a changeling.”

“What? He doesn’t look that strange, I mean, his hair is weird but—“

“That’s because he is a human-changeling. He and his brothers were human babes who were raised by a changeling mother, as such they have become infused with fairy magic giving them magical abilities . . . and prolonging their lifespans.” Bilbo explained quietly.

Thorin caught on. “And how long have they been in Belegost?”

“Long enough that people are starting to notice that they aren’t aging as fast as they should be.”

“Oh~” Fili caught on as well. “That’s why it’s not safe. If people suspect them of magic—“

“They will form an angry mob and hunt them down without mercy.” Thorin finished.

Bilbo nodded.

“So he’s been a changeling all this time?” Kili was still hung up on the revelation.
“Yes, Kili.” Fili answered rolling his eyes. Bilbo just chuckled and Thorin smirked.

“Huh.”

“What is this chicken scratch?” Thorin held up the paper. “Is it some kind of fairy speech?”

Bilbo chuckled and took the paper. “I’m afraid not. It’s a sort of code, commonly used among thieves.”

“And you know it because?”

“I know a great many languages, Thorin. Both human and . . non-human.” He raised a brow. “It’s a perk of living so long. I have plenty of time to pursue academic interests.”

“So, what are we gonna do all night? I can’t just go back to bed.” Kili asked like a bored child.

“There’s not a whole lot we can do at night. All the shops are closed.” Fili offered.

“Oh, I don’t know. I find there’s plenty to do at night.” Bilbo snarked.

Fili gave him an unimpressed look. “That’s because you’re a vampire.” He whispered the last word.

“And you’re a vampire hunter. Isn’t that when you do most of your work?” Bilbo reminded.

“But there’s no vampires around here. Present company excluded, of course.” Kili quickly corrected.

Bilbo shrugged. “Perhaps I can provide something else for you to hunt. How would you like to test your bravery with hunting Barrow Wights?” He offered with a wicked smile.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Bilbo takes the hunters Barrow Wight hunting. They finally learn a thing or two about their highly coveted Blood stones and get another history lesson along the way.

I've been considering opening up a tumblr account for posting my little updates and sneak peeks and just generally posting what I'm up to and what new things are coming, but I don't want to bother with it if it's not something people would be all that interested in. I would basically be transferring my progress rambles and updates from my Xanje thread over to the tumblr account instead.

So, let me know if that's something you would be interested in. ^_^
Well, I did it. I made a tumblr. I'm even kind of enjoying it, actually. XD I've already starting posting some little excerpts from future chapters and stuff, so, yeah, check it out if you're up to it. ;3 You can find it here.

Also, Sneak Peek for September: "Love at my Finger Tips"

After a terrible accident, Thorin Durin was left with a new and useful, though not particularly welcome, ability. He can read other people's minds and feelings with merely a touch. Having been terribly traumatized by both his accident and the betrayal that followed it, he's sworn off any kind of intimate relationship, simply refusing to put himself at such risk again. Retired from the police force, he makes his living as a private investigator using his special abilities for both private requests and official police investigations. Unfortunately, his new assistant is making it hard to stick to his convictions and has him both craving to touch and terrified of what he might discover if he does.

Bilbo/Thorin, Modern AU, Supernatural

“So . . what's a barrow wight again?” Kili asked as he readjusted the pack on his back. “Is it a goblin?”

After Bilbo had quickly gathered up the supplies they were going to need, they had ridden out to the edge of the Barrow Downs just southwest of Bree before tying the horses secure to a tree and continuing on foot. They trekked over the hills casually, as if simply wandering.

“A barrow wight,” Bilbo started to explain. “Is not a goblin or a fairy. It is a spirit, which is considered a separate category of creatures. Though many spirits are very similar to goblins and usually use and are created by dark magic, they are technically considered as a separate group of beings, for various reasons. One being that neither fairies nor goblins want to claim them. Spirits can afflict anyone, human, fairy or goblin and are typically feared and avoided by them all.”

“Uhhh. Then why are we looking for one?” Fili asked sounding a little concerned.

“Because they are dangerous and someone needs to deal with them. This particular area has an . . infestation problem. Normally, I stay on top of any breakouts, But I've been away from the area.”

“And how do we fight a barrow wight?” Thorin asked from his place beside his vampire as they crested another hill.

“You don't.” Bilbo answered. “You can't fight a spirit. Even mythril has minimal affects on spirits. The most effective defense is pure light or fairy magic. Spirits are more sensitive to fairy magic and barrow wights only manifest at night. But barrow wights are one of the most lethal of the spirit creatures.”
“Barrow wights have an ability similar to enchantment called ‘terror.’ Their voices are cold and dead and instill an intense numbing fear in their victims. It paralyzes them making them easy targets for the barrow wights, who drag them back to their graves and kill them.”

“So, why are we out here again?” Kili asked as he shifted his pack nervously.

“Like I said, someone has to deal with them.”

“Yeah, but, normally you don’t let us come when it’s something this dangerous.” Fili pointed out, his eyes glancing around nervously.

“I wouldn’t bring you defenseless. I’ve already taken precautions against their voice. You’ll feel fear, but it won’t paralyze you. And I’m immune, so push come to shove, I’ll just slash ’em up with my myrthril edged sword and ward them off. Your swords won’t kill them but you can temporarily dissipate their forms so feel free to use them if they get too close. Don’t let them touch you.”

“What precautions?” Thorin wondered as they crested another hill. He didn’t remember the vampire doing anything to prepare them for this.

“You’re wearing the blood stones I gave you, aren’t you?” Bilbo asked as if he already knew the answer.

“Of course. You said never to take them off.” Thorin replied. Not that he would. It was a gift from Bilbo that had sounded like it had to do with their protection. He'd wear it constantly even if it were just a pretty rock. “Why? What do they do?”

“You haven’t noticed?” Bilbo raised a brow at him, glancing back to catch the boys’ responses as well. They all shook their heads and looked confused.

“Blood stones are . . . “ he began but seemed unsure how to continue. He waved his hands around a bit. “Complex. They have many uses and abilities depending on their age and use. But, their primary use is to absorb and store dark energy.”

“To create one takes a vast amount of energy and power. Once created they will continue to absorb any dark energy that comes within range, including energy carried in spells, like, for example, enchantment.” He sent them meaningful looks.

“The stone absorbs the energy from the spell. Without dark energy to power it, the spell falls apart and loses it's effectiveness.”

“The Enchantress.” Thorin murmured as he connected the dots. “She couldn’t enchant us.”

Bilbo nodded. “The stones around your necks called and absorbed the dark energy she was throwing at you, making her spell ineffective.”

“Is that why it got so hot?” Kili wondered at the revelation.

“I suppose. The stones will generate heat if they are required to convert large amounts of energy for a significant stretch of time.”

“But we weren’t unaffected. Our minds stayed clear but our bodies wouldn’t move. And at the end, I felt myself go under.” Thorin pointed out.

Bilbo nodded in understanding. “ Spells often have side affects. The heaviness and difficulty moving is a side effect of enchantment meant to contain the victim until the spell has taken root. The stone
doesn’t eliminate the side effects, it just takes the bite out of the spell. If you fell under the spell, it's because it took the stone a moment to absorb the massive wave of energy she threw at you, but you resurfaced even before she was dead."

"I did." Thorin confirmed. "So the stones defend us against dark magic?"

Bilbo nodded. "Dark magic, dark spells, dark energy. Any kind of dark energy directed at you will be redirected to the stone and absorbed. The main problem with enchantment-like spells is they're slow moving. They creep along and, therefore, have time to effect you in other ways before they reach the stone and are absorbed."

"So, are we, like, immune to dark magic then?" Kili asked enthusiastically.

"To a degree, yes. But a powerful enough spell could still affect you before the stone is able to adsorb the attack." Bilbo cautioned. "And it will only protect you as long as you don't remove it." He paused. "It won't protect you from everything, but it significantly reduces the amount of threats I need to personally protect you from."

"So, what happened with her anyway?" Fili asked reminded of the situation with the Enchantress. "Did she enchant you?"

"Of course not." Bilbo scoffed. "Her power wasn't that impressive. But, it was impressive." He conceded. "It was interesting" He shrugged. "So I played with it a bit."

"You . . . played with it?" Thorin asked, incredulous.

"Magic and energy is much more physical than you think. At least, it is to other magic users. Magic energy moves, it has weight, it has . . . personality. Hers was fascinating. I indulged a bit." He shrugged again.

"And here I was worried about you."

Bilbo scoffed. "As if someone her age could touch me. She was talented, but not that talented."

"So, uh, how do we find these barrow wights? We've just been wandering over all these hills." Fili asked as they crested another hill.

"We don't." Bilbo returned. "We let them find us."

None of the hunters looked very comfortable with the idea. "And how will we know we've been found." Thorin questioned as he glanced over the moonlight bathed hills.

"Oh . . . You'll hear them." Bilbo said simply and continued to lead them on.

They continued on silently for about another ten minutes before Fili startled and shuffled closer to their vampire. "What is that?!!"

They all stopped and listened as a cold, wispy voice reached them.

"Cold be hand and heart and bone, and cold be sleep under stone: never more to wake on stony bed, never, till the Sun fails and the Moon is dead."

"What is that?!" Kili whispered, fear lacing his voice. The teens huddled between their uncle and vampire. Thorin pulled out his sword. The cold, dead voice chilled him to the bones and made his skin crawl.
"In the black wind the stars shall die, and still on gold here let them lie, till the dark lord lifts his hand over dead sea and withered land."

“That is the chant of the Barrow wights.” Bilbo informed quietly as a wispy shade floated into view. It was little more than a shadowy figure, shrouded in a cloak of darkness. It’s face was invisible in the darkness of its low hanging hood, if it even had one. The only human-like features being a pair of skeletal arms and hands that reached out from under the dark wispy cloak to grab at its victims.

The boys cowered behind the vampire. Thorin didn’t blame them. He was fighting the tremor in his own limbs. He could only imagine how bad it would be without the blood stone. “How do we destroy it?” He murmured as the wispy figure continued to float closer, unwilling to take his eyes of the terrible thing. The chant continued to float in the air around them.

“We need to find the grave it came from.”

“And how do we do that?” Thorin’s muscles were coiled tight ready to spring. His instinct was screaming to attack the threat, but he knew it wouldn’t do any good. He needed to follow Bilbo’s lead.

“Well, we can wander around for hours while fending it off and hope we find it. Or we can let it take one of us and simply follow it to it’s grave.” Bilbo answered casually.

The boys looked absolutely terrified and Thorin stared at him like he’d lost his mind.

“Relax.” Bilbo cooed to the twins who were practically attached to him. “I would never let them take any of you.” He pressed one of his hands into each of their backs and their trembling eased, the horror slowly fading from their face. “You’ll be alright. Stay with your uncle and follow along. I won’t let them near you.”

“Bilbo, no.” Thorin uttered almost numbly. His own fear overpowering much of his concern. Bilbo reached out and set a hand on his alarm and Thorin felt his own fear ease away. His muscles relaxed some, still poised to strike if necessary but not painfully tense. He look at Bilbo curiously. “What did you do?”

“It’s a simple spell. It will help ward off the fear, but it’s temporary. We need to deal with this before it wears off.”

“You can’t let it take you!” Kili denied, his thoughts more lucid without the fear coursing through his system.

“They can’t kill me, Kili. I’ll be fine. I’ll draw them to me and let them take me to their grave, you follow behind. When we get to the grave, we’ll purify their remains and put them to rest.” He explained, patted Kili’s arm one more time and walked towards the shadowy wight.

“They?!” Fili whispered, a new terror rising in his voice.

Indeed, as they listened they could hear not one, but three distinct layers of the continuing chant. The boys huddled closer to their uncle. Bilbo was only feet away from the wight now and he turned to look at them. His eyes were black and his face wore a fierce scowl. He lifted his hand and snapped.

What felt like a small shock wave rippled out away from him in every direction. It momentarily blasted away the fear and the chanting. When the voices returned, they were louder, closer and the hunters watched in horror as three wights quickly drifted straight for their vampire.

A surge of protective anger shot through Thorin as the wights latched on to their vampire with their
bony hands and started pulling him away. He rushed forward, leaving his nephews to follow, so he wouldn’t lose sight of them.

The boys stayed right behind him, no less disturbed by the sight of their vampire uncle being lead away by the deadly creatures. They followed along for what felt like forever, all the way fighting the urge to charge the shadow creatures and free Bilbo.

For his part, Bilbo just walked along, never letting the creatures pull him faster than the hunters could keep up with. He walked casually, but Thorin could see the tension in his shoulders, the slight stiffness in his gait. He wondered if he was in pain, scared, or just uncomfortable with their touches. He didn’t know and he didn’t like it.

They were following along at a safe distance when Bilbo suddenly unsheathed his mythril edged sword and swung it full circle around him. The wights shrieked and dissipated into the night, their chanting fading with them. Thorin and the boys rushed forward to catch up with him.

“What happened?!” Thorin grabbed him and started patting him down and checking for injuries.

Bilbo cocked an amused brow at him. “Nothing. We’re here.” He gestured to a pit in the ground near his feet.

“What is it?” Fili wondered, pulling out a torch and letting Kili light it.

“It’s the grave.” Bilbo took the lit torch and hopped down into the hole. He shined the light on the floor of the pit. Pieces of ancient looking skeletons protruded out from the earthen floor and walls everywhere. But, more disturbing was the small pile of fresh corpses that lay at the bottom. “It looks like they’ve been busy.”


“The most recent victims? Yes. Travelers, likely. Bandits perhaps. Unfortunate fools who weren’t smart enough to avoid the cursed hills of the Barrow Downs.”

“How do we purify it?” Thorin asked, disgusted and determined to close up the cursed hole.

Bilbo handed the torch back up. “Hand me the salt.”

Kili scrambled with his bag and hoisted out several sacks of the white mineral. Fili handed them down one at a time as Bilbo needed them. The hunters watched in the faint torchlight as Bilbo scattered the salt all throughout the grave, all over the walls and floor and even over the fresh corpses.

“The wood.” He requested when he had used up all the salt. Thorin and the twins each unloaded their share of the ash and oak logs that they had been tasked to carry and handed them down to Bilbo as he set them up around the grave.

“The oil.” He held his hand up for the last ingredient for their purifying pyre. “Quickly! I can feel them re-manifesting.”

Fili hurried to hand down the large flask of oil but fumbled and dropped it into the pit. Bilbo caught it easily and immediately started pouring it over the logs and around the the grave. With that done he hopped out, landing lightly on the edge of the pit, and threw the torch in.

The pit went up in instant flames and lit up the night more than their torch ever could. Within moments a wailing and screeching came bursting out of the grave, startling the hunters. Bilbo just
watched motionless as the flames engulfed everything inside. Thorin stood beside him, watching the same seen. Maybe it was just his imagination, but he thought he could see the wretched souls writhing in the flames.

He was morbidly fascinated, transfixed by the flickering images until a small hand eased into his own. He broke his stare and looked down to see Bilbo’s hand in his, his fingers entwined firmly but gently with Thorin's.

Bilbo was staring into the fire blankly and Thorin wondered what he saw. Bilbo always avoided gazing into the fire. Thorin squeezed his hand and brought it up to his lips for a caressing kiss. Bilbo's stare didn't falter but his face seemed to lose some of it’s tension and Thorin counted it as a win.

“So . . now what?” Fili whispered as if afraid to disturb the ritual.

“Now we wait. Once the fire has died down, I'll spread the ashes throughout the grave and rebury it.”

There was a beat of silence as they all watched the fire engulf the pit, it's flames rising up towards the dark sky.

“There were so many bones. Why were there so many bones? We’re they all victims of these things?” Kili wondered out loud, sounding almost disturbed at the amount of remains that lay exposed in the pit. “Surely people would notice if they were killing that many?”

Bilbo took a deep breath and sighed it out. “These lands were once flat plains as far as you could see.” He began, sounding nostalgic. The hunters exchanged glances wondering what it had to do with the corpses. “A great battle took place here. The most gruesome and terrifying battle in remembered history. The Battle of Abomination.”

He continued to stare into the flames and the hunters remained silent and listened. “There had been many battles before, but this one was the battle for everything. All people united, fairies, goblins, half-breeds, even some humans combined their forces to fight a common foe.”

“The Dark Lord?” Fili ventured.

“No, he was part of the united armies.”

“But . . . who else-“

“The abominations.”

“. . The fairy-goblins?” Thorin guessed, recalling one of their previous conversations.

“More like goblin-fairies, but yes. Their power was so great, even the Dark lord feared his throne would be taken. In desperation, he formed a truce with the other peoples in order to destroy his own creations. The battle was terrible. Blood flowed like water over the plains. The casualties of that battle have never been matched. There were so many dead they couldn’t bury them, and the ground so flooded with blood that they couldn’t even burn them. So they piled them up in giant mounds and just . . left them to rot. These aren’t hills, Kili. They’re mass graves.”

The hunters turned wide eyes to the surrounding hills. Hills as far as you could see for miles, even. Every one of them a mound of death.

“This land remained barren, desolate for hundreds of years afterward. No one would step foot here.
Over time the corpses rotted and the elements swept over them. Fairies, goblins, humans and half-breeds rotting together like one flesh. Eventually the earth claimed them. Much longer after that life started to creep back, but only scarcely. The grass crept back in, but nothing that moves and breathes will linger here. Even humans are usually smart enough to avoid this graveyard.

“Such a conglomerate of death, formed in the violent and desecrated way they were, it’s no surprise that some violent spirits emerge from their depths now and then. There are plenty of restless spirits here, fairy spirits retain some of their power even after death. Combine them with the dark magic of the goblins and you have yourself a nice little abomination spirit. Souls of fairies lingering by the power of dark magic.”

Thorin felt a chill run down his spine. He had been through this region many times and he had never heard of such a dark history. “If they are abominations, shouldn’t they be more powerful?”

Bilbo shrugged. “They are the most terrifying of the spirits, but they don’t wield their fairy power anymore. Even their dark magic is limited as it's only the residual dark energy left behind. Their range is limited as well and they can only appear in the darkness. In other words, they can be avoided if you’re smart, so most prefer to leave them be.”

“Then why are we hunting them?” Fili asked curiously.

Bilbo shrugged again. “To end their suffering, I suppose. The world has suffered enough from the war.”

“Were you there for it? Did you fight?” Kili questioned, intrigued by the possibility.

“No. The war was before even my time. But it is the reason why it is forbidden to merge fairy and goblin power. The results were devastating.”

“Were they that evil?” Fili wondered.

“Evil?” Bilbo echoed. “Powerful, uncontrollable, unpredictable, unstable, twisted . . . tortured. They were many things, but I don’t think they were evil. But they were dangerous above everything else. They were a threat, so they were destroyed.”

“Even though they didn’t deserve it? I mean, it wasn’t their fault they were created, right?” Kili asked indignantly.

“No. They were once normal fairies before the Dark Lord used . . who knows what sort of torturous means to infuse them with dark magic. Most of his attempts ended in gruesome failure. I imagine the ones that survived carried scars of the body and the mind. But they were dangerous . . to everyone. Do you ignore a bear living too close to a human town? No. You kill it because you never know when it will strike or who it will kill. Even if it is just a bear doing what a bear does. It’s dangerous.”

“It doesn’t . . . it doesn’t sound right.” Kili muttered.

Bilbo wrapped an arm around the teen and gave him a gentle squeeze. “The world is full of wrongs, Kili. All you can do is try not to be one of them.”

Kili shuffled closer and leaned his head against Bilbo’s as they continued to stare into the fire. Fili joined them wrapping his arms around them both, nuzzling into the back of The vampires head. Thorin was warmed by the sight even more than by the raging fire. His boys and his vampire. He didn’t know just at what point Bilbo had become part of their family, their strange little family, but a family none-the-less. He wrapped them all in his arms, his precious ones.
Eventually Bilbo stirred and shook them off. “Alright, that’s enough of that. The sun will be coming up soon so let’s head back to the inn. This is gonna burn for a while, so I’ll return tomorrow night to finish this up.”

The boys let go reluctantly and they all grabbed their empty packs and let Bilbo lead them back.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Bilbo heads to the Old Forest on a personal mission. Thorin convinces him to let him tag along and finds out a little more history about his vampire in the process.

Chant of the Barrow Wights borrowed from Tolkien. His original work not mine.
They made it back to the inn just before dawn, grabbed something to eat and collapsed into their beds. To Thorin’s delight, Bilbo opted to share his bed and let the boys each have their own bed. Thorin was more than happy to share. He didn’t have anymore erotic dreams that night, to his disappointment, but he did have a vampire plastered against his back so it wasn’t a complete loss.

Bilbo lay snug against his back, using the big hunter's bulk as a barrier against the dim light fighting it’s way through the window covers. His face was pressed between Thorin’s shoulder blades and one arm was draped over Thorin’s side possessively. Thorin didn’t even shift lest he disturb his bed partner and Bilbo move away even an inch. He quite enjoyed having his petite vampire’s lithe body molded against his own.

They awoke just as the sun was going down. Fili and Kili woke first, getting around and heading down to the common room to make orders for dinner, breakfast, or whatever it was. Bilbo didn’t stir until the sun stopped filtering in through the curtains and Thorin wasn’t about to leave the vampire's embrace until he had to.

Bilbo squirmed behind him, finally rolling onto his back with a stretch. Thorin rolled over to face him as the vampire’s body produced a series of disturbing sounding pops and crackles.

“Are you all right?” Was his first thought after hearing the strange sounds.

“Yes.” Bilbo stretched one more time getting a few more pops out. “Just a bit stiff. It’ll be nice to be underground again.”

“Why does being above ground make you stiff?”

“I’m dead, Thorin. The dead are meant to be under ground.”

“You're not dead.” Thorin replied, aware just how much in denial he sounded.

“Right. I’m undead. Still belong in the ground.” Bilbo smirked.

Thorin scoffed and shoved him and Bilbo giggled at his attempt. Bilbo barely moved.

Thorin sat up and swung his feet off the bed, mock annoyed at the teasing. “So, when are we returning to the castle then?”

“Tomorrow night hopefully. I have something I need to take care of tonight.” Bilbo rolled off the bed, landing on his feet effortlessly.

“What kind of something?”
“Oh, the usual. Dealing with an errant goblin, most likely.” Bilbo drawled casually as he got himself around.

Thorin nodded and finished getting himself around. A moment later and they were both headed down to join the boys for a hot meal.

They settled around a table as the boys came back with trays of food and a hot cup of water for the vampire. “So, are we going wight hunting again tonight?” Fili wondered as he dug into his food.

“No. You will stay here and rest for tonight. I have business to take care of.” Bilbo replied mildly.

“What?! What kind of business? Why can’t we come?” Kili was quick to protest.

“Personal business. That’s why.”

“Is it dangerous?” Fili probed.

“I doubt it.”

“Then why can’t we come?!” Kili repeated.

“Because it’s personal.” Bilbo echoed.

“But you’ll let Uncle come with you!” Kili whined.

“No, I won’t.” Bilbo scoffed.

“What?!” Thorin’s head popped up. He understood making the boys stay behind. He had done it on a regular basis. But he was a mature hunter. He wasn’t going to be left behind. “I’m coming.”

“No, you’re not.” Bilbo huffed an exasperated laugh. “What part of ‘personal’ don’t you hunters understand?”

“What sort of personal?” Thorin almost growled.

Bilbo rolled his eyes. The jealousy in the hunter’s tone too obvious. “Not that sort of personal.”

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“Then why can’t I come. I can take care of myself.”

Bilbo raised an unimpressed brow at him, not bothering to mention all the times he had gotten the hunter out of a . . . Difficult situation. Thorin could practically read the word ‘trolls’ all over the vampire’s face but he didn’t back down. “What kind of personal business?” He pushed.

Bilbo sighed and shook his head. “I have an . . . arrangement with the fairies of the Old Forest. I deal with any . . . unwanted visitors in their woods. I’ve been picking up their signal since I got here. I thought it might have been the wights bothering them, but since the signal is still ringing in my ears, it must be something actually inside the forest. Which means I’ll have to go check it out.”

“You’re going . . . into the Old Forest?” Fili asked uneasily.

“Yes. You're familiar?”

Fili glanced to his brother and uncle before continuing. “They say the Old Forest is haunted. That the trees themselves are dangerous and no one who enters there ever comes out.”

Bilbo shrugged. “If the second were true, no one would know about the first, huh?”
The hunters looked at him, not sure what he was implying.

“The Forest is protected by strong fairy magic. To a human, the place would be a nightmare. Of course, the scarier it is, the less likely people will wander in. I don’t kill the humans who get lost in the woods, but I do make sure they are scared out of their minds by the time they get out.” He murmured lowly.

“You protect it with fairy magic?!” Fili asked in surprise.

“No! Of course not. The fairies protect the forest with their magic, I simply scare the life out of any humans stupid enough to venture there, while also herding them out. Goblins on the other hand, I simply eradicate. Few will enter the forest, most are repelled by a force they can’t even detect. They don’t understand why, they just don’t like it there and it keeps most of them out. “

“But there are some who are more or less immune to the affect and I have to deal with them personally.”

“If the fairies are so strong, why don’t they take care of it themselves?” Kili wondered. More put out that Bilbo had to deal with it than that he was going to miss out on the forest.

“The fairies of the Old Forest are very powerful. One of the oldest and most powerful fairy races. But they are peaceful by nature. They detest violence, even for their own sake. They could easily destroy any intruders into their forest, but they won’t. So, I do it for them.”

“And what do you get out of this arrangement?” Thorin asked dubiously.

“I protect their sanctuary and they protect mine. They use their magic to conceal the entrance to my true home under the castle.”


“Of course I do. Haven’t you been listening. I belong under ground.”

“Wait! If they protect the entrance, doesn’t that mean we’re gonna have to go there anyway? So why can’t we come with you now?” Kili redirected.

“Because it’s basic manners to let them know I’m bringing guests before I show up on their doorstep, Kili.” Bilbo rebuked.

“We’re not guests, Bilbo. We’re family!” Fili corrected.

Bilbo stared at him, looking like he wasn’t sure how to respond to that.

“I’m still coming with you.” Thorin announced stubbornly.

“You are not.”

“Fine. Then I’ll go to the Old Forest by myself.”

“You will not. I could get there, kill the goblin, and get back before you even made it to the Barrow Downs.”

“So, I’ll still go. Just to see what it’s like.”

Bilbo narrowed his eyes at the stubborn hunter. “I can make you stay.” He threatened.
“How? You can’t enchant me without removing the blood stone. You gonna tie us all up and leave us defenseless?” Thorin challenged.

Bilbo’s eyes narrowed even more and he glared at him. Thorin stared back, unwilling to back down. Finally Bilbo scoffed and relented. “I shouldn’t have told you about those blasted blood stones.” He grumbled. “Fine! You may come, but the boys stay here.”

“Agreed.” Thorin smirked triumphantly.

The teens protested and complained, but Bilbo shot them a warning glare and they quieted. “You will stay or so help me, I won’t give either of you anything for your birthday.” He warned darkly.

The boys instantly perked up, their disappointment replaced by eager anticipation. “What?!” “What are you getting us?!”

“Nothing if you don’t behave.” Bilbo warned once more.

“We’ll stay!” “We promise!” “We won’t even leave the inn!” They hastened to assure and Bilbo just huffed, a small smirk revealing he wasn’t too upset.

“Alright, well, if you’re coming with me, you better hurry up and get ready because we need to go as soon as possible.” Bilbo ordered at Thorin.

Thorin chuckled to himself as he downed the last of his ale and sprinted up to their room to grab his gear, choosing his lighter weapons since he likely wouldn’t have to do much with Bilbo around. When he made it back down stairs, Bilbo was waiting for him by the door.

He turned and left the inn without even waiting for Thorin to get to him. They headed straight for the stable and grabbed Thorin’s horse. Bilbo stepped up and grabbed the reigns while Thorin was tightening the saddle strap. “Mind If I drive?”

Thorin raised a brow. “I thought horses didn’t like vampires.”

“They don’t. They don’t like the Barrow Downs either and we still have to stop and fill that grave. We don’t have time to walk all the way there and back. I can overpower an animal’s will and instincts if I have too.”

Thorin nodded and gestured for Bilbo to get on and the vampire effortlessly hoisted himself up onto the horse. The horse pranced and whinnied in fright until Bilbo brushed a small hand down its neck. He murmured something quietly and the horse settled.

Thorin stared, not used to seeing the vampire seated on a horse . . . his horse. He shook himself and grabbed the saddle to pull himself up behind Bilbo. He settled into the saddle, Bilbo’s shorter legs didn’t even reach the stirrups but he didn’t seem to care and it didn’t affect the efficiency of his movements as he turned the horse towards the door and walked them out onto the town road.

They trotted through the town and what little foot traffic was still wandering about after dark. Thorin quickly discovered that the trip was going to prove very . . . stimulating as his groin rubbed against Bilbo’s rear with every stride of the horse.

He wrapped an arm around the vampire’s waist and tugged him even closer, pressing their bodies flush against each other shamelessly.

“Thorin.” Bilbo chided. “I’m driving. Don’t make me turn this horse around.”
“Don’t. I quite like this arrangement.” Thorin pressed a soft kiss the back of Bilbo’s neck.”

Bilbo huffed and his rear rubbed against Thorin’s hardening interest. Thorin groaned and drooped over the vampire, his head on his shoulder and his arms wrapped around his waist.

“You’re just going to make this uncomfortable for yourself.” Bilbo warned.

“You could have mercy and relieve my suffering.” Thorin rumbled into his ear.

Bilbo laughed as they approached the gate leading out of town. “No time for that, I’m afraid. Better hold on tight.” He replied and spurred the horse through the gate at a gallop. He guided the horse expertly, even when it resisted and fought to avoid entering the Barrow Downs.

Thorin found that the speed and the rush of the wind was helpful for his . . . predicament, but he let his hands settle on the vampire’s hips even as he leaned over him to avoid the worst of the wind. Bilbo kept them at a steady run until they reached the grave in the Barrow Downs. The horse was too tired to try to bolt by the time Bilbo let it stop. He and Thorin slipped off, and Thorin held the horse while Bilbo dealt with the grave.

It only took a few minutes. He scattered the burned up ashes around the grave before caving it in with a few precise punches into the ground. Suddenly there was no pit.

“Come on. We’ll walk for a while. Let the horse rest.” Bilbo instructed and they turned to head towards the forest. It was already in sight, its dark shadows looked deep and menacing under the thin moon.

“So, what kind of goblin are you expecting to find?” Thorin wondered as they walked.

“Oh, probably nothing too significant.” Bilbo answered unconcerned. “There aren’t very many who can stand to enter the forest and most of them aren’t too impressive.”

“They aren’t powerful?” Thorin asked curiously.

“In their own way, I suppose. Typically it’s the ones who use a similar kind of spell as the concealment one on the forest. Those used to altered or hidden space and familiar with the feel of the spell.”

Thorin nodded. He supposed that made sense. “Does it bother you?” He wondered. “The magic that protects the forest.”

Bilbo shrugged. “Not really. The forest has never really bothered me.”

Thorin cocked a brow at the statement. “But?”

“But what?”

“You said the ‘forest’ doesn’t bother you, but . . . something else does?”

Bilbo just shrugged.

Thorin was curious now. What else was there in the Old Forest that would disturb someone like Bilbo? If it wasn’t the forest itself . . . “Do the fairies bother you?” What had Bilbo said, one of the oldest and strongest races of fairies?

Bilbo remained silent and Thorin could see a tension in his shoulders.
“I thought you had an arrangement?” He prodded gently.

“We do.” Bilbo replied shortly. “But it . . . wasn’t always that way.” He added quietly.

“Oh?” Thorin was burning with curiosity, but he didn't push. If Bilbo didn't want to share, no amount of prodding would get it out of him.

They walked in silence for several minutes before Bilbo finally sighed. "When I was . . . young in my . . . rebirth, very young . . . newborn, really, one of my . . . sire's," he spoke the word tensely, "commands was to eradicate the fairy people of the woods." He revealed.

"The fairies of these woods?” Thorin couldn't help asking. He felt he was learning something very personal, something Bilbo wouldn't share with just anyone. But Bilbo was powerful . . . terrifyingly so. So why were the fairies still here?

"Yes. I think it was more of a test really. To see if I could do it. . . . He wanted to see how powerful his new toy was." Bilbo spat in disgust.

"What happened?” Thorin prompted, if only to convey his continued interest.

"I went flying in with nothing but a blood lust burning in my throat and the command of my sire ringing in my ears. . . 'Kill them all.'" Bilbo's voiced dropped into deep, husky voice. For those three words, it sounded like he was speaking in someone else's voice entirely. "No plan, no strategy, no spells, not even a weapon. Just my own rage and imprisoned will." He ended bitterly.

"My only thoughts were to kill and destroy. . . . I didn't make it far before the then fairy elder and his sons . . . all nine of them stepped in my way. The elder is traditionally the most powerful and he was certainly no small fry, but him and all his sons . . . I didn't stand a chance, really." He sounded resigned.

"I thought you said they detested violence?” Thorin asked confused.

Bilbo nodded. "They do.” Then shrugged. "I assume they had their reasons. Perhaps the threat of genocide was enough to force their hands." He was silent for a few moments. "They almost killed me. I still have the scar to show for it."

"I didn't think vampires could scar." Thorin wondered out loud, slightly disturbed by the information.

"They don't. Not from physical wounds anyway. But fairy magic . . . is a different story. Fairy magic is toxic to us. It burns like acid and can leave burn-like scars in its wake . . . if we survive it."

"It only took one attack, though it was likely a combined effort. One agonizing blow and I was writhing on the ground as my flesh sizzled and burned away. All I really remember is pain, anger, confusion . . . hatred. . . . They could have killed me . . . but they didn't. They gathered around me while I was weak. I probably . . . snarled and hissed defiantly. I remember a searing pain and a blinding light. The next thing I knew I was crawling back into my master's castle broken and pathetic."

Thorin glanced over at his vampire. He knew vampires never admitted to things like fear or weakness. Bilbo was truly opening up to him, even if he was looking back on it with disgust. "Why do you think they let you live?"

Bilbo shrugged. Thorin couldn't tell if he didn't know or simply didn't care to share his theories. "After my attack, they disappeared for centuries behind a barrier that even my sire couldn't detect or penetrate."
"Then how did you end up with your little . . arrangement?"

"Over time, my power grew and I became able to detect their presence. When I decided to move in next door . . I thought it best to . . . resolve old conflicts. I entered the forest, knowing they would see and hear me, and assured them that my sire didn't know about them and that I had no ill intentions toward them and would be living next door to their forest." Bilbo shrugged. "The next time I passed through, they appeared to me and offered the arrangement."

"I always thought that vampires were vengeful by nature." Thorin said after a few moments of thought.

"They are." Bilbo shrugged. "But you assume that my grudge is against the fairies. They were only defending themselves. I was the invader and they spared me. It wasn't their fault I was in those blasted woods." He growled.

Thorin didn't reply. He had been listening. It was Bilbo's sire that had sent him out against the fairies, for the fun of it, it sounded like. Bilbo didn't blame the fairies. They were as much victim as he was. "What are they like?" Thorin changed the subject. He knew how much Bilbo hated talking about his sire. It always put him in a mood.

"The fairies?" Bilbo seemed to latch on to the new topic. "Short. Energetic. Jovial. They don't look nearly as powerful as they are, but that seems to be a common theme with sprites."

"Sprites? Is that a kind of fairy?"

"Sprites are the original fairies, the oldest races. Are you familiar with the Valar?"

"Yes, of course. My ancestors worshiped the vala Mahal."

Bilbo nodded. "According to fairy legend, every vala was given permission from Eru to create a race of their own to populate middle-earth. The first races before Eru filled it with his own creations. Unlike his creations, they each poured everything they had into their chosen race, their likenesses, their power and magic. As a result, they were far more powerful than any one race of Eru's, but they were limited in numbers compared to the abundance of Eru's creations."

"These were the sprites, the first fairies who helped their masters shape and tend to middle-earth. There aren't many sprites left in middle-earth, and they are all carefully hidden. The fairies of the Old Forest are the Sprites of Yavannah, the sprites of growth, fertility, peace, and simplicity."

Thorin contemplated that. One of the first races. "It almost sounds like sacred ground."

Bilbo shrugged. "They're just fairies. Powerful fairies with long histories, but still fairies."

They stopped at the edge of the Old Forest. Thorin had to admit, it certainly didn't look inviting and gave him a bit of a chill. An eerie fog seemed to linger amidst the trees.

"Well, ready to do some hunting?" Bilbo assessed him after tying up the horse.

Thorin made sure his weapons were secure. "Yeah. Let's go." And they headed into the eerie forest.

Chapter End Notes
Next time: Whew! Things are going to heat up as our favorite vampire/hunter duo head into the cursed forest to deal with the intruder. For some strange reason, Bilbo seems more intent on seducing his hunter than doing his job. Thorin is both thrilled and confused.
Seduction

Chapter Notes

Finally some steamy stuff! Jeez! These two have really taken their time, huh?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They slowly made their way into the forest. It seemed to close around them, menacing and threatening. Thorin glanced around suspiciously. The fog limited visibility, but what he could see looked twisted and distorted. The forest almost seemed to writh like the slithering innards of some kind of monstrous beast. Perhaps an affect of the shadows. He didn’t want to believe it was the true state of the forest.

“It’s an illusion. To make the forest . . uninviting. Don’t let it bother you. Except for the goblin we’re hunting, there isn’t much here that would harm you. It’s the fear that will do the most damage.” Bilbo must have picked up on his unease.

He glanced over at his vampire who looked perfectly calm and unaffected. Thorin wondered if they were seeing the same thing, but, then again, he’d never actually seen Bilbo afraid of anything before. “So, what are we looking for exactly?” He forced himself calm. Bilbo likely wouldn’t have brought him if there were any true threats anyway.

“Something that doesn’t belong here.” Bilbo answered simply.

Thorin snorted. This actually seemed exactly like the kind of place one would find a dangerous goblin, not a bunch of peace loving fairies. “And how do we find it? It’s a big forest. We don’t have all night.”

“I figured we’d split up. Cover more ground.”

Thorin sent the vampire a surprised glance. It was the last thing he expected to hear. Bilbo seemed to think the hunters needed constant supervision lately. “You want us to split up?”

“Yes. If it’s a goblin it will be more inclined to attack you if you’re alone anyway.” Bilbo stated casually. “Then I can swoop in and kill it.”

Thorin stopped where he was. “You want to use me as bait?” He asked incredulously. Was this even his vampire?!

“You’re the one who wanted to come along. I tried to get you to stay. But it was your stubborn arse that insisted on coming. The fastest way to find it is to let it come to us and hunters are always prime targets.” Bilbo retorted. “Unless you can’t handle being bait. I thought you were tougher than that though.” He raised a brow and smirked at the hunter.

Thorin narrowed his eyes at the vampire. He didn’t need to be challenged to do his job. “Fine.” He grumbled. “I’ll do it for a kiss.” He smirked back. Bilbo wasn’t the only one who could play games.

Bilbo chuckled as he stepped closer and grabbed Thorin’s coat. “Be good bait and help me wrap this up quickly and I’ll give you a kiss that will curl your toes in pleasure.” He husked sensually. He pulled Thorin into a quick kiss but pulled away before the hunter could get his arms around him.
“Mm-mm. That was an advance. You’ll get the rest of it when the problem is dealt with.”

Thorin huffed in mock annoyance at being avoided. At least now he was motivated and the woods didn’t seem quite so bad. “I’m gonna hold you to it.” He warned. Bilbo smirked but there was genuine fondness in his eyes.

“Don’t hurt the trees.” Bilbo instructed quickly, as if he had almost forgotten. “If there is anything sacred about this forest, it’s the trees. Do nothing to harm them.”

Thorin nodded. “Be nice to the trees. I think I can handle that.” He quipped as he started deeper in the forest. “Now, lets get this over with! I have a prize to claim!” He called back as he ventured into the mist alone.

He heard Bilbo’s chuckle fade away behind him as he walked. He wandered about for a while. The forest was strange. He wasn’t that scared of it anymore, but it was creepy and strange. For one, the mist never seemed to touch him. It was always around him, but for about fifteen to twenty feet his sight was clear. The ring of mist outside that range seems to simply following him like a giant ring with him at the center.

Without fear feeding his nerves, the woods didn’t look all that terrible. The trees looked old and gnarled, but didn’t look like they were moving anymore. Overall, it just looked like a dark, creepy, old forest, not some ominous death trap.

He continued to wander. It was incredibly difficult to keep track of direction, but he didn’t figure it mattered all that much. All he had to do was utter a single word and Bilbo would be by his side. In fact, he wouldn’t be surprised if Bilbo was watching him this whole time anyway. The vampire could be ridiculously protective and Thorin was meant to be bait.

That would explain the feeling of being watched crawling up his spine. Though he had never gotten quite such a creepy vibe from Bilbo, but maybe it was the affect of the forest. He knew something was watching him. He just hoped it was Bilbo. He readied his blade just in case and continued to wander.

He hadn’t spotted a single living thing save the plants and trees themselves so far. Did even the animals wish to avoid this forest? Bilbo hadn’t said anything about that. He didn’t know how long he’d been walking. He stopped to take a break and reassess his location. It was a wasted effort. He had no idea where he was.

He leaned against a tree, the feel of it getting his attention. He rubbed gently at the bark. It’s not that it didn’t feel like a tree, but it was slightly warm. It also gave him a strange feeling when he touched it. Magic maybe? Could the forest itself possess magic? He murmured a quiet thanks to the tree for being his leaning post, remembering what Bilbo had said. Best to show proper consideration, just in case they were sentient or something. Mahal, he wouldn’t be surprised if they were. He wasn’t surprised by much of anything anymore.

Except Bilbo. You would think after all this time they would know what to expect from the vampire and yet he was always finding ways to surprise them.

He heard a soft shuffle and whipped around towards the source of the sound grabbing his short blade and holding it ready. There, at the very edge of the ring of mist, stood a figure watching him. He slightly lowered his short sword.

“Bilbo?” He asked. That short stature and those riotous curls framing the head. It had to be Bilbo.

The figure stepped closer lightly and Thorin relaxed further. It was Bilbo. “What happened? Did you
already find it?” He wondered as he re-sheathed his blade.

Bilbo didn’t say anything but continued to step closer.

“Are you alright?” Thorin asked suspiciously when Bilbo still hadn’t responded.

Bilbo stopped barely a foot in front of him, staring up at him with a barely there smirk. His eyes seemed to glimmer slightly in the darkness, little glints of light reflecting of his emerald green irises. Was that . . . desire in his eyes? Intent? Thorin’s body started tensing in a new way as the desirous gaze continued to rake over him.

Bilbo slowly lifted a hand and slid it under Thorin’s coat to press it against his chest. Thorin’s heart rate sped up as it traveled up over his shoulder and finally to his neck, burying itself in his dark hair while Bilbo’s other hand pressed against his stomach and slowly worked it’s way down to the buckle of his pants.

Thorin’s mind swam as he let Bilbo pull him down into a kiss, the vampire’s wandering hand already massaging him through his pants. He groaned and stumbled back against the tree with the slightest push from his vampire. Bilbo pulled away only to place teasing bites and kisses along his jaw and neck.

“Bilbo?” Thorin breathed in confusion. Why were they doing this here? Not that he wasn’t thrilled and completely willing. It was just . . strange. Why here? Why now? And why wasn’t Bilbo saying anything?! Was an explanation or tease too much to ask? Bilbo’s lips met his and Thorin plunged into his mouth greedily. He buried his hand in those curls, keeping his vampire right where he wanted him as he explored that smart little mouth.

He pulled away slightly confused. Something didn’t feel . . right. The kisses felt . . different. His buckle snapped open and he lost all train of thought when Bilbo’s small hand reached in his pants and pulled him out.

He groaned, grabbing Bilbo tighter as the vampire ran a teasing thumb over the head of his engorged cock. He brought his other hand to Bilbo’s face. That beautiful, angelic face that hid such a vicious, dangerous beast behind it. Bilbo tugged off Thorin’s belt, letting it and the weapons on it fall to the ground.

Thorin grabbed at Bilbo’s coat, determined to get it off as well as any other piece of clothing he could manage to get under. Bilbo responded by slipping Thorin out of his coat, equally eager to get things down to skin level.

Bilbo climbed up into Thorin’s arms, wrapping his legs around his hips and grinding against him insistently. Thorin groped his rear, holding him up and adding pressure to the wonderful rhythm Bilbo was working them into. Bilbo tugged him down for another deep kiss.

Thorin had long surrendered and eagerly leaned down to meet the kiss. His eyes caught movement and he looked past his lover. Dark, furious eyes, sharp snarling fangs, and a face frozen in pure rage snapped him out of his state of drunken pleasure. “Bilbo?” He whispered.

He glanced back down at the lover in his arms. Bilbo looked up at him, eyes heavy lidded with seductive intent and pleasure. It was his Bilbo’s face, but his eyes . . his eyes were still green.

Suddenly the body in his arms was yanked away. Bilbo shrieked as something grappled him from behind before sinking its fangs deep into his neck. The struggling Bilbo flickered, his form distorting and melting until it looked nothing like his Bilbo as the light in the vampire’s eyes swirled
dangerously. With a final inhuman shriek the twisted, deformed figure dissipated into mist.

Thorin stared, his brain still trying to understand what had just happened. There stood his Bilbo, his vampire Bilbo. Dark eyes, bared fangs and a snarl on his lips. “Bilbo? What?” His brain couldn’t even form a proper question at the moment.

Bilbo continued closer, his eyes wandering down to Thorin’s still very hard erection. He stepped into Thorin’s space, his hands raising to let deft fingers travel over his disheveled torso appreciatively. His hands slipped up under Thorin’s undershirt, tracing his hard stomach.

Bilbo’s touch sent a jolt through Thorin’s system and his mind instantly cleared. He was barely dressed, his pants hanging low around his hips, his tunic was strangely missing and his undershirt was barely still on. His eyes shot back to Bilbo. The vampire’s anger seemed to have been satisfied and he looked more interested than anything as his hands continued to wander.

“What . . . what was that?” He finally ground out. He didn’t really want to distract Bilbo from his . . . current activities, but he needed answers.

Fortunately, Bilbo didn’t stop what he was doing, trailing his hands up Thorin’s sides before dragging them down over his hips. “That was an incubus. They take the form of the one you desire most and feed on your sexual energy. I imagine you’re just brimming with it.” His voice dropped sensually and he stretched up to nip at Thorin’s jaw, his hand wrapping around Thorin’s very interested cock.

Thorin groaned as Bilbo gave him a firm stroke. “I-I thought . . . it was you.” He tried to defend as Bilbo’s hand massaged the head of his cock.

“I know.” Bilbo answered coolly. “I don’t blame you. It was nice to watch for a little while, but I just couldn’t take it anymore. Couldn’t stand it taking what was mine.” He growled and nipped at Thorin again, giving him another firm tug. “I am flattered though. Not particularly surprised, but flattered that it was my form it took.” He murmured in Thorin’s ear.

Thorin grunted, gripping the vampire’s upper arms to steady himself. “You were watching? You were gonna let that thing- let me- with it-” Why hadn’t Bilbo interfered earlier?!

“There’s a certain appeal to watching yourself . . . be intimate, but, like I said, i couldn’t let it take what was mine.” Bilbo stroked his thumb over the head of Thorin’s cock meaningfully and Thorin groaned. “We should probably take care of this. I did promise you a kiss after all. I didn’t specify where it would be.” He grinned wickedly and lowered himself to his knees.

Thorin watched with wide eyes as Bilbo licked a stripe up the underside of his cock ending it with a swirl of his tongue over the head. Thorin groaned, his cock twitching eagerly at the sight. “You-you don’t . . . have to-” He tried to protest, but Mahal, he wanted it too much.

Bilbo shushed him, taking hold of his hips. “Relax and let me enjoy the taste of you, Hmm? I promise I won’t bite.” He winked.

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Thorin huffed a startled laugh but then Bilbo’s tongue was out and his cock was sliding over it into the vampire’s mouth. He shuddered when Bilbo’s mouth finally closed around him and gave a firm suck. And then he was moving, his head bobbing and tongue twirling to devastating affect.

Thorin grit his teeth through a ragged groan, grabbing a branch from the tree behind him to stead his shuddering legs. His eyes wanted to roll back but he forced them to focus on the beautiful creature swallowing down his dick. Bilbo took him all in easily. Thorin felt the vampire’s throat muscles
swallow around him and he nearly lost it right there. Mahal, he wasn’t going to last long as tightly
wound as he was.

He buried his fingers in those luscious curls even as Bilbo continued to bob and suck. He tilted
Bilbo’s head back as much as he could. He wanted to see him, to see his face. Bilbo stared up at him,
eyes dark and watchful. Thorin could almost see the possessiveness in them. This was his, Thorin
was his.

Thorin couldn’t agree more. Bilbo sucked hard on him again and Thorin’s eyes lost focus for a
moment. He breathed deep. He was so close he couldn’t hold it off much longer, as much as he
wanted it to last. He stared down at his beautiful, stubborn beloved with barely focus eyes.

“Men lananubukhs me.” He muttered in the tongue of his ancestors, voice rough with pleasure.
“Ghivashel.”

Bilbo’s eyes widened in shock. A thought flitted through Thorin’s mind. Did Bilbo know Khuzdul?
But it was quickly chased away by his pleasure. The black of Bilbo’s eyes faded back to green and
his lids drooped over glassy eyes.

It was that look, that look of utter . . . contentment and . . peace, that was Thorin’s undoing. Bilbo
swallowed around him again and he lost the battle. He gripped the fistful of hair in his hand tight and
tried to suppress his roar with gritted teeth, hunching over as he spilled into his vampire’s waiting
throat.

After a few moments of blinding pleasure he started to come back to himself. He purposely eased the
grip he had on Bilbo’s hair, petting the curls in apology. Bilbo had already licked him clean and was
still licking his lips thoughtfully. He tucked Thorin back into his pants almost lovingly and tied them
closed again before standing up.

“You know.” He began, his voice smooth and satisfied as if he had been the one to find earth
shattering release. “I think I found a new favorite flavor.” He smirked and winked cheekily as he
started to right Thorin’s disheveled clothes.

Thorin laughed a tired, breathy laugh, his heart feeling warm and content. He leaned his forehead
against Bilbo’s tiredly, simply enjoying the contact with his vampire, his beloved, no matter how
Bilbo denied it. Bilbo didn’t pull away, but leaned into the affectionate gesture. Thorin brought a
hand up to cup his face and leaned down for a kiss.

Bilbo returned it chastely. Thorin reveled in the hum of energy that ran through him from such a
simple contact. He should have known the incubus wasn’t his Bilbo. No one else felt like this.

Bilbo finally pulled away. “We should finish getting your clothes on. The fairies are probably
waiting on us.”

“What fairies?” Thorin asked dumbly as he accepted his tunic to slip it back on.

“The fairies of the forest. They usually show up after I take care of whatever was bothering them.”

“You mean they’re here? Now?”

“They’ve always been here, Thorin. It’s their forest. Just because we can’t see them doesn’t mean
they can’t see us.”

Thorin’s face heated with the idea that they had had an audience the whole time, but quickly turned
to a primal satisfaction. Didn’t that mean that Bilbo had claimed him publicly? That he had shown
off their relationship?

“So, the incubus was the goblin we were looking for then?” He asked to confirm.

“Yes and no. It was the intruder we were looking for, but it wasn’t a goblin. It was a fairy, just an unwelcome one.”

Thorin paused in confusion. “But... you killed it. You... ate it, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” Bilbo shrugged. “I don’t only eat goblins.”

“I thought you didn’t kill fairies.”

“I usually don’t. But I don’t care what kind of creature it is, if it touches something of mine, I’m going to kill it.” He answered sternly.

“Right. Of course.” Thorin fought a smirk. “But, if it was a fairy, why did we have to get rid of it? Isn’t this fairy territory?”

“These woods belong to the sprites of Yavannah. They don’t share it with others. Other magics could interfere with their own and other fairies could attract too much attention to the area. That’s why it’s my job to deal with intruders.” Bilbo wrapped Thorin’s belt around him and buckled it with a surprising amount of intimacy that Thorin wasn’t expecting, but welcomed all the same.

He grabbed the vampire and pulled him into his arms. “Shall I take care of you?” He asked, letting his hands slide down Bilbo’s back and grope his rear.

“That won’t be necessary.” Bilbo smirked, but let his hunter grope him. “We don’t have the time anyway.” He smoothed Thorin’s tunic over his chest and draped the hunter’s coat over his shoulders.

"But you will let me have you?” Thorin pushed, afraid that Bilbo would draw away from him again.

Bilbo's soft smile faded and he became closed off again, just as Thorin feared he would. "I can't promise you that."

Thorin held him tighter, as if to draw him back. "I don't need a promise. Just a 'yes.'" He husked in Bilbo's ear and reveled in the delicious shiver that ran down the vampire's spine.

Bilbo gently started to pull away and out of Thorin's grip. "I can't." His voice was firm, but his face was apologetic and... regretful.

Thorin didn't pretend to understand, but he didn't push. He didn't need to right now. He would have plenty of time later. "I'm not going to stop asking." He warned.

"You'll give up eventually." Bilbo replied, a soft sad smile on his lips.

"I won't." Thorin assured with absolute confidence. "Even if I have to steal every kiss and touch from you for the rest of my life."

Bilbo gave him an exasperated but fond look and shook his head. "You're quite romantic for a hunter." He smirked.

"I'm more than just a hunter." Thorin retorted.

"Don't I know it." Bilbo replied softly before turning away as if facing someone. "Sorry for the wait. I think we're ready now."
Thorin turned his eyes to where Bilbo was facing and the space in that area seemed to distort and twist as two figures started to phase into view. Thorin's curiosity burned. He was going to meet fairies not only of great power, but also of significance to his beloved. He was going to meet a piece of Bilbo's history and it shot a thrill through him.

Chapter End Notes

Next Time: Thorin meets the Elder of the Old Forest and finally learns the true nature of his connection to Bilbo. The fairies step on some toes and send our vampire into a rage.

In case you missed my most recent announcement about updates, check out my tumblr. Most announcements will be made on there.
The Elder

Chapter Notes

Hey! Some one drew some fan art for me for the previous chapter! You can check it out on my tumblr! So beautiful!

October's Sneak Peek: "The Song of My Heart"
After a failed attempt of trying to carve out a new home in the Blue Mountains for his people, Thorin finds himself beseeching the Hobbit Thain and his council for a place for his people in their bountiful land. An agreement is struck and plans in the works for integrating his people into their land. The only condition being an arranged marriage between himself and one of their family heads. A small price to pay to see his people safe and well fed. Unfortunately, he’s to marry the most disagreeable hobbit in all the Shire who also seems to hold a personal grudge against him. If only he could figure out why his new betrothed hates him so much.

Bilbo/Thorin, Arranged Marriage, Dwarves in the Shire

Thorin stared at the two beings that had materialized before them. They were short, real short. Neither of them could be over four feet tall and the older one in the front was even shorter than the other.

Though they had some humanoid features, they were definitely not human. First of all their lower bodies looked to be of some kind of goat . . or maybe sheep, right down to their cloven hooves. They were roundish in figure, each sporting a little round belly, but not quite fat either.

The hair covering much of their bodies was thick and tightly curled. The younger’s hair was dark with a red tint, like dark cherry wood. The older was lighter, what might have been a medium chestnut color before it started to gray with age. They were simply dressed, a loincloth for modesty and a linen vest, though the elder wore a variety of nature related cords around his neck bearing simple pendants such as branches, seeds, and even flowers.

Their ears were large and pointed and seemed to twitch with alertness. Sprouting out of each of their foreheads was a set of horns. The elder’s were thick and circular and they curled on either side of his head like a ram’s. The other’s were strait but twisted as they jutted up from his forehead.

But more than anything, it was their eyes that struck Thorin. Bright glittering greens. The elder’s was a dark shade, like jade, but the other’s was almost blueish like aquamarine. Their bodies were small, unassuming, but their eyes . . their eyes were old and wise and brimming with power. Thorin was mesmerized.

Bilbo lowered his head in a semblance of a bow. “I was away. I . . apologize if I’ve responded late.” He conceded begrudgingly. “It seems the moment I leave everyone starts getting into trouble.” He grumbled.

“Peace.” The elder spoke. “You have tended our lands faithfully for many centuries. We can easily forgive an occasional tardy response. You have been traveling? I see you’ve brought. . . company.”
The elder lifted his brow at Thorin. Was he smirking?

“This is Oakenshield. He’s a hunter seeking more knowledge of the fairy and goblin realms and yes, I’ve been accompanying him on his travels.” Bilbo introduced with all the enthusiasm of a teenager introducing his secret crush to his parents.

Thorin nodded respectfully, not sure how to speak to such an entity. “This is the Elder of the Old Forest and his eldest son and heir.” Bilbo finished for Thorin’s benefit.

“Oh? A hunter? And a vampire? Working together?” The elder’s eyes seemed to shine even brighter as he studied the hunter with far too much interest.

“We have . . . a contract.” Bilbo tried to explain, but it was a hollow explanation for what they had just done.

“Indeed?” The elder was definitely smirking now and Bilbo glared at him.

“Frankly, it’s none of your business.” Bilbo snapped irritably and the elder just chuckled. Thorin sneaked a glance at his vampire who looked benignly irritated.

“We have missed you.” The elder strategically switched topics. “Your protection over our woods is a great comfort to us. Perhaps you would honor us with your presence at our upcoming festival? The young ones have missed your company.”

“I’m a bloody vampire! Why do you keep invitingly me to your blasted fairy celebrations?!” Bilbo crossed his arms stubbornly.

The elder chuckled, like an indulgent grandfather. “Because we enjoy your company. And you could stand to get out of that lonely, dusty, old castle now and then.” He gestured toward the vampire with the bulbous tip of his staff.

“I don’t live in the ‘dusty, old castle’ part, old man. You know that.”

“Ah, yes. But it is still lonely, is it not?” The elder raised a brow.

“Being alone is not the same as being lonely.” Bilbo denied.

“Very true.” The Elder sighed. “Still, we would be honored to have you . . . and your hunter ‘companion,’ of course.” The elder turned to Thorin with a smirk.

“I would be honored.” Was all Thorin could to think to say. He was still trying to decipher the strange relationship between Bilbo and the Elder.

“What?! No! You can’t invite a human to your celebrations!” Bilbo corrected. “You’re fairies! He’s a bloody human! You just don’t . . . do that!”

The Elder chuckled. “They are our celebrations. We can invite who we please.”

Bilbo crossed his arms and glared.

“You, Mr. Oakenshield, I assume that’s not your real name.” The elder addressed him. “May I have it?”

Thorin shifted. He didn’t want to be rude, but he wasn’t sure he should trust them so easily either. He sent Bilbo a sideways glance. The vampire just shrugged, still caught in his pout.
“Thorin. Thorin Durin.” He risked. Bilbo clearly didn’t consider these fairies a threat.

“Thorin Durin.” The elder repeated, his face brightening into a smile. “Of course.”

Thorin wondered what that meant, but before he could ask the elder spoke again.

"Step forward, please." Thorin did so cautiously.

“May I borrow your hunter?” The Elder addressed the vampire. "Just for a moment. I’ll give him right back.” The elder assured. Bilbo’s eyes widened in refusal but, before he could voice it, the Elder tapped the ground with the base of his staff and the air around them shifted.

After a moment things seemed to return to normal and Thorin looked around. Nothing had really changed, but Bilbo was wide eyed and tense and still as a stone figure.

“Bilbo?”

“He can’t hear you. I’ve put up a barrier around us.” The elder responded instead.

“Why?” Thorin demanded, glancing with concern to his vampire’s darkening eyes.

“I wished to speak with you . . without his interference.”

“What do you want?” Thorin asked darkly, his full attention on the fairy Elder now.

The elder chuckled. “I mean neither of you harm. But what I have to say is for you only. Hence the barrier. But we will have to be quick before he does something to damage himself.”

“You care about him.” Thorin deduced. All of their interactions played like an overly affectionate parent and a begrudging child.

“Yes, I do.” The elder nodded.

“But he’s a vampire. You’re a fairy.”

“He was not always a vampire.” The elder responded sadly.

“What does that mean?” Thorin asked suspiciously. “Did you know him before he changed?”

“Sadly, no.” The elder replied. “But my great, great grandfather did. And the knowledge of every elder is passed on to the successor. His knowledge was granted to me when I became the Elder.”

“Bilbo’s history is a dark and painful thing. And we have waited a very long time for you, Thorin Durin.” The Elder fixed him with his powerful gaze.

“I don’t understand. What do I have to do with it?” Thorin wondered baffled by the turn of their conversation,

“Do you not know?” The Elder asked meaningfully. “A soulmate is a wonderful thing. I believe your people called them ‘Ones’.”

“How do you know about that?” Thorin’s voice lowered in suspicion. His people's culture and beliefs were all but lost now and even before they were rarely shared with outsiders. “What do you know of my people?”

“We know much of your ancestors. 'How' is not important. What is important is that you understand
the nature of your bond to Bilbo. Do you love him?”

“More than anything, but . . . are you saying that Ones are real? The belief has been lost. I thought it was little more than a myth.”

“For you? Yes, it is very real. Soul bonds are not a human trait. It is a magical union that binds the soul itself. A pure and powerful magic, inherent within our very souls.”

“But I’m just a human. I have no magic.”

“And that is where you are wrong. You are not ‘just’ anything. How little you know of your ancestry. How much you have lost.”

Thorin shook his head in bewildered denial. “I don’t- what you’re saying isn’t possible. I’m just a human.”

“It matters not what you are or believe you are. What matters is your soul’s bond.”

“Bilbo.” Thorin glanced back to his love. Bilbo was wearing a fierce snarl now and pacing furiously along where Thorin assumed the barrier was. He looked much more like a vampire at the moment and Thorin could still only feel fondness knowing that this reaction was due to his absence.

“Bilbo is my One.” He agreed confidently. How he could have a One, what it meant that he did, none of that mattered. What matter was that Bilbo was his One.

The elder nodded approvingly. “He has waited a long time for you.”

Thorin turned back around in shock. “What?! Are you saying- . . . Am I- . . . but he’s-“

“A soul bond is a two way thing.” The elder assured. “Your soul cannot be bound to another’s without their soul being equally bound to yours.”

“But-but he’s a vampire. Or are you talking about the blood siren thing? Isn’t that all a soulmate is to a vampire?”

“It is connected, but separated. You are his blood siren because you are his One. But, as I said, he was not always a vampire.”

“But he wasn’t a fairy either. And I’m not a fairy. And he lived hundreds of years before I was even born! None of what your saying makes any sense! How does any of this make sense?!”

The elder nodded, enduring his anger and confusion unperturbed. “You will understand more in time. What matters now is that you know what he is to you. He needs you, Thorin Durin. You have become the pin that holds his sanity intact. But he is plagued by terrible memories and fears alike. You must not give up. He is a stubborn lad. Do not be afraid to push, for he will not give in to you easily. But never give up. He needs you too much.” He ended sadly.

“I have no intention of giving up. Even if I wanted to, he’s too much a part of me now. I . . . I need him.” Thorin admitted softly. It felt good to say it out loud. Like a confession that he could finally get off his chest. And now he felt justified. How could he have ever ignored or even denied Bilbo? Bilbo was part of him.

“Good.” The elder nodded with a satisfied smile.

Suddenly, there was a crackling and the space around them shuddered.
“What-?” Thorin ducked on reflex.

“That foolish boy.” The Elder sighed and Thorin whipped around to check on his vampire.

Bilbo looked absolutely terrifying. His hair stood nearly upright, the curls losing much of their tightness, as energy from the barrier snapped and crackled around his body. His clawed fingers were dug into the barrier itself, the space around his hands sparking and distorting from the intrusion. He wore a furious snarl as he endured the burn of fairy magic on his skin, his hands and arms turning black from charring as the energy traveled up his arms in bright jolts.

“Bilbo!” Thorin tried to snap him out of it, but Bilbo either wasn’t listening or still couldn’t hear him. His hands slowly started to separate as he ripped the barrier open with his bare hands. “What is he doing?!”

“He is trying to break the barrier.” The Elder replied, tapping his staff on the ground again to dispel it.

“Can he do that?! I though you were one of the most powerful fairies?! Isn’t this your barrier?!?”

“He has the power, yes, but not without causing himself significant damage in the process.” The barrier shuddered, the space around them distorting again as it was removed. “Look at him, is this not proof enough of his bond to you?” The elder challenged as the last of the barrier faded.

Before Thorin could respond, he was snatched away by a fiercely scowling vampire. His hands were still black and smoking, and Thorin could smell the smoke and ash from the damage.

“Don’t you ever do that again!” Bilbo snarled viciously at the Elder. His fangs bared and the light in his eyes swirling dangerously, even as he remained wrapped around his hunter.

“I meant him no harm.” The Elder tried to pacify.

“I couldn’t feel him through the barrier! You ever do that again, so help me, I’ll raze this forest to the ground!!”

“My deepest apologies. It was not my intention to cause you such distress.” The Elder bowed his head in apology.

“We’re leaving!” Bilbo spat back at him and started dragging Thorin away.

Thorin turned back to the fairies as he was being dragged away and met eyes with the Elder. Rather than offended or afraid, the Elder seemed pleased. He wore a small satisfied smile and gave Thorin a conspiratorial wink. With another tap of his staff, they were gone.

Thorin’s head was spinning, so much had happened this night he was going to need time to sort everything out. The smell of charred flesh wafted into his nose and his priorities straightened. He looked down at the black, flaking hand that was dragging him along and grabbed it. “What were you thinking?!?”

Bilbo stopped and twisted around with a hiss. Thorin let go on reflex thinking he had hurt the damaged flesh, but Bilbo didn’t pay his hands any mind. “He took you from me!” He snarled, still very agitated.

“He wasn’t trying to hurt me!”

“That’s not the point!” Bilbo hissed back. “I can’t feel you through a fairy barrier! I couldn’t feel you
at all! It was like you were dead!"

Thorin was speechless for a moment. Was this what the Elder was talking about? “He only wanted to talk. It was only for a few minutes. Why would you risk hurting yourself on the barrier over just a few minutes?!”

“I would do far worse for you!!” Bilbo shouted back, then immediately looked shocked for saying it or maybe admitting it. His wide eyes turned back into a scowl and he turned away to keep leading them out.

Thorin was too surprised to move at first and he had to run to catch up when he could command his legs again. “Bilbo.” He tried to get Bilbo’s attention when he caught up, but the vampire ignored him.

“Bilbo!” He grabbed the vampire’s arm and Bilbo swung around to meet him.

“What did he tell you?” He growled.

“What?” Thorin reeled in confusion.

“What did he tell you?! You think I don’t know why he put that barrier up?! He has no business telling you about me!” The vampire snarled.

“Bilbo.” Thorin shook his head, unsure of where all this hostility was coming from. What was he afraid the elder would tell him? About Ones? “He wanted to talk to me about my people.” It wasn’t a lie, it just wasn’t he whole truth.

Bilbo snarled again and pulled his arm out of Thorin’s grip. “I should have killed him! How dare he touch what’s mine?! I should kill them all!” The space around him suddenly felt heavy and Thorin could feel the iron grip Bilbo kept over his power slipping.

Thorin’s gut dropped in fear, not of Bilbo, but of what he might do. He knew the vampire was capable of terrifying things, but he also knew that he would regret it. He charged for the his One and wrapped his arms around him as tightly as possible. “Stop.” He spoke close to Bilbo’s ear. “Stop. You don’t want to hurt them.” Bilbo hissed but didn’t throw off the hunter. “I don’t want you to hurt them.” He rumbled soothingly.

Bilbo was tense and stiff, hard as a stone in Thorin’s embrace, but Thorin didn’t loosen his hold. He nuzzled into singed curls. Bilbo’s ear twitched back at him, his snarling and hissing had stopped but he was still tense.

“Calm down . . . Please?” Thorin nuzzled against his ear and Bilbo shuddered almost violently before all the tension left him and he snagged under Thorin’s weight. Thorin caught their weight and was practically holding him up. “Are you alright?”

Bilbo nodded tiredly. “I didn’t like It. He shouldn’t have done that.”

“I’m sorry. I won’t let him do it again.” Thorin assured. “I’ve never seen you so angry.” He commented after a few moments of silence, still wrapped around his vampire.

Bilbo huffed. “I get angry all the time, Thorin. But I’m usually able to satisfy my anger by destroying the offenders. Vampire anger is only satisfied with blood and death.”

Thorin thought back on all the enemies Bilbo had disposed of. It was true, his bad mood rarely lasted beyond the death of his opponent. “But you’re fine now.”
Bilbo’s legs straightened under him to bare his weight again and he rolled his shoulders in Thorin’s grip. “It’s what you wanted, isn’t it?” He asked matter-of-factly.

Thorin finally released him only to reach for his hands. He held them up to inspect them as he thought. “You let it go for me?” He asked as he rubbed his thumbs over the charred appendages.

“I would do far worse for you.” Bilbo reiterated. He met Thorin’s eyes when he said it this time, his face blank save for fatigue.

Thorin studied his face and realized that his hands weren’t all that was damaged. He looked closer to find tiny cracks here and there on his face like what you might see in a atone statue, most notable around his still darkened eyes. A piece of Bilbo’s charred hand flaked off as he rubbed it, to his mortification. “Please don’t do this again.” He pleaded.

Bilbo looked away and shrugged. “I can’t promise you that. Besides, it will heal soon enough.”

Thorin sighed, he should have known that was the answer he’d get. “I thought you said you’d do anything for me?”

“I didn’t say ‘anything.’ I said ‘far worse’.” Bilbo gave him a sideways glance and smirk.

Thorin huffed.

“It’s your fault anyway. It wouldn’t have happened if you didn’t let those gossipy fairies hide you in their barrier.” Bilbo complained.

“My mistake. If I had known you were going to freak out like that, I wouldn’t have.” Thorin retorted without any heat.

“Exactly.” Bilbo agreed, ignoring most of the comment.

Thorin chuckled and wrapped one arm around his vampire, tugging him close and stealing a kiss.

Bilbo didn’t fight or refuse, but met it eagerly. Thorin wasn’t expecting the eager reception and quickly got distracted chasing his vampire’s lips until he had Bilbo pinned against a tree. The vampire's legs wrapped around his waist, his charred arms gingerly wrapping around Thorin’s shoulders.

Thorin ground them together, as he explored Bilbo’s willing mouth with his tongue. Bilbo groaned and bucked back against him. Thorin ground them together harder and their kiss was broken with a hiss. He attacked the vampire’s neck, kissing hard enough to leave bruises on any human.

“Thorin!” Bilbo gasped, bucking in time with Thorin’s grinds. “The-the sun!”

Bilbo was right, the Forest was already started to lighten as the first rays of the morning’s sun reached the sky above them. They needed to get moving. There was already no way they were going to make it back before the sun came up. Thorin’s hips sped up, he wasn’t leaving before he brought his vampire to completion and they didn’t have time for anything more. Bilbo would complain about the mess, but it would be worth it.

Bilbo met his grinds insistently, his teeth bared as he snarled into Thorin’s shoulder. Thorin felt himself teetering over the edge, but he wasn’t going alone. He nipped at the ridge of Bilbo’s ear and Bilbo spasmed against him with a snarl even as Thorin lost himself in his own release.

Thorin panted into the curls against his shoulder. Bilbo was relaxed and limp against him. “We
should get going.” His voice came out rough and gravelly.

Bilbo nodded slightly against his shoulder but didn’t move. He seemed content where he was.

“Do you want to clean up?” Finally Bilbo moved, begrudgingly pushing off Thorin’s chest.

“Yes.” He confirmed tiredly. “The sun will be up soon. We need to hurry.”

Thorin set him down and he pulled out a handkerchief. He disappeared for a few moments and reappeared with the handkerchief dampened. Thorin took it, assuming Bilbo had already taken care of himself. He cleaned up as best he could and they started heading back out of the forest again.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Bilbo is feeling a bit under the weather and falling apart. He and his hunters finally head to his castle so he can recover.
Sometimes scenes just happen, you know? I intended to have them reach Bilbo’s lair in this chapter, but they only made it to the front door because Thorin and Bilbo had to go and get all lovey-Dovey at the inn. XD

Thorin rolled over sleepily, rotating carefully so as not to roll onto the vampire who was plastered against his back just moments before. Bilbo loosened his grip enough to let the hunter rearrange until he was comfortable before snugly wrapping around him once more.

Thorin pulled the blanket up, making sure Bilbo’s arm was covered from the sun, and wrapped himself around the vampire, settling in to get a little more sleep.

By the time they had made it back that morning, the sun was well up and the boys were already down in the common room eating breakfast. They had jumped up to helped shuffle Bilbo through the inn, the three of them doing their best to block anyone getting too good a view of him in his heavily robed and covered state. As it was, there was sure to be some rumors and suspicion going around about it.

Fortunately, Bilbo had thought ahead and remembered to bring his day cloak along. Thorin had asked if he had planned for their mission taking so long, but he responded that it was just a precaution. There was no way he was going to sprint ahead and leave Thorin behind.

Still, he had ridden behind Thorin and let the hunter drive on the way back. He seemed tired and weakened after his stunt with the fairy barrier. His hands and arms were still blackened from the damage, something that greatly upset the teens when they had gotten back that morning. Bilbo had brushed off their concern, but they had all noticed the way that he was avoiding using his hands as much as possible.

They slept the day away, tucked snugly in each other’s arms. Fili and Kili respectfully spent the day out about the town in order to not disturb their rest, though Thorin suspected they were mostly concerned for Bilbo and his charred condition. Perhaps they hoped he would heal with some decent rest.

When they finally awoke after the sun had gone down, they realized that was not to be the case. Fili and Kili had wandered back up to their room, figuring their uncles would already be awake. They weren’t but they stirred from the boys entering.

Thorin rolled onto his back for a stretch and Bilbo released his grip on the hunter to groggily roll over and off the bed, being careful not to involve his hands. He started to carefully pull his over clothes back on looking like he was still half asleep. All three of the hunters watched with concern.

“Bilbo.” Thorin rolled himself off the bed. “Are you sure you’re alright? You’ve never looked this . . . groggy before.”

Bilbo’s eyes were barely open, but they opened enough to be only half-lidded when he turned to
reply. “It’s fairy poisoning.” He answered blandly and rolled his stiff shoulders making them crackle and pop.

“What?!” Kili was the first to respond. “Are you gonna be okay?!”

Bilbo nodded sloppily. “I’ll heal properly once I’m back home.”

“And your hands?! Are you saying they won’t heal until you’re underground?!” Thorin stepped forward to grab his still charred hands.

Bilbo nodded again. “Most vampires would be dead after tangling with a fairy barrier that strong. My symptoms are relatively mild in comparison.” He tugged his hands back.

“But you could have healed at home! Why didn’t you just go there last night?! You could have come back for us!” Kili asked, clearly distressed by it all.

Bilbo shook his head. “And leave you boys here alone, without knowing what we were doing, and without someone watching over you? Absolutely not. I’ll be fine. Besides, I’ll probably sleep a few days once I finally let myself so it’s best I wait until we’re all there.”

“Is it that bad?” Thorin wondered. He had thought the vampire had been doing better.

“Not really. I just have a lot of damage to sleep off from our little adventures. Despite the more regulars meals, I really need some proper sleep for my magic to revitalize itself.” He said with a sniff.

“Then we go tonight.” Thorin declared. “Is there anything we need to do before we go?”

“We should probably grab some food.” Bilbo murmured. “I don’t have much in the way of human food at home.”

“Most of the shops are closed by now.” Fili remarked.

Bilbo nodded. “I’ll grab you enough to last a couple days. You can always come back to do some shopping. Once I show you the entrance, you’ll be able to come and go as you like.”

The hunters nodded in uncertain agreement. They didn’t want to have to rely on Bilbo yet again, but they didn’t want to wait another day either. Bilbo needed to rest. They gathered their bags around and Fili and Kili went down to fetch Thorin something to eat and Bilbo some hot water for tea.

Thorin ate hurriedly, as he watched Bilbo carefully work his fingers around his tea cup to lift it to his lips.

“Do they hurt?” He asked quietly, but got his nephews’ attention anyway.

Bilbo’s face twitched. “It’s a sort of . . . simmering pain. Not more then I can handle. They’re just stiff from the damage. I’m trying to avoid having to reattach them.”

Thorin’s face paled and he swallowed hard. Vampire or not, he didn’t want to be picking up pieces of his One.

“Are-Are you saying . . . they could, what, break off?” Fili’s voice wavered.

“In this condition? Yes, like a burnt log on the fire.”

Both Fili’s and Kili’s faces went as white as Thorin’s.”
“It’s fine. I can reattach them. I’d just have to go finger-less until I could get to my sanctuary.” He sighed.

“And your face?” Thorin pushed out. “Will your hands and face be scarred once they heal?”

“Why? Would that bother you?” Bilbo raised a brow at him.

“It bothers me that you're hurt at all.” Thorin corrected. “I just don’t want you to bear scars for such a thing as this. This wasn’t even a fight. . . and, no, I’d find you no less attractive for a few scars.”

Bilbo studied him with narrowed eyes for a moment before huffing. “None of this should scar. It’s not my first tangle with a fairy barrier. I've grown more resistant to fairy magic over time. . But I still have to deal with the minor fairy magic poisoning until I can filter it out.”

“And how do you do that?” Kili wondered.

“I need to enter my Sanctuary.”

“You mean your home?” Fili pushed.

“Yes, and no. My home is my sanctuary, but inside my home is a special chamber specially designed to repair and revitalize me and my magic. That is my Sanctuary. Every vampire has one, though some are far more simple and unimpressive than others.”

“Can we see it?” Kili asked excitedly.

“No, you can’t. It is designed for me and only me. It is infused with my magic and designed to amplify it when I’m in it. It would be toxic to you just as fairy magic is toxic to me.”

“But you said you'd be fine.” Fili questioned suspiciously.

“I will, because my tolerance is high, but I’m not about to test your tolerance for dark magic, now am I?” Bilbo retorted.

“What happens if another vampire enters it?” Kili looked curious.

“Anyone who enters that doesn’t share my magic signature and is weaker than me will be destroyed and the Sanctuary will be defiled. I’d have to build a brand new one. If they are stronger than me, they might survive but not without taking damage. Either way my Sanctuary will be ruined. Sanctuaries are sacred to vampires. It’s like a literal piece of me and I’m weakened without access to it.”

“But you’ve gone without it since you’ve been with us.” Fili pointed out, slightly concerned.

“So you can image how much I’m looking forward to being in it again.”

“Then what are we waiting for?! Hurry up uncle! We need to get going!” Kili rushed his uncle who was already finishing up his last bite.

Thorin rolled his eyes and swallowed down the last of his drink. Bilbo chuckled and gingerly set his cup down on the tray with the rest of Thorin’s used dishes.

The boys grabbed their bags and Thorin’s tray. “You guys finish up and we’ll meet you down stairs.” Fili ordered before the two of them disappeared out the door.

Thorin sighed at being ordered about by his nephews and Bilbo chuckled indulgently. Thorin threw
himself together and gathered up his and Bilbo’s things. He left out Bilbo’s robe. He was going to need to wear it to hide the damage to his hands and face. Bilbo nodded in thanks and started to try to slip it on.

Thorin heard a crack followed by a soft curse and spun around from where he was shoving things into his pack. “What happened?!”

“I lost a finger.” Bilbo sighed irritably.

Thorin quickly fought down the panic. It would heal! They just needed to get Bilbo home! “Let me see.” He demanded and Bilbo held up the barely recognizable, charred digit on his equally dark palm.

“Please tell me you can reattach it.” He pleaded as he carefully inspected the detached finger.

“I already-“

“Tell me again!”

Bilbo paused, studying him. “It will reattach, Thorin. You won’t even be able to tell it ever fell off.” He answered seriously.

Thorin nodded, letting the reassurance settle in. “Shall I hold on to it until we get there?”

Bilbo didn’t respond at first but when he did his green eyes cleared from the dullness of the poisoning and sparkled when he smiled one of his genuine, amused smiles.

The sight knocked Thorin breathless, more so because this was the last moment he’d expect to see it. Bilbo was in pain and suffering! Why was he smiling like this now?! Why was he so beautiful despite the cracking stone-like flesh of his face?

“You want to carry a piece of me with you?” Bilbo asked, his smile turning slightly mischievous, pulling Thorin back from his state of awe and confusion.

“What?“

Bilbo huffed a small laugh, that gorgeous smile still on his face. “My finger. If you hold on to it, you will literally be carrying a piece of me with you.” He explained, his eyes still glittering with amusement and fondness.

For a moment, Thorin still didn’t get it. That smile wasn’t exactly helping his brain to function properly. Finally it clicked and he chuckled despite himself. “Yeah, I suppose so. But I’d prefer a less functioning piece of you. Preferably something we don’t have to break off.” He gently pulled the vampire close and Bilbo let him with a soft chuckle of his own.

“And do you have a particular piece in mind?” Bilbo teased, gently wrapping one arm around Thorin’s waist.

“Yes.” Thorin answered, nuzzling his nose against Bilbo’s button one. “All of you.”

“I don’t think I’ll fit in your pocket, Thorin.” Bilbo giggled softly.

He was so beautiful, so open and receptive right now. Thorin was breathless. His desire to not miss a moment of it the only thing keeping him from being lost in awe. “I could carry you on my back. I know you have the straps for it.” He teased back.
Bilbo laughed, the sound of it sweeter than the sweetest music Thorin had ever heard. “Now you’re just being ridiculous.” Bilbo chided.

“You can be my pack vampire instead of my pocket vampire.” Thorin further teased with a grin.

Bilbo giggled, the sound was pure and angelic and so in contrast to his powerful vampire nature. Thorin wondered if anyone else had ever seen this side of him and secretly hoped he was the only one.

“As interesting as that sounds, I’m afraid you’ll have to settle for me being just your regular, old-blood, high-gen vampire.” Bilbo replied softly, tilting his head up invitingly.

Thorin met his lips for a sweet, chaste kiss. Bilbo’s hand came up as if to touch his face, but hovered instead. The blacked, cracked appendage never actually making contact. Thorin reached up with his free hand and gently wrapped it around Bilbo’s charred one. He pulled away from Bilbo lips only to place a tender kiss on his blackened flesh. “Come. We need to get you home.”

Bilbo studied him through half-lidded eyes. The dullness of the poisoning was creeping back and his face had relaxed into something more neutral. Thorin gave him one more short kiss, which was readily received, before letting him go to help him into his cloak.

Finally, Thorin grabbed their bags and escorted Bilbo out.

“What took you guys so long?!” Kili whined when they finally showed up in the common room. “We were about to come looking for you.”

“There was a . . situation.” Thorin explained as he handed his room key back to the innkeeper, thinking of the charred finger in his pocket.

“What kind of situation?” Fili asked suspiciously.

“Nothing serious. Let’s just go.” Bilbo ushered them out as Thorin caught up. “I’ll meet you at the stables.” He instructed before disappearing into the night outside the inn.

He wasn’t kidding. By the time they got to the stables, he was already there. “There wasn’t much to choose from, seeing as it’s night, but I think I grabbed enough to last you until you can come back.” Bilbo explained as he gingerly handed off the sacks of food.

“I’m sure it will do.” Thorin agreed as they saddled their horses and tied their sacks secure.

“Do you, uh, would you mind if I rode with you? Your horse handled me rather well last night.” Bilbo asked uncertainly as they lead the horses out of the stable.

Thorin was surprised, more by the uncertainty than the question. “Of course. You’re welcome to share my saddle.”

“I don’t want to inconvenience you.” Bilbo backpedaled.

“You won’t. You’re welcome to ride with me anytime.”

“Thank you.” Bilbo nodded politely.

Once they were in the street they mounted up. Thorin helped Bilbo up by the arm, grabbing him as close to the elbow as possible so as not to further damage his hands.

“Hey! I thought you didn't like riding!” Kili complained as Bilbo settled into the saddle behind
“I don’t particularly care for it. It’s faster to run and horses don’t particularly like me. But Thorin’s seems to have gotten used to me and I can’t go any faster than you anyway.” Bilbo replied, notably not mentioning that he just wasn’t up to running around at the moment.

Kili seemed to catch on anyway though. “Oh.”

“So, how do we get to this entrance of yours?” Thorin asked the vampire resting against his back, Bilbo’s arms wrapped lightly around Thorin’s waist.

“Follow the road until you reach the edge of the forest just past the Downs. From there we’ll leave the road and ride along the edge of the forest until I say so. The entrance is just inside the forest at about the halfway mark.” Bilbo instructed as the trotted towards the gate leading to the main road.

“Got it.” Thorin replied and resolved to let the vampire rest as much as possible. They spurred into a gallop as they exited the gate and altered the horses between a gallop and trot in order to make the best time possible. Bilbo rested limply against Thorin’s back and it motivated Thorin to get them there as quickly as possible.

They rode in determined silence for several hours before they had fully passed the Downs and reached the edge of the forest. Without bothering to disturb the vampire, Thorin guided them off the road to ride along the edge of the woods. They couldn't ride as fast as before, as the way wasn’t as clear, but they pushed on as best as they could.

After almost a couple more hours, Bilbo till hadn’t stirred and Thorin wondered if he was going to have to wake him up for further instructions. Just as he was thinking it, Bilbo stirred behind him and pulled of his hood.

“Stop here.” He ordered and they came to a stop. He slid off, being careful of his hands. “You’ll have to lead the horses through the forest. They’ll spook easily.”

The hunters nodded and dismounted as well.

“Are you alright?” Thorin asked quietly as he wrapped his reigns secure around his arm.

“I’ll be fine.” Bilbo answered blandly and started to lead them into the forest.

The woods were just as dark and twisted as Thorin remembered. Fili and Kili glanced around warily as they did their best to stay close.

“Did you tell them that we were coming?” Fili asked quietly and he jumped nervously at a rustle in the undergrowth.

“No. I didn’t get to it.”

“They’re not, uh, angry . . . about the barrier thing, . . . are they?” Kili asked nervously.

“No.” Thorin replied in Bilbo’s place and the vampire sent him a curious look.

They had walked for about twenty minutes when Bilbo stopped and muttered a soft curse. “What do you want now? I already dealt with your little problem.” He asked petulantly.

Fili and Kili shuffled forward to either side of their uncle as the space ahead of them shuddered and distorted until the Elder and his son appeared before them.
“It’s not often you bring company to your lair. We were curious.” The elder replied mildly, ignoring Bilbo’s attitude.

"Is that them? The sprites?” Kili whispered to his uncle. Thorin just nodded.

Bilbo sighed. “These are Thorin’s nephews. He and they will be staying with me for now. A family of changelings will also be joining us soon.” He informed the elder begrudgingly.

The elder nodded in acceptance. “They look like good, strong boys.” He complimented. “And of course we will provide safe passage for all of your guests. As . . unusual as it is for you to have them.” The elder eyed the vampire more closely. “You should have healed yourself by now, my boy.” He tutted disapprovingly.

“I’m not yours or a boy.” Bilbo retorted coldly. “I had other more important . . priorities to tend to.”

The elder glanced at the teens, easily picking up the vampire’s meaning, and nodded. “So I see. I am glad to see you have found some company, Bilbo. You’ve been alone too much since your boy left.”

“Alone is safest.” Bilbo replied un concerned.

“But not easiest.” The Elder retorted. “Or happiest.”

“I’m a vampire. I don’t deserve either of those things.”

“Oh, Bilbo.” The Elder replied sadly. “You didn’t deserved this fate.”

Bilbo rolled his stiff shoulders. “Are we done? I’m still not particularly happy with you and I want to get home.”

“Very well.” The Elder nodded. “I simply came to extend the invitation to your young charges as well.”

“Dully noted. Now would you open the door?”

“Of course.” The elder nodded and tapped his staff against the ground. The space distorted again and slowly a large double door appeared between two trees in front of them.

Bilbo stepped forward and pulled open the doors. “Will you grant them passage for the future as well?”

“Of course.” The Elder waved his staff around with a soft incantation.

Nothing seemed to happen and the hunters were left confused.

“I have placed a small blessing on each of you. The door will appear before you when ever you come near it, but only those bearing my blessing will be able to see and enter it.”

‘Thank you.” Thorin answered politely as It seemed unlikely Bilbo would.

The elder nodded. Fili and Kili hurried in after Bilbo, but the Elder stopped Thorin as he was passing by.

“You carry something precious with you.”

“It's only temporary.” Thorin felt the need to assure. "I'll make sure he rests."
“I was not referring to his finger.” The elder stared at him soberly. "Take good care of it.”

Thorin's brow furrowed in confusion. “I’ll . . do my best.” He muttered, not entirely sure what the Elder was talking about, but strongly suspecting it had to do with Bilbo.

The elder nodded once more and disappeared as Thorin entered the door.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: They finally reach Bilbo's lair and discover that it is very much not what they were expecting.
Hey there! Things are hectic in real life right now. Just moved again and still trying to get settled. But, don't worry, this is exactly why I write ahead.

November's Sneak Peak: **Once Again**

Some people believed he was a seer or a prophet. Some people thought he was just crazy, Mad Baggins they called him. Really, Bilbo Baggins was just tired. Tired of pretending that every day was a new adventure. Tired of feigning surprise, ignorance and confusion. Tired of trying to make a difference. The truth was, after living the same life over and over again countless times, there were no new adventures, no surprises. No, it didn’t matter if he tried to change things because he always came back to live the same exact life all over again. No matter what changes he managed to make, it would all be reset again the moment he died. So was there really any point in trying? Despite all that, there was definitely something different going on this time . . . or was there? After living the same life so many times, it was hard to distinguish the present life from the past ones sometimes. But he certainly couldn’t ever remember Thorin looking at him like that after walking through his door. Maybe there were a few more surprises left in store for him after all.

Bilbo/Thorin, Time Loop, Reincarnation

The door closed behind them and, at first, they saw nothing but darkness. The horses pranced in nervousness as the darkness slowly lightened. A single lamp flickered behind them, doing little to illuminate the large cavern they had stepped into. Some way in front of them, another lone lamp flickered, partially revealing another large door.

“Welcome to my dungeon. This is where I keep all my guard dogs.” Bilbo explained coldly. “The path is straight. Always head straight for the lamps and you won’t get into any trouble.”


“Oh, just a few scum that death as too good an end for.” Bilbo replied casually. “You’ll want to cover the horses eyes or might lose them.”

The hunters pulled out some rags and did promptly that before Bilbo began to lead them forward. “Whatever happens, never venture to either side. Keep your path straight.” He warned them as they began to walk through the darkness.

They hadn’t even gone ten feet when they heard a metallic rattling in the dark. Thorin’s memory flashed back to the lamia in the cave.

“W-wouldn’t it be better to have a light?” Fili asked quietly.

Suddenly the rattling intensified and a dark figure came to a sudden jolt mere feet away, snarling and growling viciously. The boys jumped and their horses reared and whinnied, mirroring their fright.
Thorin reflexively drew his sword to attack the unknown beast, but Bilbo caught his arm.

“Don’t kill my pets. They can’t reach you if you stay on the straight path.”

The beast continued to snarl and lash out at them from the darkness, it’s swings flailing through the air harmlessly.

“What is it?” Thorin warily lowered his weapon.

“‘They’ are my pets, my . . . trophies.” Bilbo replied darkly. “Creatures for which death or destruction was too good for. I keep them chained here . . . and starved. They guard my home. I keep some at every entrance . . . Just in case.”

Thorin pried his gaze away from the growling beast to eye his vampire. Bilbo sounded far darker, vindictive than he was used to. Sometimes Thorin still forgot he was a vampire. “What are they?”

Bilbo shrugged and Thorin only saw it because they were standing so close. “Various things. All goblins. All guilty of terrible things. Nothing that you should feel any sympathy for.” He turned back towards the lighted door to keep moving and the hunter’s hurriedly followed in order to stay close.

Creatures continued to charge at them, snarling, hissing, growling, each one only making it so far before they came to an abrupt stop from reaching the end of their tether.

“As long as you always head from one lamp to the next, they can’t reach you. If you try to run to escape one, you will simply run into the grasp of another. That’s why I keep it dark. Only those who know what to expect and how to avoid them will make it to the other side alive. It’s effective and I get to display my trophies.” Bilbo explained as they walked.

They were almost to the doors on the other side when another dark figure lurched for them, only it was close enough to the lantern that they could make out some of it’s features. It looked like a mummified corpse. Its skin was dry and shriveled up over bones. Its eyes were black and empty and it hissed and reached for them desperately.

“What is that?!” Kili yelped at the sight of it reaching for him.

“That is what happens to a vampire when they go too long without eating.”

“That’s a vampire?!” Fili asked skeptically. On closer examination, it did have the signature fangs jutting from the jaw, exposed by the receded skin of its mouth and face.

“Yes.” Bilbo replied simply. “Gentlemen, meet the Sweet Tooth. He’s my Favorite.” He ended darkly, stepping forward to pet the shriveled undead corpse.

“The Sweet Tooth?” Thorin echoed. “What did he do?”

“Blood comes in different flavors, you know. Every human has a slightly distinct flavor. But the age of the human affects the flavor the most. Blood from the elderly is bitter, leaves a bad aftertaste. The middle-aged have a more spicy flavor while young adults have a well-balanced tangy one. Sweet and spicy, so to speak. That’s when it’s considered to be the best by most vampires.” He explained casually.

“The blood of children is sweet . . . The younger they are, the sweeter their blood.” Bilbo continued darkly. “Very few vampires feed on children. Those that do usually do it out of desperation and hunger. It’s almost unheard of for a vampire to feed from infants. The flavor is too sweet, . . sickly sweet.”
“The Sweet Tooth got his namesake from his appetite. He fed only on infants and small children, didn’t you?” He asked menacingly sweet. “And then you dared satisfy your twisted hunger on my lands. No . . . Death was far too good for you.” He whispered with cold fury.

He swiveled around and stepped back toward the door, his casual mood back. “So, now he gets the privilege of spending an eternity in the state of living death. Hunger eats away at our minds until it destroys everything but our base instincts if left unsatisfied. He’s nothing more than a starving animal now, locked in eternal suffering. . . . Can’t think of a better place for him.” He ended almost cheerfully.

Thorin stared at the starved, deranged creature as Bilbo opened the door to let them in. This vile creature was nothing like his vampire. Bilbo was right. There was no better place for him. He turned away from the pitiful beast and followed his nephews through the door.

At first it was dark, then, with one snap from Bilbo, a wide hall lit up with lanterns hanging on either side in intervals. There seemed to be openings on either side of the hall.

“Welcome to the stables. You can settle the horses in here.” Bilbo instructed before pulling off a sack from Thorin’s horse.

The hunters peered into several doorways to find that, yes, it was indeed an actual stable. They each claimed a stall and began relieving their horses of their burdens. Each stall had a built in pump and trough for water, though there wasn’t any fresh feed to speak of.

“Here.” Bilbo handed over a bag of feed. “I grabbed you some before we left, but I’ll have to go grab you some hay soon. I don’t normally keep any since my horses don’t eat it.”

“You have horses?” Kili popped out of his stall, carrying his tack and bags.

“Of course. I just don’t need them very often. But it’s good to have them on hand just in case.”

“What kind of horses?” Fili wondered suspiciously.

“Why, goblin horses, of course.” Bilbo smirked and walked to a stall farther down the hall. A huge black head stuck out of the half door of the stall and Bilbo pet and cooed to it lovingly.

The hunters crept closer warily, the boys using their uncle like a shield. It was all black, like the deep, dark color of ink, but its eyes were a fiery red and almost glowed in the light. The edges of it’s mouth reached much farther up his head than it should and large, sharp teeth stuck out from its wicked mouth. The beast nuzzled the vampire, nodding it’s head as Bilbo spoke softly to it.

“I’m sorry, love. I wasn’t able to grab you anything to eat. I’ll get you something soon, alright?”

“What does it eat?” Fili wondered.

“Meat.” Bilbo answered. “Goblin horses, often called devil’s horses by humans, are carnivorous, but their strength, speed, and intelligence is far superior to regular horses and they can use a good number of dark magic abilities. I found a small herd of them some time ago and I thought it a shame to lose them, so I brought them home. You don’t see them that much anymore.”

“You have more?” Thorin asked idly.

“Oh, yes.” He muttered a word in dark tongue and several more heads popped out of various stalls, each one as black and fiery eyed as the next. “This one is Myrtle. She was the leader of their little heard and my personal favorite. Aren’t you, girl?” He cooed at her. She shook her head up and
down and pressed her massive head against him. “Good girl.”

“Can we . . . ride them?” Kili asked sounding like he wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to.

Bilbo chuckled. “With some lessons. They’re a little more intense than riding regular horses and they won’t submit if the rider harbors any fear or uncertainty. You have to have complete confidence and surety if you’re going to ride one. Otherwise, they’ll just eat you right up.” He smirked mischievously then chuckled at their horrified faces. “I’ll give you lessons once you’re more used to them. They’re really quite sweet once you earn their respect.” He petted Myrtle once more before continuing down the hall.

Just before the doors on the other end of the hall, they found the tack and supply rooms and dropped off all their horse related gear.

They passed through another set of wide doors and into another dimly lit room. It seemed bare at first, until Bilbo snapped his fingers once more. Lanterns ignited around them. The space they were in was an entry way of sorts, with hooks for coats and racks for weapons. It opened up into a huge cavernous room.

The hunters stared in awe, taking in the sight. The cavern was three stories high and had numerous doors that wrapped around the room on every story, connected by balconies that not only wrapped around the room, but criss-crossed from one side to the other. In the center of the room was a huge, elaborate dual staircase that wrapped around like a helix to connect the various levels.

Bilbo walked past them with a smirk as they continued to gawk. “Told you I didn’t live in a dusty old castle.” He had stripped his cloak and jacket, leaving him in just his vest.


“Yes, most of the time. But you are welcome to stay as long as you like.”

“Why is it so big?” Fili was rotating in place trying to take it all in.

Bilbo shrugged. “I like my luxuries and I’ve been around for a while. I’ve . . . accumulated stuff. I tend to collect things.”

“Like your trophies?” Thorin finally returned his gaze to his vampire.

“I suppose. You won’t find anything quite so dark or dangerous in here though. My library is extensive though and I have several collection rooms you might find interesting. Artifacts of extinct races, antique weapons, things like that you might find interesting.” He led them farther into the room.

The main room was like a lobby and courtyard wrapped into one. There were numerous plush couches and chairs about alternating with clear open spaces, and there was even a fountain. The room was kept well lit by numerous chandeliers that glowed with a bright, but slightly off light. There was no fire and a Thorin suspected they were magic based.

The room was bright and beautiful, the walls were covered in brilliant mosaics and murals. Everything’s from the furniture to the cavernous structure and design itself was intricate, luxurious and exquisite.

“How did you build this?” He asked in awe.

“By hand mostly. I’ve had plenty of time to spare. It started out small enough, but I kept adding and
decorating until, well, I had this.” He gestured across the large room. “I barely step foot in half the
rooms most of the time, but, well, boredom.” He shrugged. “Sometimes I add more rooms just for
something to work on.”

Thorin spotted a mosaic set into the wall near where they had entered and wandered closer for a
better look. The picture was a flower. He didn’t know what kind, but it was beautifully made. The
small pieces of what looked like rocks used to create the picture sparkled and Thorin stepped closer.
His eyes widened when he realized what he was looking at. “Are these emeralds?” He wondered out
loud.

Bilbo appeared behind him instantly. “Hmm.” He nodded. “And amethysts, topaz, jade, sapphires
and several others.”

Thorin turned to stare at him. “Are all these images made from precious gems?”

“Mostly for the mosaics. Though for some I used metals like gold and silver, even a little mythril here
and there. And one I think is done in just regular stones.” He shrugged again when Thorin continued
to stare at him. “I told you, I accumulate a lot. I didn’t see the point in have roomfuls of loose gems.
Figured I might as well make something out of them.

Thorin raised a brow and glanced around the huge room at all the other mosaics decorating the wall.
He had never seen such opulence in all his life.

“It shouldn’t be all that surprising. If I’m going to kill something, I might as well take its valuables,
right? And, I’ve been around a long time and I don’t exactly spend a lot of money, do I?” He
shrugged. “It adds up.”

Thorin looked back to the mosaic flower before him. “What is it?”

Bilbo gave him a confused look.

“The flower.” Thorin clarified. ‘What kind of flower is it?’ It was set in a rather prominent location.
One of two mosaics that adorned the walls on either side of the main entrance way.

“Oh.” Bilbo paused. “It’s a deadly nightshade flower.”

Thorin waited for more of an explanation to follow, but it didn’t. Bilbo just stared at the flower, not
really seeing it. Thorin looked at it again. It must be significant in some way, but he couldn’t guess
how.

He turned at a whoop from one of his nephews and rolled his eyes. They were already making
themselves quiet comfortable on the fluffy couches and chairs they had found.

Bilbo huffed and shook his head, having been drawn from his daydreaming. “Come on. I’ll show
you around.” He waved them over and they hurried over like excited pups.

“Alright. The main floor here is where all the living suites are-“

“Suites? Not rooms?” Fili interrupted.

“Well, no. The place got so large that it became rather inconvenient not to include all the
commodities in each room. Yes, there is a main kitchen and main dining area and the center room
here acts as a sort of sitting room, but ever suite also has a small kitchenette, sitting room, full
washroom and such. Oh! I also have a hot springs bathing chamber, but I guess it would be public
bathing, not that any of you seem to care about that.”
“Anyway, the main living areas are all here on the first floor—”

“Where’s your Room?” Kili interrupted.

Bilbo sighed. “The large doors opposite the entry way lead to my private chambers. It’s nothing special really.” He paused and sighed again. “I guess I should warn you, though it’s hidden. I wouldn’t put it past your prying noses to find it, so, should you ever come across a large set of doors covered in runes, don’t touch it.” He ordered sternly. “That is my Sanctuary and you must not go near it.”

The teens both nodded seriously.

“The second story is mostly collections, supplies, hobbies, storage. Things like that. Those rooms you’re welcome to explore, but any door bearing my symbol is locked and can only be unlocked by me. That applies to my entire home. If you find one, move on. It’s either private or dangerous.”

"The top floor is the library. Just the library. It is . . . rather impressive, if I do say so myself. I’ve amassed quite a collection over the centuries. You’ll probably find more written history in my library than every large human city combined. I started writing to pass the time, and never really stopped. Being as old as I am and having a perfect memory, I’ve had plenty of material. There is one locked off section in the library. It contains mostly sacred and fairy texts.”

Bilbo spun on his heal to face them. “This is just the main section of my home, but there are actually many other rooms connected by tunnels. Some are locked, and some are more public rooms like the hot springs. But they typically run deeper than the main chamber here. There’s four entrances to the tunnels, one at each corner of this room on the floor level. They wind about a bit, but if you keep going you’ll eventually find your way back here.”

“Well, That sums up the basics. I’ll let the three of you explore to discover the details.” He turned and led them over to one of the nearest doors. “Every suite has three bedrooms. Use them how you like.” He opened the door and it seemed to illuminate of its own will. “Make yourselves at home. I’m going to aim for twenty-four hours in my Sanctuary and then I’ll come take care of some chores, make some supply runs.” He informed tiredly.

“Will that be enough?” Thorin paused at the door to ask.

“No, but it should be enough to make me more functional. I’ll settle in for a longer rest once I know you three won’t starve while I’m in there.” He Admitted.

“We’ll be fine. Sleep as long as you have to.”

Bilbo just shook his head. “I’ll, uh, need my piece back.” He held out his hand.

“Right.” Thorin reached into his pocket and drew out the charred little digit. “Will it be enough to at least heal this?”

Bilbo nodded tiredly. “Most of the external damage should be repaired.”

“Should I walk you to it?” Thorin offered as he handed over the blacked finger. His nephews had already charged into the suite to claim their rooms. He was curious about Bilbo’s Sanctuary.

“No, need. I’ll be faster on my own.” Bilbo stared at him quietly for a few moments.

“Yes?” Thorin prompted. He could tell something was going through that ancient vampire mind, but didn’t have a clue what.
Finally, Bilbo shook his head. “Nothing.”

Thorin stepped closer, checking to make sure his nephews were still out of sight. He studied the vampire’s reaction as he cupped his face with one hand. Bilbo didn’t move or resist so he leaned down for a kiss. It was chaste and sweet, not the fiery desire being near the vampire usually inspired in him. But he could tell, Bilbo was tired and needed to rest and recover.

“We will still be here when you awake.” He assured.

Bilbo nodded hesitantly. Was he reluctant to put much distance between them, even if they were in his home? “Try not to get into any trouble.” He sighed as if didn’t truly believe it was possible.

Thorin chuckled. “Do you have a troll collection or an arrogant vampire house guest we should be wary of?”

Bilbo snorted. “You already passed the trolls and I don’t permit just any house guest.”

Thorin raised a brow, he had been joking about the trolls.

“As long as you don’t try to leave or open any locked doors, you should be fine.” He paused again. “I just . . won’t be able to feel you once I enter my Sanctuary.” He admitted softly.

“Why is that?” Thorin wondered.

“It just the way it works. The chamber both amplifies and restricts my magic. I can’t feel much of the outside while inside.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry. We’ll be here and we’ll be fine.” Thorin reassured and pressed their foreheads together.

Bilbo tilted his head back to meet him, closed his eyes, and sighed. “Alright.” He whispered.

“Go rest.” Thorin ordered softly.

Bilbo’s eyes opened and he took his finger back. “I’ll keep it short.”

Before Thorin could tell him to take his time, he was gone. Thorin smiled softly at his One’s reluctance to leave and turned to inspect their new living quarters.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: The hunters get to explore some of Bilbo’s underground mansion and discover a little more about his human life.
Thorin wandered around the underground mansion curiously. He didn’t have any particular destination in mind, though it would be a bonus if he managed to stumble upon a certain Sanctuary door. Not that he wanted to enter, of course. He just liked the idea of knowing exactly where his One was.

He and his nephews had taken full advantage of their suite’s accommodations. Plush beds fit for king’s, large tubs carved into the floor with running hot water, even a variety of fragrant oils and soaps for washing complimented their rooms. It was almost too good to be true. Thorin slept like a baby on his plush mattress that felt more like sleeping on a cloud than any bed he had ever used.

It was strange. For some one who was such a loner, Bilbo seemed to have an awful lot of space for guests. Had he had a coven at some point? A family? Or was it really all just out of boredom? It didn’t seem likely. Everything was far too exquisite and thought out to have been done just for the sake of it.

After the hunters had enjoyed hot baths and conked out on their luxurious beds for the most amazing sleep they had ever had, they had found themselves distinctly lacking in things to do . . in their rooms, anyway. After something to eat, the boys had nearly barreled for the door, so eager they were to explore the vampire’s home.

Thorin had followed them out eventually at a far more casual pace. He was curious about the vampire’s treasure and trinkets, of course, but he was more interested in what he could learn about his One from them.

Thorin watched his nephews charge noisily up the double helix staircase and promptly decided he would explore the first floor instead. No need to endure a headache caused by his rambunctious nephews and their excessive enthusiasm. Besides, he wanted to get a closer look at those mosaics.

They were everywhere, decorating almost every wall space where there wasn’t a doorway. Most were smaller pictures, consisting of a single item, a flower or a tree, for example. Thorin knew that the images were significant. Art, like music, was an expression of the soul. And Thorin as more confident than ever that Bilbo had a soul. How else could they be soulmates? How else could such a vial natured being be so good? Be so compassionate?

No, he knew Bilbo had a soul, a good soul that suffered under the weight of the curse that had been forced upon it. If he had any doubt, meeting the Elder of the Old Wood had put it to rest. The sprite was clearly fond of Bilbo, despite Bilbo’s attitude and threats. The sprites had chosen to spare him when they could have killed him before he became too strong.

Thorin suspected that his vampire could be a very real threat to them now if he want to be. He had ripped their barrier open with his bare hands! Yet, they didn’t seem afraid of him in the least. If that didn’t speak of their trust and affection for him, he didn’t know what would.
But Bilbo was still so much of an enigma. There were still so many questions that Thorin wanted answered. He still knew so little of Bilbo’s past and origins, about Bilbo himself. He hoped that studying the vampire’s personal space might help reveal more about him.

He stopped in front of the closest mosaic to his room. It seemed straight forward enough, it was a sun, clear as day, made with a rich variety of yellows, reds, and oranges. Each gemstone catching and reflecting the light in a way that made it glow as if it had a light of its own. Thorin looked around and noticed that their was one of those magical lamps hanging from one of the crossover balconies at a perfect angle from the mosaic. Just right to catch the maximum amount of light and reflect it out in a fiery hue of yellow-orange and red.

Thorin smiled sadly. He didn’t need to be a scholar to understand this one. Bilbo missed the sun. Thorin wondered what his life had been like as a human. Had he been an outdoorsy type? Had he reveled in the sun and its daylight beauty? How much had he lost because of the curse?

He admired the beautiful handiwork for a few more moments before movingly on. He stopped and admired many more mosaic images, each one just as brilliant and exquisite as the next. Images of flowers, trees, even an animal here and there, but for the most part Thorin drew a blank on their meanings. He didn’t know if the items themselves had particular meanings or if Bilbo was simply a lover of nature and its various forms.

He felt somewhat confident that he could at least say the latter even if they did have deeper meanings. After all, no one fills their home with images of flowers and trees if they don’t like such things.

One particular image Thorin found fascinating. Unlike the others, instead of one large image, it was made up of several smaller ones. Crows, he thought, or maybe ravens. They were made with gleaming black gems of varying shades. Thorin couldn’t quite make out what sort of stones their eyes were made of, but they shined with an eerie intelligence. They looked like they could fly off the wall at any moment.

Thorin stared at it for some time, lost in the old tales his parents used to tell him about their people before they had been run out of their mountainous home. He remembered being told of a race of intelligent ravens that served his ancestors as messengers and lookouts. He wondered if this was what they looked like. They were beautiful.

He was making his way steadily towards the two mosaics that he believed to hold the most significance for the vampire. The ones on either side of the entry way. Unlike the others, they were large and more detailed. The one of the nightshade flower was completed with stems and leaves and even a soft blue background. All the other flowers were just a blossom and maybe a leaf or two.

But he had already looked at that one, so he was heading towards the one one the other side of the entrance when his eyes caught on a brilliant mosaic he was passing by. He turned and stared at it in confused awe. It was magnificent. It was simply shaped, like a crystal, and made with a rainbow of colors. Glimmering colors that seem to change as he moved, pinks flickering to blues, and greens flickering to yellows. It was bright, many clear stones, likely diamonds, amidst other color changing gems, opals possibly. He stepped closer, transfixed by the bright, glimmering shape.

He knew exactly what it was. He didn’t know how or why he did, but he knew. He had never actually seem one for himself. They had all been left behind when the dragon had attacked and their people had fled. The arkenstones. Even his own parents had never seen one. His grandfather was the last generation to look upon one of the purest substances of middle-earth.

Why in Mahal’s name would Bilbo replicate an image of one of the most dangerous substances to his
kind?! A stone so pure and magical that it could slay a vampire with the slightest nick! Why would an arkenstone be important to Bilbo?! Had he seen one?! Most likely. He was around long before Thorin’s people had been all but eradicated, after all. But why would it mean anything to him? Did he simply admire its beauty? Did he long for death?

Thorin was as baffled as he was impressed. He thought about asking about it, but doubted Bilbo would give him a real answer. He never did when it came to things about him that actually mattered. He stroked the stones in awe of its beauty and perfection. From a distance, it would look like a single giant arkenstone. No matter how he tried, he couldn’t fathom any logical reason why Bilbo would create an image of an arkenstone, not one that made any sense anyway. Eventually, he tore his eyes away from it and continued on. There was one last mosaic he wanted to study.

He gazed at it as he made his way closer. The images were much more discernible from a distance. It was something he had seen before. An acorn, with two curly B’s set into it, and a single oak leaf attached to the stem. He recognized the image from the symbols that Bilbo had place on the people of Cardume, the ones that had signed his contract. This one was more detailed, however, and in full color. Rich browns and oranges formed the flesh of the acorn, brilliant greens formed the leaf, and the letters were written in bold reds. They were his initials obviously. B. B. for Bilbo Baggins. Strange that he always gave his true name, even to his opponents.

But the acorn was a mystery. Why an acorn? As a whole, vampires had no interest or connection to nature. How could they when they were creatures of death? So, why would Bilbo choose an acorn as his symbol? That’s what it must be. His symbol, a coat of arms, so to speak. But why an acorn? Was it connected to his human life? Were all of these images somehow connected to the life he had before the curse.

Thorin looked around again, flowers, trees, animals, the sun. The only one that didn’t seem to fit the theory was the arkenstone image. He turned back to the acorn symbol. Did Bilbo remember more about his human life than he let on? Or were these just lingering images that he wanted to replicate before they faded completely? How long ago had he started making them?

He was abruptly startled from his musings when his nephews started yelling for him from the second floor balcony. He looked up to find them leaning precariously over the railing.

“Uncle! You have to come see this!” “You won’t believe all the weapons he has in here!” “Old ones!” Really old, but they don’t look old!” “Yeah, some of them are practically brand new!” They alternated shouting at him as if he couldn’t hear them just fine.

He sighed and made his way to the elaborate staircase. They wouldn’t shut up until he humored them. Before he had even made it all the way to the second floor, they had grabbed him and started dragging him along.

Once they entered the room harboring Bilbo’s weapon collection, they finally let him go. He ambled along behind them, only half listening to their constant chatter about every new weapon they pointed out.

It was fascinating and every weapon was preserved and displayed expertly and even had a little note or plaque explaining the what, when, where and why of each weapon. There were even paintings and sketches hanging on the wall showing how certain, usually the more peculiar, weapons had been used. It was very educational and, again, Thorin wondered what the point of it all was. It’s not like Bilbo would forget any of the information. It was almost like he had designed it for someone else... someone who wasn’t a vampire and could forget.

They must have spent hours slowly working their way through the large room. It was built almost
like a simple maze, unlike the open central room. The extra wall space being used to display countless weapons, and, apparently, torture devices. The boys were particularly fascinated by an iron person shaped casket that opened up to reveal hundreds of spikes meant to impale the occupant. The plaque called it an 'Iron Maiden.' Thorin though it looked more like a iron nightmare.

They still hadn’t made their way through the entire collection when an unexpected voice startled them out of their admirations. “Having fun?”

They spun around to find Bilbo smirking at them. He looked much better. His face was smooth and crack free again and what they could see of his hands sticking out of his pockets looked normal again. He leaned against an edge of the wall as he watched them. He wasn’t wearing his vest or cravat now, only a long sleeved shirt and suspenders. His neckband was visible where it hung low on his neck.

“Bilbo!” Kili greeting enthusiastically. “You look great!” Fili complimented as they both rushed for him.

Bilbo chuckled and tolerated their hugs good-naturedly. “I wasn’t gone that long. I see you wasted no time to start exploring.”

“Your collections are amazing!” Kili declared. “There’s even fairy and goblin weapons in here.” Fili sounded impressed.

“I thought you were going to sleep for twenty-four hours?” Thorin asked as he approached more sedately than his nephews. He wasn’t sure how long it had been, but he was sure it hadn’t been twenty-four hours.

“I got enough for now.” Bilbo shrugged. “Honestly, leaving these two trouble-makers unattended was making me nervous.” He ruffled Kili’s dark untied hair.

“Hey!” Kili pouted. “We’re not kids.”

“But you are troublemakers.” Bilbo retorted and the teen huffed. “Have you eaten recently?”

At least two bellies growled at the mere mention of food and Bilbo chuckled. “I thought not. I know you think all this is fascinating but you can’t forget to take care of your basic needs in your excitement. Come on. We don’t have much, but I’ll try to whip up something decent.

The boys shared a confused glance before they all followed him out. Thorin honestly wasn’t all that surprised by this sort of thing any more. A vampire who cooks? Sure, why not, he drinks tea, doesn’t he?

He led them back down to the main floor and into a large fancy kitchen that the hunters had yet to discover. It was huge. There were at least half a dozen ovens, of several different designs, a roasting pit, numerous stove tops, and more. It looked capable of feeding an army, let alone a few hunters.

Bilbo wasted no time and started pulling out what little he had managed to grab for them before they left Bree. He pulled out a few loaves of bread, some salted meat, and a few veggies he had snagged. “Well, I think I can manage a simple stew with this.”

“So, you’re really gonna . . . cook?” Fili asked uncertainly.

“You know I cook, Fili. You’ve eaten quite a bit since Belegost.” He replied as he rolled up his sleeves, bearing his lean, contract tattooed forearms.
“I know, but . . . I thought you were just . . . following directions or something.”

Bilbo chuckled. “Well, I suppose that’s partly true. I was following a recipe, but that doesn’t mean I’m helpless without one.”

“But, you’re a vampire. Why would you need to know how to cook? Why would you even be bothered to learn?” Kili wondered.

Bilbo shrugged as he prepped an oven. “It was relevant at one point. I found I was rather good at it. So, I guess I dabble now and then. Not really worth keeping fresh supplies around for though, so I’ll have to restock the pantries.”

“Is this one of those . . . eccentricity things?” Fili asked.

Bilbo sighed and set a filled pot on a burner. “Not really.” He decided after a few moments of thought. “There seems to be some amount of lingering . . . interest and skill, perhaps, from my former life. But to be considered an eccentricity it has to be something compulsive. Something I’m driven, compelled to do despite the circumstances. For example, you’ll never find my tea and pipe weed stores lacking. And, believe me, it hasn’t always been easy getting a hold of the good stuff. Dori has made that part of my life drastically easier.” He explained as he started adding things to the pot.

“So, . . . you liked to cook? When you were human?” Kili ventured, hoping to learn more about the vampire’s previous life.

“Possibly.” He paused in thought. “I get the distinct impression that I had a bit of a belly and likely enjoying maintaining my roundish figure.” He outlined a little chubby belly over his perfectly flat one with his hands.

“What?!” “No way!” “You don’t have an ounce of fat on you!” The teens protested.

“Well, of course I don’t now. Have you ever seen a fat vampire?”

The hunters were silent as they tried to remember if they’d ever met a vampire that wasn’t lean.

“Of course you haven’t. It’s impossible. Our new bodies burn through that energy before the transformation is even complete. Our energy is magical, it can’t be store as fat and the kind of energy stored in fat isn’t usable by us, so it’s burned up when we change. You’ll never see a fat vampire.”

“So . . . you were chubby? How cute would that be?!” Kili didn’t seem to mind in the least. Bilbo just huffed and rolled his eyes.

Thorin could see it. Bilbo’s roundish face, his physical proportions. He was beautiful as he was of course, but Thorin could see how he might have been built to carry a little more meat on his bones. How he might carry a satisfyingly plump rear and soft, squeezable thighs. A soft bulge over his pant-line, not enough to be problematic, but enough to show that he was healthy and happy with life. His cheeks might be just a bit rounder, pinker, perfect for the beatific smile he sometimes sported.

Yes, Thorin was sure he would have found the pre-vampire Bilbo just as beautiful as this one . . . and easier to squeeze.

“Do you remember anything else about it? Your previous life, I mean.” Fili pried. “I know you said most of those memories fade, but you seem to remember some things.”

Bilbo stirred the pot in silence. “I don’t remember much. Most of what I know about it is from research, history. I started trying to find out more about my people once he . . . after I was given more
freedom.” He finally admitted. “Other than a few flash images and . . feelings of nostalgia or recognition, most of what I do remember are not memories that I particularly wish to remember.” He finished quietly.

“What about your home?” Thorin changed the subject.

“What about it?” Bilbo asked while pulling some bread out he had been toasting in an oven.

“It doesn’t seem designed for a vampire. The spare rooms, the stairs, the brightness, the kitchen, even the way you organized your collection room. They seem better suited for . . humans.”

“Hmm.” Bilbo hummed and pulled out some bowls for the three of them. “Well, that’s probably because it was. Designed for a human, that is. I guess it became habit after that.”

“You . . you had a human living with you?” Kili asked baffled.

“I did. A long time ago. A child.” Bilbo sighed wistfully. “That’s when I started carving this place out of the earth.”

“Why?! I mean, who was he? What made you take him in?” Fili shot out questions.

“I . . I was supposed to kill him.” Bilbo admitted, running his hand through his curls. An anxious behavior Thorin wasn’t used to seeing on the vampire. “I couldn’t. I-I don’t kill children. Not-not if I can get out of it.” He added softly. “But he was an orphan and I knew if-If he found out about him, we would both suffer. So I brought him hear and hid him away.”

“What happen to him?” Thorin asked gently.

Bilbo sighed and stirred the pot. “He grew up. He left.”

Thorin doubted it was that simple, but he didn’t feel it appropriate to pry any more about it. Fortunately, his nephews seemed to feel the same.

After a few more silent minutes, Bilbo scooped some stew into each of their bowls and set them on the counter before them.

“It also feels nostalgic. The layout and design of this place.” He clarified when they gave him confused looks. “I told you I was a noble remember. My father was actually a lord over a very productive area of farming land. A king by today’s standards.”

“Really?! So then, you’re like a prince!” Kili concluded excitedly.,

“I suppose I was.” Bilbo shrugged. “Maybe that’s why I was chosen.” He added darkly and the teens enthusiasm faded.

After that, the hunters dropped any conversation related to Bilbo’s pre-vampire life and chose to eat in silence save for some compliments and appreciation for the hot meal.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: The hunters spend more time exploring Bilbo's luxurious mansion and learn a little more about his mysterious past.
Quick question everyone. I'm almost out of new Sneak Peeks to post so I'm thinking about releasing continuing chapters for the stories that I've been working on on the side instead. But I have several chapters written for several works, so my question is would you like to vote on which work gets a chapter posted and, if yes, would you prefer to vote here in the comments or on a tumbler post? (Okay, that's two questions.) Personally, I would rather post it on my tumbler but I don't want anyone to miss out on the chance to vote, so just let me know if you would rather vote here in the comments.
Lost and Forgotten

Chapter Notes

Hope everyone had a great Thanksgiving! So the next updates will be right before the holidays so expect some holiday surprises! I make you all wait so much for updates, I've decided it's the perfect time of the year to spoil you. Check my [Tumblr](https://www.tumblr.com) for more info! 😊

December's Sneak Peek: "Husband Mine"

Passing through the Shire, Thorin and her escorting guards arrive in time for a huge Shire-wide hobbit festival and are encouraged to join in the celebrations. She meets a annoyingly cheerful and confusing hobbit who takes a suspicious amount of interest in her and eventually convinces her to let him to be her escort for the evening. She wakes up in bed with said hobbit the next morning with no memory of how she got there and discovers that they are somehow married. Mortified and neck deep in denial, all she wants to do is get out of the Shire and leave the whole embarrassing mess behind. Unfortunately, her new husband is strangely enthusiastic about their marriage and isn’t about to let her slip away so easily.

Thorin/Bilbo, Fem!Thorin

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thorin found himself wandering again. After seeing that they were fed, Bilbo had taken off to collect supplies and had yet to return. The hunters had explored for a while more before returning to their rooms for another indulgent bath and some rest. The boys hadn’t slept very long before they had disappeared to resume their exploring.

Thorin took his time getting up and around and ate a quick dry breakfast before venturing out again. He wander the main floor for a while first, exploring the many shared rooms. Off of the kitchen had been a large dining room. It had only had one table, but it could have easily fit several. He also discovered a door he suspected led to the pantries that Bilbo had mentioned but wasn't particularly inclined to explore.

He found a few more rooms that weren’t particularly interesting and he was getting ready to head up to the next level when a door caught his eye. It was a simple double door like all the other rooms had and he could tell by the design of the stone trim around it that it led to one of the suites.

What caught his attention though, was the symbol etched onto the door. None of the other doors had such a thing. He got closer and realized it was Bilbo’s symbol, an acorn with his initials inscribed onto it. A locked door then. But it was just a suite. Why would he feel the need to lock it? . . . Unless.

Could the rooms have belonged to the human child that Bilbo had mentioned? Bilbo had been . . . vague about the child’s fate, though it’s likely the boy was long dead by now. Perhaps he kept the door locked for personal reasons, preserving memories.

Thorin ran his hand over the shimmering markings and they seemed to brighten with the contact. He cocked his head and raised his brow. That was interesting.
Rapid boot-falls and chatter reached his ears and he turned just in time to see his nephews come bursting out of one of the corner doorways that led to the lower levels.

“Ah man! We’re back we’re we started!” Kili whined after glancing around.

“Not quite. We went in that door over there, remember? Somehow we made a full circle.” Fili corrected.

“Gah! It’s like a maze down there! Simple my arse! There’s so many turns!”

“Maybe you’re just directionally challenged. Stop running ahead and let me lead this time.” Fili retorted.

“Am not! And you take too long!”

“That’s because I’m not just running around and turning at random!”

“What are you doing?” Thorin interrupted their bickering.

“Hey, uncle.” “We’re exploring!”

“Kili thinks all the best rooms must be deeper down.” Fili explained.

“But it’s a bloody maze down there!”

“We did find a training room though.” Fili perked up.

“Yeah, and a couple locked ones.” Kili added. “They won’t open for nothing!”

“He told you to stay away from the locked doors.” Thorin chided.

Kili shrugged sheepishly. “So, you’re curious too, aren’t you?”

“We tried that one already.” Fili explained. “I think it’s just another suite room, but it’s still locked.”

“It might have belonged to the human he spoke of.” Thorin shared his thoughts.

“Oh yeah, that would explain it. . . What do you think happened to him?” Fili wondered.

Thorin shrugged. “I’m not sure it’s something Bilbo would want to talk about.”

The boys nodded in agreement.

“What are we standing around for?! We have a hot springs to find!” Kili shouted with renewed ambition and dragged his brother back the way they had come.

Thorin shook his head and decided to head up to the higher levels. He wandered the collection and hobby rooms. They really were fascinating, but he tried not to spend too much time on any one room. Besides the one for weapons, there was a room devoted to medicines and medical practices. Medical tools and books were on display as well as countless bottles and jars of what must have been the medicines themselves.

Another room was devoted entirely to flowers and plants. Each specimen carefully dried and preserved with information about it down in writing. Many Thorin had never seen before and turned out to be now extinct.
There was a room devoted to pottery and another for tools. In many ways they were all about history. Pieces of the past the Bilbo had seen fit to collect and preserve for whatever reason.

Thorin wandered through another room about art and another for music, but he didn’t spend much time in either of them. He stopped and leaned against the balcony railing as he gazed about the magnificent room. All that these rooms revealed was that Bilbo was academically minded and an avid collector. They didn’t do much to reveal his innermost self.

Another shimmer caught his eye and he spotted a locked room on the other side of the second floor. He traveled across one of the cross-way balconies, stopping to admire the view when he reached the center, and made his way over to it.

He eyed the symbol, the same symbol. An inscribed acorn. What sort of collection would need to be locked up?

“It’s a collection of magical artifacts.” A voice at his side startled him. “It’s locked because they could be dangerous if left with . . . meddlesome unsupervised teenagers.”

“You’re back.” He gave the vampire a small smile.

Bilbo nodded and returned the smile. “I stopped and fed your horses. The pantries aren’t fully stocked but there’s enough to keep you for a while. I figured it was enough for now.” He cocked an ear. “Where are the boys?”

“Exploring the lower levels, or trying to anyway. They seem to keep getting lost more than anything.”

“Kili must be leading.” Bilbo nodded in understanding. “I’d offer to take you in but you must be getting hungry.” He gestured to the locked door. “Come, let me feed you first.” He grabbed Thorin’s hand in his and started pulling him back downstairs.

Thorin welcomed the pulse of energy that shot through him from the vampire’s touch. He hurried to match Bilbo’s pace and threaded their fingers together. Bilbo didn’t acknowledge the act and Thorin took it a step further and raised his hand to his lips, planting a soft kiss on it.

Bilbo sent him a side-way narrow-eyed glance in rebuke, but the amused smirk on his face countered its affect. Thorin smirked unapologetically and Bilbo huffed and shook his head.

Thorin didn’t let him go until they were back in the kitchen. Bilbo pulled of his jacket and vest and started getting to work. He disappeared into the dark pantries and returned with a cut of pork to roast and a sack of potatoes.

Thorin watched as he prepared the meat before sliding it into an oven and began pealing potatoes. His movements were precise and swift as he quickly divested the root vegetables of their outermost layer.

Thorin spotted a window and quickly exploited it. He slipped behind the vampire and wrapped his arms around him, nuzzling into his curly hair.

“Thorin.” Bilbo warned as the hunters hands began to wander, running over his hips, sides and stomach. “I have a knife.”

“We both know your bare hands are a hundred times more dangerous than any knife.” Thorin rumbled into his ear, relishing the shiver he earned when his beard lightly brushed against it.
I’m trying to make you dinner.” Bilbo scolded.

“What if I don’t want that for dinner?” Thorin’s hand slowly slid down the vampire’s stomach.

Bilbo huffed. “Then what would you like?”

“You.” Thorin muttered against his neck before planting a sucking kiss on perfect porcelain skin. He ended his kiss with a nip and Bilbo gasped.

Suddenly, Thorin’s wondering hands were arrested in Bilbo’s firm grip, having been caught before they could wander any farther south. Thorin’s mouth, however, remained free and he repeated the biting kiss.

“Thorin!” Bilbo hissed and Thorin could just imagine his dark eyes and snarling fangs.

Thorin grinned and was about to bite his neck again when Bilbo pulled away. His muscles tremored as if he was forcing them into obedience.

“Go sit and behave so I can get your dinner made.” Bilbo ordered through his fangs.

“But I already found my dinner.”

“He chuckled and planted one last kiss to the back of Bilbo’s neck. “Fine.”

Bilbo glared at him as he walked around to the other side of the counter, his dark eyes revealing the source of his annoyance. He huffed in agitation and continued preparing their dinner.

Thorin behaved (mostly) from then on, watching the vampire work and admiring his agile movements. Bilbo quickly finished throwing everything together and setting it to cook before he grabbed a large wooden mug and a tea cup.

“Would you like some ale?” Bilbo asked as he set a tea kettle on the stove. “I took the liberty of snagging a few barrels.”

“Ale would be good.”

A few moments later, Bilbo set the filled mug in front of him. “How do you like it?”

Thorin took a sip. “It’s good.”

“Not the ale, silly.” Bilbo chuckled. “This place.”

Thorin grunted, as his mouth was too busy with another gulp of ale. “It’s big.”

“So you don’t like it.”

“I didn’t say that.” Thorin denied. “It just seems a bit . . “

“Excessive?”

“Lonely.” Thorin corrected. “Why do you keep so much space if you prefer to be alone?”

Bilbo hummed over his tea. “I have a lot of interests-“

“I’m not talking about your collections. I’m talking about the suites. Why do you have so many if
you didn’t expect to share them?”

Bilbo shrugged. “A castle has many rooms.”

“Because it has many occupants.”

Bilbo shrugged again. “I guess it just felt . . . appropriate.”

“And the mosaics?”

“I told you.”

“You said why you made them; you didn’t explain why you chose those images.”

“Does it matter?” Bilbo retorted.

“It matters to you.” Thorin stared him down.

“Have you seen the murals?” Bilbo abruptly change the subject after a moment of silent staring.

“I haven’t.” Thorin shook his head at the tactic.

“You should.” Bilbo continued. “I think you’ll find them interesting.”

Thorin studied him, not sure if the recommendation had a deeper meaning or not. “Perhaps you could give me a tour.”

Bilbo raised a brow and the corner of his mouth lifted just slightly. “I suppose I could do that.” He took another sip of his tea.

“After we eat?” Thorin studied him from over his ale.

“Sure.” Bilbo agree easily. “The murals are some of my favorite works. I’ve spent a good share of time with them myself. It would feel good to share them.”

“What are they of?”

“Places. At least the ones on the third floor are. There are a few . . . hidden ones that depict other things.”

“Hidden?” Thorin echoed. “Why are they hidden?”

“Well, they aren’t as . . . pleasant, I suppose. Relevant. Memories that should not be forgotten, but aren’t particularly pleasant to remember either.” Bilbo explained.

“History.” Thorin concluded. Much of Bilbo’s hobbies and collections seemed to be geared towards history or the passing of it. “It’s important to you.”

Bilbo shrugged. “Not really. There isn’t much that really matters to me anymore.” He stared off at nothing. “But I . . . think it’s a shame when things are forgotten.” He admitted softly. “Things, people, places that were and will never be again. Things that are forever lost because no one remembers them. . . . Isn’t that the same as having never existed at all?” He ended quietly, his eyes focused back on Thorin.

Thorin met his gaze. Honestly, he had never thought much about the past beyond his own history and the scope of his work. But Bilbo had lived history, ages of it. Thorin wondered if he felt some
sort of connection or understanding towards the antiques he collected. “You're not lost . . or forgotten, Bilbo.” His large hand engulfed the hand Bilbo had setting on the counter.

Bilbo stared at him for a moment, his smaller fingers rubbing at Thorin’s larger ones. “I’ve been both lost and forgotten . . for a very long time.”

Thorin wanted to argue, but there was a look in the vampire’s eyes that he couldn’t compete with. The look of one who had lost more than could ever be recovered, more than anyone would care to discover. He looked . . lonely. Thorin squeezed his hand. “I want to know you.”

Bilbo blinked and looked away. The fleeting look in his eyes was gone, replaced by skepticism. “No, you don’t.” He answered darkly. “I have done things you could never forgive.”

“I don’t care.”

“That’s because you don’t know!” Bilbo hissed. “If you knew what I’ve done, you wouldn’t dismiss it so easily. . . . If you knew who I was, you would wish me as far away from your side as possible, to the burning depths of Mount Doom itself.”

Bilbo tried to pull his hand away and Thorin gripped it harder, refusing to let him go. “Impossible.” Thorin assured and remained confident under Bilbo’s scrutiny. “I can’t say that it would be easy to accept some of the things you might have done, but I can promise you that I would never wish you to be far from me or anywhere other than by my side.”

Bilbo eyed him skeptically. He didn’t reply but squeezed Thorin’s hand lightly before lifting it to his lips. He opened his mouth and lightly gripped the edge of Thorin’s hand between two of his fangs, his gaze never leaving Thorin’s eyes.

Thorin’s eyes widened in understanding as he watched. Vampire kisses. Bilbo continued to stare at him, gauging his reaction as he set his and Thorin’s hand’s back on the counter-top. His heart rate sprinted in excitement and the affectionate gesture that Bilbo had just shown him. A gesture he himself often gave but always earned him raised eyebrows, amused smirks and sideways glances. He never hoped to have it returned. “Bilbo.” He breathed.

There was a growing racket in the distance and before Thorin could figure out what else he should say, Fili and Kili busted into the room.

“Ha! I told you I smelled food!” Kili declared triumphantly.

Fili scoffed. “Leave it to you to do your best navigating with your nose.” He jabbed.

“Hey! I got us out, didn’t I?”

“No before getting us royally lost, you moron! Next time, I’m leading or you can go exploring on your own!” Fili bickered back.

Bilbo discretely pulled has hand away in the disturbance and Thorin mourned its loss.

“You got lost again?” Bilbo wondered in amusement.

“Bilbo! You’re back!” Kili glomped onto him.

“We only keep getting lost because Kili just rushes ahead without bothering to keep track of our turns.” Fili complained before sharing a hug of his own with the vampire.
Bilbo chuckled. “I can’t believe you're having that much trouble with those tunnels.”

“It’s only because of Kili.” Fili accuses through gritted teeth.

“Is not! There are a lot of turns and dead ends down there and not very much light.”

“There aren't any dead ends.” Bilbo chuckled, slightly confused.

The teens stared at him suspiciously. “Are you sure?”

“Quite.” Bilbo nodded with a chuckle. “I made those tunnels. Every one leads somewhere. Sometimes the doors are a bit hidden though.” He shrugged.

“Hidden?!” Kili yelped. “Why?!"

Bilbo shrugged again. “The rooms downstairs aren’t meant for casual use. If you don’t know how to get somewhere, then you probably don’t need to be there.”

“What about the hot springs?” Fili asked as his brother groaned something about overly secretive vampires.

“Those are not hidden. You simply haven’t found them.”

“I’m leading next time.” He nodded his head with finality.

“Whatever. Hey! What’s cooking?” Kili switched topics enthusiastically. “It smells great!”

Bilbo chuckled and turned to check on the meat in the oven. “Pork roast.”

“Sweet!” “That sounds amazing.”

“Hey, Uncle. Have you found the springs yet?” Fili asked.

“I haven’t been to the lower levels yet.”

“Really?! What’s so interesting up here?” Kili challenged.

Thorin didn’t reply but cast a hungry look at the vampire over the rim of his cup.

The boys continued to chat about what they had seen and found so far, Thorin and Bilbo having to add little to the conversation. Finally, Bilbo pulled out the pork roast and set the table for them with the other dishes.

The hunters tore into the fresh meal, groans and muttered praises escaping their occupied mouths. It was likely one of the best meals they had every had in their lives. Thorin was sure it was more fitting for the table of a king. The meat was succulent and perfect, almost melting in their mouths and full of flavor. Every dish was as superb as the next.

“This is bloody amazing.” He muttered Before shoving another forkful in his mouth. The boys echoed barely discernible compliments.

Bilbo chuckled as he stirred his tea. “I’m glad you’re enjoying it.”

“I wish you could eat it too.” Kili said through a full mouth.

“Don’t speak with your mouthful, Kili, and I can. It just doesn’t appeal all that much to me.”
“I know, but I wish you could enjoy it.” Kili clarified after swallowing.

Bilbo gave him a soft smile. “I’m fine.”

“Hey, Bilbo? Can I ask you something?” Fili asked uncertainly.

“You do all the time.”

“Yeah, but, this one’s a little more . . personal.”

Bilbo raised a brow. “You can ask anything, but I reserve the right to not answer.”

“All right.” Fili agreed and then fell silent. “Why do they call you the Halfling?” He finally asked after several thoughtful moments.

Thorin saw Bilbo’s face twitch in disgust and doubted Fili would get an answer.

Indeed, he didn’t for several long minutes and the hunter’s continued eating in silence as they waited for a response.

“It’s a mockery of my stature and the idea that I’m not a ‘real’ vampire because of my . . different nature.” He finally responded evenly.

“That’s it?” Fili wondered, it didn’t sound that bad.

Bilbo’s eyes narrowed. “Other vampires see me as being beneath them, inferior. Should I not be offended?”

“Well, no, but, I dunno. I thought it meant something . . worse, I guess.”

“Originally, it did mean something entirely different. But that meaning has been lost to time. There are few vampires as old as me. I guess, to the young ones these days, I’m as much a relic as my collections. Much like humans, every generation perceives the older generations as being inferior . . especially the ones not out there asserting their dominance.”

“I suppose you could compare it to being called a ‘weak old man.’” He added with a sigh. “I may not have dreams of grandeur, but I don’t like being dismissed either, especially not simply because I don’t meet modern vampire standards.”

“Vampires aren’t allowed to be short?” Kili wondered innocently.

“Have you ever seen one, besides myself?”

“Uh. No, I guess not.” Kili scratched his head.

“Vampire’s are drawn to people they perceive as powerful, the sort of people they will change. Tall, muscular, beautiful, conniving. It comes in different forms. “Short, youthful and . . -“

“Cute?” Kili supplied unapologetically, much to Bilbo’s disgust.

“Don’t generally fit the bill.” He ended none-the-less. “I don’t ‘look’ strong and dangerous.”

“So, they’re jealous.” Kili summarized his own biased conclusion.

Bilbo’s faces twisted with mixed emotions, disgust, confusion, and disbelief being some of the more identifiable ones, before it settled into sarcasm. “Yes, Kili, I’m sure that’s exactly It.”
“I knew it.” Kili laughed. “They’re just jealous you’re so adorable and perfect. I mean look at you! You can hide in plain sight because you don’t look like a vampire!” He added enthusiastically.

Bilbo rolled his eyes and shook his head, revealing just what he thought about that, while the others chuckled at his expense.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Bilbo takes the hunters on a tour to see his murals and they get some unexpected history lessons. Thorin is faced with memories of his home but is he ready for them?

End Notes

Gimlelul - my brightest star
Dushin-Mizim = “Dark Jewel” or “Black Opal”
Ghivashel – treasure of all treasures
Men lananubukhs me – I love you
Menu tessu - you mean everything to me
Mizimel - Jewel of all Jewels

Khuzdul and meanings taken from:
Collection of Khuzdul By
Islenthatur, TheDarkestFallingStar

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