Sons of a Took

by sifshadowheart

Summary

In the in-between Harry climbed onto the feathered back of Thorondor, King of Eagles.

In the Shire, Hadley Baggins, younger fauntling of Belladonna Took and Bungo Baggins was born.

Slash/Pre-Slash/Mpreg

A/U & Non-Canon
Chapter One: Places In-Between

“I am about to die.”

Harry wished he could say he was surprised then the Snitch slid open, revealing a thing he’d only become aware of existing a week or so ago: The Resurrection Stone.

Dumbledore, that old bastard, Harry laughed to himself shaking his head.

He knew that he’d been groomed at this point, shaped and molded, or as Snape had put it “raised like a pig for slaughter.” A test every year, a challenge to harden him in the fires of struggle and strife. No connections beyond his friends, nothing to tether him to this life.

Nothing to live for but everything to die for, Dumbledore had trained him well, the meddling old goat.

Turning the stone thrice in hand, Harry looked up to see a quartet of shades staring at him in various stages of grief and mourning.

A man with Harry’s messy hair and much of his facial structure.

A woman with the same shape of eyes that were a brilliant green in life.

Another man with handsome aristocratic features and a devilish smirk whose face showed none of the premature aging of his living self.

And last a man older than his companions by at least a decade, with scars marring his handsome face, but somehow made all the gentler for it.

“Hello, baby.” Lily said, smiling softly at the sight of her son, holding back her tears and denials of what he was about to do.
“We’re so proud of you, son.” James told him, wrapping one arm around his wife’s shoulders. “Never doubt that for a moment. You’re as much a fighter as we ever were.”

“Does it hurt?” Harry asked, blinking back his own tears, focusing on Sirius’s dark eyes rather than Remus’s gentle face. A soft smile from Remus in this moment might just break him in a way Voldemort never managed even in his wildest dreams or Harry’s worst nightmares.

“Quicker than falling asleep.” His godfather assured him.

“Tonks will take care of Teddy, Harry. I couldn’t be prouder of you if you were my own son.” Remus told him softly, lifting one of his last worries from his mind.

“Will you stay with me?” He asked, hand clenching on the stone. “Until…”

“All the way to the end, cub.” Remus smiled, the others echoing his words even as Lily hid her face in James’s shoulder.

And they did, as Harry dropped his wand in the forest – well, Malfoy’s wand – and clenched his hand tight around the stone, not letting go even as green light enveloped him and his eyes closed one last time.

…

Emerald green eyes opened, though not on a dark forest glade or a white train station, but a rolling meadow, flowers dancing in a warm summer breeze.

Looking around, Harry was surprised to find himself on his feet, wearing clothes that fit him better than anything he’d owned in his life, even if it was a simple pair of blue jeans and a white t-shirt, glasses absent from his face but able to see with unrivaled clarity nonetheless, bare feet and wiggling toes burying themselves into the soft sun-warmed grass and clover underfoot.

Rubbing one hand over his forehead, he was shocked to find the ever-present scar gone, and lowering the same hand, no sign of Umbridge’s torment marring his flesh.

Turning in a slow circle, he was creatures of all kinds surrounding him: horses, what he thought were donkeys and mules, hippogryffs, griffons, thestrals, abraxans, pegasi, even dragons in shapes familiar and strange alike.

“Where am I?” He wondered.

It certainly was like no place he’d ever seen before, even without all the species that rightfully should never graze alongside each other or nap in another’s company.

“An in-between place, little one.” A soft voice told him, Harry whirling around at its presence. He stalled only a moment before darting forward and running into an open set of arms.

“Mum.” He whispered, tears clogging his eyes once more.

“Yes, baby.” Lily Evans murmured into his messy hair. “I’m here.”

She held and rocked him as he cried, letting him drain all the poison and pain of his life out, humming under her breath all the while until he quieted at last, then passed him into another set of waiting arms.

“That’s it, son.” James told him, hugging him tight a moment before passing his precious boy over
to the waiting Remus. “It’s all behind you now.”

“James.” Remus growled a warning, even as he held Harry tight before passing him off to Padfoot, only beating his best-friend to the hugs by virtue of stomping on his foot. “Let him process a moment won’t you before bringing that up?”

Before the old friends could begin squabbling, Lily cleared her throat and arched an auburn brow, the three grown wizards ducking their heads in a picture of sheepishness.

“Now, Harry.” Lily turned back to her son even as each of them curled around him in a four-way hug, all loath to let go. “I’m sure you have questions.”

“Well, one at least.” Harry quirked a half-smile. “Am I dead?”

“Yes.” Lily sighed. “And no. That I’m afraid is up to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Voldemort killed you, that’s true.” Remus told him in his patented “professor” voice. “However, when you died you weren’t alone in your body, you had a…hitch-hiker for lack of a better term.”

“That means.” Lily told her confused looking son. “That you could return if you wished, and Voldemort’s soul-shard will be the only one to perish. Or…”

“Or…?” Harry asked, curiosity aroused by the looks exchanged by his loved ones.

“Or.” James supplied, taking the bull by the horns. Another spirit given this task likely wouldn’t have presented him with the “or.” But they loved him above all else and wanted him to make this choice – at least this once – as informed as possible.

“You can go on elsewhere.” Sirius supplied, breaking off from the Harry-pile to wave at all the creatures surrounding them.

All means of going on.

“You can choose to stay with us, baby.” Lily told him. “Choose to rest, and we know better than anyone that you’ve earned it.”

“Or you can return.” Remus added in turn. “Go back to the life you left, take back up the fight, and live out a hopefully long life in the wizarding world.”

“I wouldn’t go back to the life you left.” Padfoot interjected irreverently, taking the head-slap from Lily without hesitating.

“Or,” James gave a devil-may-care grin down at his mini-me with Lily’s eyes. “You can choose a new adventure entirely. The choice, Harry, is yours. As your mother said: this is a place in-between.”

Harry looked around at all the creatures, some paying him attention, some taking wing or wandering away. He was about to give in to going “home” despite how tired he was of the wizarding world and all the pressures and expectations, when something caught his eye. A speck in the bright azure sky at first, then it came closer and closer, blotting out the sun for a long moment before landing with a raucous shriek and scattering the rest of the creatures.

It was an eagle, but not any eagle.
Massive in size, its head alone was big enough to swallow a man whole, with endless marbled brown feathers and burning golden eyes.

James let out a whistle in appreciation.

"Damn, pup." Sirius said, smirking. "I’ve never seen that big bastard leave his nest before. Must be something about you he likes."

"Sirius." Lily slapped his arm as James and Remus snickered at her scolding. "We’re not supposed to interfere and that’s twice."

"Guess Thorondor there didn’t get the memo." Remus snorted.

"Thorondor?" Harry asked, cocking his head even as he moved to stand head to viciously curved beak with the massive eagle. It was different than the eagles he’d known in England. Even above and beyond the massive size issue – clear intelligence shone in his eyes.

"Thorondor, the King of Eagles." Lily explained with a sigh. "He’s not the only one of his kind here, but he’s the biggest and most powerful."

"Thorondor." Harry repeated once more, liking the sound of it before gathering all his courage and resting one hand on that massive beak, Thorondor leaning into the petting hand then lowering his body towards the ground in expectation. "Looks like he’s made the decision for me." He turned, giving his parents, Sirius, and Remus a bittersweet smile, the quartet rushing to shower him in last hugs and kisses.

Harry turned to climb up Thorondor’s head, planning to perch between his wings and neck to hang on to the enormous eagle, then stopped asking one last question before taking his leave. He knew, now, that he’d see them again, at the end of whatever adventure Thorondor was taking him to. But still…there was something off.

"Dad, Mum, why me?"

The others traded glances.

"We don’t know, Harry." James told him carefully. "Not for certain."

"Ok.” Harry blew out a breath, then climbed up onto Thorondor’s back and digging his hands into the soft down of his feathers, positioning himself firmly. "I’m ready when you are, Thorondor."

With another shrieking cry as Harry’s family faded away, back to their rest, Thorondor leapt into the bright blue sky, carrying Harry Potter off to his next great adventure.

…

Hadley Baggins was born on Mid-Year’s Day of the year 1307 by Shire Reckoning or Midsummer of 2907 of the Third Age to outsiders; to Bungo Baggins, Master of Bag End, and his beloved wife Belladonna Baggins neé Took.

His birth was a joyous occasion, as prior to it the odd couple of respectable Baggins son and wild Took lass had been plagued by a lack of faunts for a normally fertile race, save their sandy-haired heir Bilbo, who was seventeen years older than his new baby brother.

Fauntling Hadley was of a different coloring than his elder brother’s Baggins looks, having more of a Tookish mien with dark hair that showed rich red after being washed and eyes that changed
within weeks to a bold green that rivaled the emeralds in one of his mother’s brooches and were a deeper color than Belladonna’s own Took green gaze. Were it not for the handsome Baggins nose he bore, some might have whispered of Belladonna’s fidelity to her husband, but as it was, he was nearly Belladonna in miniature if with a cast to his face that was more handsomely androgynous than her Took prettiness. Still, it was of little matter, as he was a happy dual-natured baby they called “he” for simplicity until he was old enough to decide on matters of gender to go with his dual-natured sex for himself, one who brought smiles to all around him, doted upon by his mother and brother alike, and even able to make his sober father laugh as he gurgled and reached for Bungo’s tidily folded neckerchief.

The first six months of his life passed this way, in simple bliss with his parents and brother.

Then the dreams came, causing much confusion and upset to the young faunt, to the point of the midwife recommending switching him from the breast to goats-milk, as his upset made them fear sickness or colic had set in, it was so great.

Even the awful Sackville-Bagginses feared, though should aught befall the fauntling, they anticipated a return of a brighter hope of inheritance regarding Bag End than they’d seen in the last six months since the birth of the healthy and strong Hadley as the spare to Bilbo’s heir.

Little did they know that the issue wasn’t one of diet, but of dreaming.

More to the point, dreaming of another life, and the memories – mostly bad but some good – that came with it.

It took months for the young mind to be able to understand what was happening, but in less than a year Hadley’s family and household saw a return of a calm, happy babe if not as joyful as his first half-year of life had been.

…

First there was warmth, then pressure and sudden cold.

Those were the first things Harry knew after Thorondor dived through a shining archway that had appeared in the sky.

It was a strange, endless time, one of little understanding as if he was drifting through an endless dreamscape. When he hungered, he was fed. When he was cold, he cried and was comforted. It wasn’t until what seemed a long time passed, a time where his dreamscape grew haunted as he remembered what came before Thorondor and the vast azure sky, that he at last understood.

The great eagle had taken him on his next great adventure alright.

He simply hadn’t expected having to start over from the beginning, as a helpless baby barely able to understand his own memories let alone what was happening around him.

Harry was still himself, even if he was called “Hadley” now, or “Hadi” by his elder brother, but it was hard to think and understand what was going on with the undeveloped mind of a fauntling. To that end, he stopped fussing over it. He knew he would grow and be able to figure things out again. In the meantime, he was loved, that much he knew.

Sleepy after being fed by his mother – a living mother, which strangely didn’t feel like a betrayal to the one he’d left behind – with kind green eyes and black hair, Harry let himself nod off, safe and content in her arms.
His mother, Belladonna, sang in a soft crooning voice as she lulled him to sleep, Harry happy for the first time – outside of his visit to the in-between – in longer than he could remember.

…

By the time he was two years old, Harry’s mind had developed enough to make sense of what had happened to him and access his memories and personality beyond being a sleepy-hungry babe.

To his shock and elation that was also about the time that he’d realized he was still him, meaning that while Harry Potter had been reborn in a new world as Hadley Baggins, he still had all his memories – and some of his skills – from being Harry Potter in his new body. A fact that he discovered one fine morning when he managed to force the clover field around him to bloom in an act of accidental magic that had him squealing with joy – before rushing to reverse it before his mother or brother came to get him now that he’d woken from his nap under the great oak tree atop their smial. Harry knew it would need training up – he didn’t have a wand for one thing – but magic was still magic, and he was elated that it had stayed with him in some form if not the exact same as he’d once possessed.

As time passed, he began to notice more as his vision and senses matured, and his mind caught up with the nineteen-year-old he was in fact instead of the young fauntling he was in age.

For one thing, his parents while loving towards both him and his brother, were head-over-heels in love with each other despite some whispers that managed to carry even to his young ears by mean-spirited gossips over the match.

He also realized that he was a noble, after hearing everyone not-family call his parents “Master” or “Mistress” and his father summon the “Bounders” to come and deal with a troublesome instance of wolves in the Bindbole Woods.

And didn’t that just figure?

He escaped a life in the spotlight, as figurative royalty, only to end up in the exact same spot in another world filled with even nosier beings.

At least he was the spare and not the heir.

Bilbo could have that spot, with Harry’s much-thankful blessings.

Harry slept, and fed, and learned, picking up the two languages spoken all around him, one that was at least a bit similar to English called “Hobbitish Westron” and the Green Tongue which was much more lyrical that was spoken strictly in private amongst family and close-kin, most often by his mother and brother when they were either reading to him or singing.

It was a good life, a happy life, still he couldn’t deny even that after his first birthday celebration that he was holding his breath a bit in anxiety.

The reason?

While it took him awhile to notice eventually, he did, in fact, realize that not only had he been born into a new world and a new family but also into a new species altogether…with a new physical sex to go with it.

He noted the differences in those around him first: feet that were too large with thick curls of hair on the tops and ankles, easily seen as everyone around him went barefooted all the time.
Including himself, tiny baby feet much larger than his teeny baby hands with curls of hair in a bright red that reminded him of his first-mother’s hair.

They ate more, sitting down for many meals over the course of the day, not just him with a baby’s appetite and need of constant feeding.

His father had a rounded belly that pushed out his shirt-fronts as did the gardener while his mother’s was smaller but still soft.

Then one day a stranger came walking through the market of Hobbiton where Harry was toddling hand-in-hand with his brother: a great giant of a Man with a hood shading his features who was almost twice the height of all those around him. From the top of his hood to the bottom of his booted feet, he was a gentle sort but still of great size. That was when it clicked: it wasn’t the Man as the others called him that was so large.

It was Harry and the others who were so small.

They were hobbits.

And now that he’d seen the difference for himself he realized what that meant.

Then came potty-training and his world shook and changed once more.
Sons of a Took

Author’s Note: There is discussion here of physical androgyny and/or hermaphroditism which will be called being “dual-natured” here and throughout the fic.

Chapter Two: Growing Pains

Discovering that he had a few extra bits – and were missing a few from what he could tell – was a shock to be sure.

Belladonna had sat him down when he’d brought the matter to her in his toddler’s confusion though being older than he physically appeared Harry was more than capable of conveying what was needed and understanding what was said.

His parents and relatives all chalked up his seeming advanced intelligence to the combination of what had, at the time, appeared to be a foolhardy love-match between Belladonna and Bungo as their elder son Bilbo had likewise shown prodigious understanding from a young age for a fauntling, taking well to Bungo’s lessons in history and language and so on, though that didn’t keep him from running as wild as any Took faunt searching for elves and fairies in the nearby woods and stealing pies from windowsills with his Took and Brandybuck cousins.

After all, while Took and Baggins could and did tend to wed at least once a generation, it in the normal course of things as was considered right and proper by the good folk of the Shire was between either a rather wild Baggins or a somewhat staid Took rather than the bastion of respectability for his generation that was Bungo Baggins and the wildest of Took daughters who wandered farther afield – even so far as Rivendell with that troublemaker Gandalf! – than any other hobbit in recent memory.

For all that negative attention and rumbles of gossip that didn’t stop even after the arrival of their second faunt, it could not be denied that the match had produced a pair of fauntlings of great intelligence and unmistakable handsomeness.

Young Bilbo was set to have his pick of the lasses and dual-natured tweens when he was ready for a sweetheart while the sheer prettiness of Hadley was set to make him the diamond of his age-group.

Though at twenty-one and four years old respectively neither of them much cared about any of that.

At least, not beyond the advantages of pretty begging eyes on their parents when it came to the serious business of acquiring extra cookies between mealtimes.

Hobbits, Harry had found, aged differently than humans had – or did, he still wasn’t quite certain.

They aged slower to maturity from what he could tell once he was aware enough in his new life and form to start taking measure of things like months and years as they passed him by.

For one thing, Harry was four as of his last birthday, but he was still a toddler rather than a young faunt and just beginning potty-training.

For another, his brother had turned twenty-one but to Harry’s eyes was perhaps Hogwarts age, and
talk of his majority wasn’t at seventeen and already passed but at thirty-three.

It was strange to be sure, but not as strange as what his innocent – and understandable – examination of his private places had yielded in parts added or missing altogether that brought him — very confused — to his mother as Belladonna hummed at her loom in her sewing room an important addition their father had made to the smial to help keep his wild Took wife grounded at home rather than flying free through the woods.

A beautiful room with big windows, it was paneled in special rosewood imported for the project from Far Harad that gave it a rich red color and a sweet scent that had yet to fade even five years after being completed. Bungo, or so Harry had gathered, had started on the planned project the moment Belladonna announced she was carrying again. Thick carpets cushioned even the toughest of hobbit feet in soft greens and pinks. His mother’s glory box stood in a place of pride under the largest of the windows while shelving held yarns and fibers and fabrics for her use while special-crafted tables or stands held her loom or large embroidery frame or quilting frame (though the latter of which saw more use by Bungo than it did Belladonna, weaving suiting her more than quilting or sewing.) It kept her busier in both hands and mind than some other fiber crafts did from treating and dyeing wool all that way down to working the loom itself.

Bag End was the largest and grandest smial in Hobbiton after all, which was saying something as the town was the most populated of any of the Shire’s settlements.

The Great Smials at Tuckborough might be larger in lands, the great sprawling mass of an estate that they were, and Brandy Hall was greater in size, but neither were so comfortable and well-appointed as Bag End a fact of which Bungo who’d built the smial for his Belladonna was rightfully proud.

Hobbits, Harry had found, tended to be private creatures for all that they loved to gossip but as he and Bilbo were still young faunts they were bathed together until Bilbo turned bashful this last year.

A fact which gave him the opportunity to ask a few pertinent questions of his mother.

“Mama?” Harry asked as he toddled his way into her sewing room, a bit of a pout on his face at the sheer effort it took to walk with the rollicking and rolling gait of a fauntling who wasn’t yet steady on his feet.

“Yes, pumpkin?” Belladonna turned from her tapestry weaving to smile down at her little gift, one she’d never expected after it had taken so long to have Bilbo then all the years without more children that followed after him. He had the sweetest little pout on his chubby fauntling features but she still managed to spy the sharper bones that spoke of Took heritage. Oh, she was so proud of her faunts. Bungo might grumble over Bilbo running wild and coming home for tea with leaves and twigs all tangled up in his hair and Hadley’s stubborn independence for such a cuddle-monster but they were Tooks and she couldn’t be happier.

Besides which – a great deal of the stubbornness that had her husband frowning came from his side of the family not hers.

Tooks were wild, yes, not utterly intractable as the Bagginses with their respectability and propriety that might as well be etched in stone for all the compromise they had in their natures.

Which was to say almost none at all.

“Why don’t I look like Bo?” Her sweet fauntling managed in their Hobbitish Westron that didn’t
tangle up his tongue as much as their mother’s Green Tongue.

“Because you’re Hadley my sweet one, not Bilbo.” Belladonna reached down as she turned on her soft padded stool and snatched him up with gentle hands, sitting him on her lap and brushing one thumb over a smudge he’d gotten – somehow – on one downy cheek. “And you’re the most perfect Hadley that anyone could be.”

Her little one’s pout deepened even as he giggled when she bussed a noisy kiss on his chubby cheek.


“Then what do you mean my gentle faunt?”

And he was – gentle that is.

Of all the young fauntlings none were so careful – and caring – with the livestock or the puppies Farmer Maggot brought to find families for than her Hadley, not even her older sweet Bilbo.

Bungo – Baggins that he was – didn’t approve of indoor pets and being a gentleman of means didn’t see the need to keep his own livestock.

Belladonna was still working on a way around that for while Bilbo had never seemed to mind one way or another, Hadley most certainly would enjoy a kitten or puppy or even a wee bunny to keep him company when his brother was off with his cousins or learning at his father’s knee.

“Down here.” Harry waved one hand towards his own lap. “Bo isn’t like Harry down here.”

“Ah…” Belladonna nodded, blinking. Well, he was a bit young to learn about such things but then he was quite intelligent for his age. A simple explanation wouldn’t go awry and then when he was older, more Bilbo’s age, they could explain the rest of it to him.

As for her Hadley calling himself Harry, well. It wasn’t odd for a faunt to stumble over certain letters when they were young. Bilbo had been the opposite, still calling Hadley “Hadi” because the “l” tripped him up when he was absent a tooth at his brother’s birth. Nicknames were normal in the Shire. If her little one called himself Harry then that was his choice much like what gender he preferred or none at all when he grew old enough to understand and make such choices. In the meantime all she and Bungo could do was allow him to grow as he wished being dual-natured and prepare for paying either a dowry or bride-price in addition to a possible dower depending on what choices he made in love when he came of age for such things.

“You’re different than Bilbo, my pumpkin.” Belladonna told him honestly. “Bilbo is male, like Papa. You’re different than them.”

“Bilbo and Papa boys.” Harry told her, eyes narrowing with a little one’s suspicion. “Harry boy.”

“Yes, you can be a boy if you want to darling.” Belladonna agreed. “Or you can be a girl like Mama, or neither.”

Harry wasn’t quite sure if his mother was discussing general gender issues or something more to do with his physical sex – though at least he’d gotten confirmation that he wasn’t, strictly speaking, male.

Though what his strange private areas meant had yet to be broached.
He patted her bosom then his flat chest in wordless question, trying to figure out a way to get the actual information he wanted instead of loving – and very well-meaning – platitudes.

“You’re dual-natured, Hadley.” She tried again, frowning a bit as she tried to answer his questions without giving either too much information that would just confuse him at this point or not enough that would to the same or worse leave him with wrongful ideas. “That’s why you’re a Hadley and not a Hugo or a Heather. You have some boy parts and some girl parts because you’re both and neither.”

Harry blinked, working his way through that for his mother’s peace of mind rather than the mature quickness of his actual age.

Well…that answered that.

He was a hermaphrodite as his old world would’ve called it.

And it seemed that his new world dealt with it a lot better than his old one did as the little bit about gender she’d told him clicked into place along with his physical differences.

If he was understanding everything right, then he was able to choose whether he was considered male or female or both or neither by those around him. He wasn’t certain if that was a freedom all fauntlings were given, Bilbo had been old enough when he was born that he assumed any choosing had already been done by his brother, or if it was a freedom only allowed for dual-natured fauntlings. Which by even having nomenclature for it told him that it wasn’t an anomaly for hobbits.

It was something for him to think about, that was for sure as he wiggled down from his mother’s lap, Belladonna giving him one last kiss as she watched him toddle off to return to his father’s study where his absence from studies with his father and brother had been noted but not worried over.

That wasn’t much in a smial with young faunts that could harm a wee one after all, and most of them are kept in the kitchen which had a handle far too high for a faunt to manage to open on their own.

…

Think on it he did over the next year and some months as he watched everything that went on around him with more care, investigating and drawing conclusions – as best he could in the form of a young fauntling barely more than a toddler – from all that he saw.

Unlike a lot of things that went on in his old world, Harry didn’t see many set-in-stone gender roles at Bag End.

Maybe it was a result of his parents being somewhat out of the norm but he wouldn’t know for certain until he was older.

For now it was all he really knew of hobbity life, visits to the market or the Party Tree, or his mother’s family at the Great Smials aside.

Belladonna baked but Bungo did all of the cooking, Bilbo and little Harry helping as much as possible or appropriate, leaning both skills as well as how to clean up after themselves. Their clothes were made by the village tailor but Bungo or Belladonna alike would make minor repairs or sew a button back on. Bungo managed the smial’s gardens but had help from a gardener for much of the heavy work along with Bilbo, Harry allowed to toddle along the neat rows and sow
the larger seeds for squash or sunflowers.

Their firewood was purchased but Belladonna was more likely to pick up a splitting axe to make kindling than Bungo.

Bungo was the Arbiter for Hobbiton but when it came to Bag End it was no secret that Belladonna ruled the roost.

A male hobbit manned the lone Hobbiton smithy but likewise was the tailor while a female hobbit ran a brisk laundry service but also the local inn and pub, the ladies of Hobbiton not restricted to only being mothers and housewives like in feudal England – or careers of lesser repute.

In fact, the only position from what he could see that wasn’t open – though by preference or design he wasn’t certain – to female hobbits or dual-natured hobbits of feminine inclination was that of a Bounder who were responsible for “beating the boundaries” of the Shire providing simple protection via archery or a dab hand with a slingshot to the good hobbits of the population as well as occasionally assisting with law enforcement (which in the Shire was rarely anymore dire than an old gaffer who enjoyed a pint or two too many at the local tavern.)

Harry likely could’ve passed more than a single year and some months in contemplation of this area had not a new problem presented itself the winter after his fifth birthday.

…

It began with an early hard frost that wiped out the late-harvesting fields throughout the Shire.

Farmers and landholders alike grumbled about the losses but trade caravans were still able to journey through the Shire and hobbit households who could manage it made up the lack through purchasing extra grains and dried fruit. With the loss of the late harvest also pushed farmers into slaughtering what livestock they could spare to prevent them from having to overwinter more animals than they could support thanks to the lost feed grains, which helped make up for the lost produce as well, pantries and cellars filled with more salted and smoked meats rather than heaps of cabbages or potatoes for the first winter in many years. They were hobbits, Harry heard his father mutter under his breath more than once, they would endure.

His mother on the other hand watched the skies and spoke with the Gamgees and Farmer Maggot with a drawn face and worry pinching her brows at every one of Bilbo’s tales of caterpillars being abnormally furry and squirrels so busy stockpiling nuts that they didn’t run when they saw him bend to pick up a rock to scare crows away from the few remaining fields that had weathered the early frost.

The Fell Winter had come but they didn’t know it.

Not yet.

Belladonna knew more about the world and how to read weather from her travels than most gentlehobbits, not unlike those who had similar knowledge from working the earth for a living rather than for pleasure or inclination.

She knew something was awry and set about doing what she could to prepare for it, whatever it might be with two young fauntlings.

Or, perhaps, especially with a pair of fauntlings as while Bilbo was a strong tween, Hadley was young, too young to weather a hard winter or any kind of disaster with the same relative ease as those of tween and young adult years like his brother and older cousins and friends.
The eldest daughter of the Old Took purchased extra firewood as one thing all of the portents agreed upon was that it was set to be a cold winter, filling the entire backroom as well as stacking up against the walls of both the east and west hall. She filled the wine cellar with provisions of a less-libatious aspect, the cold cellar beside it overflowing and the pantry as stuffed-full of preserves and dry provisions that keep well as it had ever been. Bungo watched it all and scratched his head but didn’t object. The stocking of Bag End was his wife’s business after all and like any husband with a lick of sense he kept out of it.

Two months into the winter when the Brandywine froze solid and the horns of Buckland sounded, the hobbits of Hobbiton having been shut into their smials and forced to make-do as best as they could manage he was glad of it.

The household of Bag End did what they could for their less-fortunate or simply less-prepared neighbors…those that would accept their help anyway.

It made good hobbit-sense, even if the staunchest of sticklers refused to believe that the winter could last as long as some warnings shouted, for the Gamgees with their little ones and been hurt by the hard frost to move into the big-folk guest room at Bag End even if they were stacked a bit cheek-to-jowl despite having the youngest Gamgee children join Hadley in the nursery and the oldest share space in Bilbo’s room.

When the horns of Buckland sounded the Gamgees and Bagginses were joined by the rest of Bag Shot row save for the Sackville-Bagginses who were just the sort of staunch sticklers that refused.

Each addition added to the packed-full feeling of Bag End and joined their own provisions and what fuel for fires they had left – if any – to the dwindling supply at Bag End.

If nothing else having so many bodies helped keep the temperatures from dropping too far into frigid what with the Cotton family encamped in the parlor, the Goodchilds in the sewing room, and the Rumbles in Bungo’s study with the children of each parceled out into either Bilbo or Hadley’s rooms until they couldn’t fit anymore in either place and the rest had to stay with their parents or grandparents as the case may be.

Soups and stews or simple porridges were the meals on hand but with the first growls and howls of wolves after the sounding of the horns and Belladonna insisting on boarding up the windows and bolting the doors the lack of fresh air soon took as great a toll on the health and morale of the denizens of Bag End as the rationing and deep cold that not even a mass of bodies and fires in the main room could beat back.

Still, Belladonna’s word was law and not even the most adventurous or contentious of the hobbits dared try and slip from Bag End in search of fresh air or firewood until the blizzards stopped and Gandalf leading a contingent of Rangers pushed through the Shire to Bag End’s front door.

…

What Harry remembered most of the Fell Winter wasn’t surviving it – it wasn’t easy living with so many hobbits or having his stomach pinch with hunger or watching the fear on the faces of older hobbits but they survived it regardless – it was the aftermath.

He was – supposedly – too young to understand but he paid attention when his parents spoke of the dozens of hobbits that died, mostly the oldest and the youngest, to hunger, sickness, or violence.

Wolves weren’t the worst of it as they later learned.
Orcs and wargs had followed in time, the borders of the Shire not protected by either random patrols of Rangers who were as snowed in as the rest of Eriador or the Brandywine, rampaging mostly through Buckland and the North Farthings.

Worst, from Harry’s perspective, was the fear that had rooted deep inside his brother.

Bilbo was never the same after the Fell Winter, spending most of his time in studies with his father or turning respectable as if he’d never spent the majority of his time hunting elves and fae in the forests.

He was still friendly, still cheerful and kind…but he wasn’t as joyful as he’d once been either, and that change Harry mourned as much as the dozens of hobbits lost.

Meeting Gandalf though, now that had been interesting even if the old wizard did little more than tickle his chin with the end of his beard and set off some fireworks once the wolves and orcs and wargs had been routed and the grey wanderer came to give relief to his closest hobbit-friends at Bag End and the Great Smials alike.

It told him that magic and wizards did exist in his new home…they just had almost nothing to do with those same concepts as that of his old world.

A shame, that, but Harry still had his little tricks of magic at his disposal that he got better with all the time, helping gardens sprout and bloom and grow or gentling wild creatures in the forests.

It wasn’t the magic of his first life but it had its place in his new one and was likely more useful to him as he was now than any wandwaving would have been.

At the very least, his gifts with growing things wasn’t as likely to draw attention as wand-magic.

And that was nothing but a good thing as far as Harry was concerned.
Chapter 3

Sons of a Took

Chapter Three: Griefs Old and New

Harry wasn’t the only one effected by the events of the Fell Winter, as aftershocks of the lives lost and the deprivations echoed through the Shire for many years to come even if it wasn’t spoken of in polite company.

If Bungo Baggins rolled out plans to add an addition to his cold cellar and a second pantry off of his back room well that was his business wasn’t it?

And if more than one parent, uncle, aunt, or grandparent found themselves weakened in health by the months of giving fauntlings extra rations to help them stay healthy even if it meant their own food was lessened in turn well that was just the natural course of things.

No parent would watch again as their faunts went hungry in the Shire.

Not if they could help it.

No matter the consequences days, weeks, or even years down the line.

…

Hadley Baggins, it was agreed by all of the good folk of Hobbiton, was every inch the wild Took his mother had been before marrying and his brother had been in his youth.

Running off into the forests in search of elves and fae wasn’t enough for the younger faunt of Belladonna and Bungo, no, he brought back wounded birds for healing by his mama and ever seemed to have a butterfly or some other creature making a nest in the curls on his head. He was a gentle soul, all agreed, but wild nonetheless. Bungo was often heard to despair over a pint at the Green Dragon with friends. No sooner had Bilbo settled down into the future mastership of Bag End and started seriously studying for arbitership and being a landholder than Hadley turned twice as adventurous.

Hadley, it seemed if Bungo was to be believed, could hardly sit still for important lessons at his long-suffering father’s knee in sums or accounts though, Bungo would allow, he drank up stories of hobbit history and languages if not the prodigy as his elder brother had proven in the latter.

His younger faunt wasn’t content with the education of a gentlehobbit.

The dual-natured hobbit wanted to run and see and do.

Though it had to be said that other than common-knowledge and hair that was worn in long curls of rich red, or the fine features that didn’t know whether to be pretty or handsome, he didn’t present much along the way of dual-natured hobbits. He was a he, if one asked, thank you very much. Or at least as a young faunt that was his decision though it could change as he aged.

He might be making a nuisance of himself at the smithy or the carpenter’s shop or running wild in the fields but he was still only a faunt, barely of age to begin the apprenticeship his father had arranged with the smith and carpenter alike as Hadley couldn’t make a decision between them, and that it seemed was that.
Hadley wanted to learn but he wanted to learn what he wanted, as stubborn a Baggins as there had ever been with the wild will of his Took nature to get his way when he really wanted.

It wasn’t normally done for a younger faunt, particularly a dual-natured one, of such a respectable and wealthy family as the Baggins family to seek an apprenticeship let alone more than one but Hadley was Hadley and as Belladonna was quick to tell any who frowned at his antics that was a fine thing to be.

Then in the spring before Hadley’s nineteenth year, two years after his brother had come of age and started taking a stronger lead in the affairs of being Master of Bag End – though no new Mrs. Or Mr. Baggins was in the offing for all that there was plenty of interest in the well-to-do bachelor Bilbo – grief struck Bag End anew for the first time since the Fell Winter as Bungo came down with a deep rattling cough in the early spring that refused to leave and was dead long before Mid-Year, leaving a grief-stricken wife and two faunts to mourn him.

The death of Bungo Baggins at eighty years of age shook the happy household – for all that it had its disagreements and contentions – of Bag End.

However, a few hobbits, if mostly of Took ancestry, noted in later years that it might have been a hidden blessing.

Or, at least insofar as the eventual happiness of his faunts was concerned anyway.

As Bilbo was young for a grown hobbit, only two years beyond his majority, there was some discussion among the Thain and the Master of Buckland who were his new authority figure and contemporary in turn, regarding whether he was truly ready for the position of Arbiter for Hobbiton as while Bungo had trained his heir for the position much like he had to be Master of Bag End being trained for something and actually carrying through with it when the time came were two very different things.

Also of concern was the deep melancholy that Belladonna fell into after the death of her beloved husband, chatter among her siblings including her brother the Thain of the Shire putting her outliving Bungo down mostly to the reality of one son barely of age and having a faunt at home who was still in need of mothering.

That of them all young Hadley was dealing with the death of his father the best was neither here nor there.

It was a thorny situation and one that needed careful handling thanks to Bungo’s nephew and sister-in-law making an awful fuss over whether Bilbo was capable – let alone deserving – over the position of Head of the Baggins Family and Arbiter for Hobbiton.

In the end it was settled in the politest of ways: Belladonna’s brother Hildigrim came to visit at Bag End for some weeks, bringing his son Adalgrim along who had been born the same year as Bilbo and the closest and favorite of Bilbo’s many cousins, followed in turn by a visit by Rorimac Brandybuck who was between Bilbo and Hadley in age who was accompanied by his dual-natured sibling Amaranth, who was younger in turn than Hadley.

Between the support of her brother and nephews and niece – and likewise the support provided to Bilbo under the guise of his uncle and cousins supporting his mother and brother – the naysayers were silenced, though even then Hadley and Bilbo could tell that nothing was likely to silence their awful Aunt Sackville-Baggins forever no matter how genial their cousin Otho could be outside of
her iron-fisted control.

It was also the first time that Harry was exposed to another dual-natured hobbit in close quarters for any real length of time outside of visiting for a night or two at the Great Smials or Brandy Hall.

A time that in later years he would be able to look back on and note that it informed more of his expressions of his gender than he’d realized at the time and showed him just how constrained he’d been both by his original world as well as the weight of his second-father’s expectations of what was appropriate for a faunt of the Baggins Family.

His father was well-meaning, that none of his wife nor offspring could deny.

But he was also entrenched in his opinions and unrelenting with it.

Amaranth’s company, as well as that of Adalgrim and Rorimac, did more to help pull Hadley and Bilbo out of their grieving than anything else.

As for Belladonna…well.

There was only so much one could do to recover from the loss of a true love. She carried on. She endured for the sake of her faunts. But until the day she died in turn she was never whole again until she returned to the Green Mother’s embrace and was reunited with her beloved Bungo.

…

15th Day of Forelithe, 1326 by Shire Reckoning

Just over two weeks until his nineteenth birthday found Harry returning from his apprentice duties at the smithy to his home at Bag End with dust clinging to him and sweat in places that until he’d taken up his apprenticeship he’d forgotten he could sweat for all that it felt good to work hard once more.

Activity and productiveness were habits that had been so long engrained in him by his first life that he doubted he would ever be able to shed him no matter how many lives he lived or how long they lasted.

It was a common complaint of his second-father before his death that Hadley Baggins could rarely sit still for many hours at a time in direct contrast with the more patient persona of his elder brother.

Bilbo liked to while away hours sitting in an armchair and reading books or pouring over maps.

Harry could spend hours like that if needed for study or on occasion for pleasure reading but he couldn’t do it day after day after day when there were woods to explore, gardens to tend, and pies to steal from neglected windowsills.

Once Hadley Baggins had been given leave to roam the roads and paths of Hobbiton the good hobbits had learned to never leave a treacle tart unattended lest it disappear.

His brother and mother might puzzle over his seeming ease with grief but they failed to understand that to Harry grief was his oldest friend. He’d learned to mourn long before he’d learned much else. Loss was more familiar to Harry than his own name and while he’d enjoyed a childhood spent with both parents alive and well it couldn’t overwrite the years he’d spent without any parents at all.
He regretted the loss of his second-father, he mourned for him, but he never stopped living his life.

If there was anything he’d learned in the combined thirty-six years or so of his life it was that grief and mourning were constants. They would always be there and they would always return. Life was far too short to give them more than their due when they came around again.

Heading for his bedroom in search of clean clothes to change into after a bath, Harry came to an abrupt stop at the sight of Amaranth standing before the open doors of his wardrobe and frowning in innocent confusion.

They were one of the dual-natured hobbits that decided whether they wanted to be feminine or masculine or neither on a day-to-day basis, being seen as often in skirts and corsets as trousers and waistcoats – or a mixture of the two – as pleased them.

Today was a feminine day from the ribbons adorning rich brown curls tumbling over curved shoulders to the bright yellow blouse, green fichu, and prettily floral-patterned skirts with a pure white apron over it all.

“Where’s your dresses?” Amaranth demanded, stomping one dainty – for a hobbit anyway – foot. “And your skirts and ribbons? Where’s your pretty things?” She wrinkled her sweetly-snubbed nose. “These are all boring boy things. You’re like me, you should have more than that.”

“Ah…” Harry blinked at the sudden storm of questions and assumptions. “Hello, Amaranth.” He tried to stall as he searched for an answer. “How’re you today?”

“Fine.” She heaved a great sigh. “Bored though. Rory and Bilbo are doing boring Arbiter business. I was hoping to borrow a ribbon for my outfit but you don’t have any. Why don’t you have any?”

“Um…have you asked my mum?”

Amaranth rolled her eyes. As if she hadn’t thought of that already. But Aunt Belladonna, for all that she was considered quite the beauty in her day, wasn’t now nor had she ever been a lass inclined towards what Amaranth’s father and brothers called “feminine fripperies” like her sister and nieces.

She wore her black curls either down or pulled back in a simple braid tied with a soft piece of plain leather.

Hardly the place to go searching for pretty ribbons hence her hopeful – but in the end dismal – search of Hadley’s things.

“Hadi.” Amaranth’s voice was long-suffering. “Auntie Bella doesn’t wear ribbons.”

“Then why would you think I would?”

“Because you have such pretty hair!” Amaranth perked up, beaming even as she wrinkled her nose at the state of her cousin. “Not that you can tell under all that coal dust and sweat.”

And it was true, Harry was very much Belladonna’s son when it came to hobbity things, even down to his preference for a simple braid and leather tie to tame – or try to anyway – his tumble of rich red curls that as he’d aged had darkened from the bright red of his first-mother to a deeper cherry tone that was the subject of much admiration and envy among the good hobbits of the Shire who saw it.
“Speaking of which,” Harry sidled over to the wardrobe and grabbed out a simple set of trousers and shirt before darting over to his clothes chest and fishing for clean underthings. “I need a wash before tea so…”

“Oh no you don’t.” Amaranth darted in front of the open door now blocking Hadley inside their bedroom unless they wanted to push her out of the way – which being half-Baggins like Amaranth was half-Took and half-Brandybuck she was counting on them being too polite to do. “Not until you answer my questions! Why do you only have boy things? Aren’t you dual-natured too?” Her brow crinkled, her confusion genuine. “I thought you were otherwise you’d have an o-ending name instead of Hadley since you’re a Baggins.”

There were few flower names that could be used for dual-natured faunts after all and no hobbit mother worth their foot hair would name their faunt Briar or Hyacinthus.

*That* would just be asking for trouble.

“I don’t know, Amaranth.” Harry sighed, rubbing one hand over his forehead. “I guess it wasn’t a very Baggins thing to do. You know they don’t *hold* with dual-natured faunts for the most part since they don’t ever *have* any unless they marry a Took…”

“Oh…” Amaranth’s eyes were the size of dinnerplates then she blinked and her face took on an expression Harry had seen more than once on his mother’s face – or Bilbo’s – that of a Took who’d made a decision. And Yavanna help anyone who got in their way of carrying it out. “Go wash.” She moved out of the way. “Tomorrow you’re going with me to the market.”

“Amaranth…”

“No.” She shook her head, not taking no for an answer. Tomorrow was Highday and the best stalls would be open in the market and all the shops would be bustling. More since it was the last day of the week Hadley didn’t have to be at one of his apprenticeships making it *perfect* for her ends. “You’re going and that’s that.”

…”

“Hadi,” Amaranth tried again after she’d wrangled her cousin out the round green door of Bag End, their hand firmly in her own lest they run off – she was having another feminine day complete with a frilly parasol in a delicate lilac that matched the embroidery on her aubergine Highday frock. “Why don’t you have pretty things? You can you know. No one would make fun since you’re like me like they might if you were just a boy like our brothers.”

It was a concept he was struggling with, he could admit it to himself if not to his cousin for lack of an explanation that would make sense to someone not *aware* of his unique circumstances.

Could he have pretty things?

And if he *could* did he want them?

Hedwig had been the only pretty thing he’d been allowed in his first life and even she’d been taken away from him in the end.

It had taken him *years* in his new life to be able to believe he could have *good* things without them disappearing before he’d believed it let alone worries about things such as *pretty*. He’d just gone along he supposed. His parents had never offered him skirts or frocks or ribbons and he’d never thought to ask, instead being satisfied with Bilbo’s hand-me-downs for everyday and miniature hobbit trousers and waistcoats for party wear and Highday clothes.
Bungo had never been one to spend a copper coin when there were serviceable options for free gathering dust in storage.

But as that same frugality led to the comfort of Bag End and Belladonna’s ability to by extra provisions to see not only their family but the families of their people through a hard winter, it was a beloved trait of the late hobbit rather than one that was looked at askance by the gossipmongers of Hobbiton.

It was with no-little amount of trepidation that Harry followed his younger cousin into the dressmaker’s shop that was between the tailor he normally visited with either his late second-father or his brother and the milliner that peddled ribbons, hats, and other pretty things to the well-to-do ladies of Hobbiton.

Mrs. Lighthand, who had inherited the dressmaker’s shop from her own mother and would likely pass it down to her own daughter in time, bustled over to the pair, flipping the sign to “Closed” after greeting Amaranth. The sweet – if headstrong like any Took – Brandybuck had sent down a note the evening before explaining the situation. Mrs. Lighthand had to admit, she’d long thought that it was a shame Hadley Baggins eschewed feminine forms of attire as they’d be quite the prettiest hobbit faunt in the Shire if they were to don a corset and skirts rather than running wild in trousers and waistcoat.

Not that Hadley wasn’t a fetching young lad in their trousers and waistcoats.

No, given the sighing of even Mrs. Lighthand’s eldest daughter Violet who was more of an age – if not a bit older though her mother would never out a lady's age, even that of her own faunt – with Bilbo than Hadley over the young form of Hadley who’d yet to reach their full growth though was growing into quite the standard of hobbity handsomeness she would never say they were lacking in looks no matter which – or neither or somewhere in-between – gender they chose to dress as.

Still and all, Mrs. Lighthand’s fingers had itched to drape lace and ribbons and prettily-tucked and embroidered silks on that young frame and do more with that mass of glorious curls than bind it back into a braid or let it fall around Hadley’s young shoulders.

Mrs. Lighthand wasn’t one to speak ill of her neighbors for all that she loved a good gossip, but it was no secret to any hobbit in the Shire or beyond that of all the mothers a beauty like Hadley Baggins could have had Belladonna Took was perhaps the least likely to teach her dual-natured faunt the joys of dressing up in skirts and ribbons or having a bit of a flirt with the Shire lads.

Indeed, if it weren’t for Bungo setting his heart and cap on the younger Belladonna, it was common thought that she would’ve eventually left on an adventure to Rivendell or some other far-away place not to return either by desire or tragedy.

He’d managed to ground Belladonna’s flighty feet, to be sure, though in their faunts the will-o’-the-whisp nature had taken deep hold.

Amaranth was right for all that they were a young one: for this first attempt at teaching Hadley something of feminine wiles it was best done without an audience or gawkers and it was towards that end she’d shooed any shoppers from her shop and made no other appointments for the day awaiting them.

“Now darlings.” She clapped her hands, holding them in front of her as she studied Hadley with an eye towards custom rather than simple appreciation. “Where shall we begin?”
Chapter 4

Sons of a Took

Author’s Note: I didn’t mean to dive into this, the sub-plot of Harry finding a balance between the expectations of his old world and his former physical sex and those of his new world and new physical sex kinda side-tracked my brain into an exploration of gender and expression. One of the things I love about writing Harry Potter fanfic is being able to give him options and choices that he didn’t get to experience in canon due to abuse, neglect, manipulation, and so on. This I think is another example of that, letting someone who grew up in a very rigid, structured and conformist society regarding gender and sexuality have a chance to explore other options and have experiences that wouldn’t have been allowed or understood in either 90’s England with the Dursleys or likely the Wizarding World.

I didn’t tag this fic for crossdressing because in my opinion this doesn’t really count given how I’ve set up gender and physical sex with hobbits but if you disagree or don’t want to read about a character that is widely considered to be predominantly masculine and having a bit of a crisis and awakening regarding being genderfluid then you’re probably going to want to skip this chapter in particular.

Be aware, however, that this interpretation of HP is going to dress and behave in ways that are not strictly “masculine” throughout the fic.

Also, I made an error in not being clear about the age of Amaranth Brandybuck – they’re younger than Hadley by a year or two so the mental equivalent of a 9 or 10 year old human child.

Chapter Four: Both and Neither

“Now darlings.” She clapped her hands, holding them in front of her as she studied Hadley with an eye towards custom rather than simple appreciation. “Where shall we begin?”

…

Harry stared at the shelves filled with bolts of fabrics in every color of the rainbow and busts draped with fabric or lace as well as the mannequins dressed with completed examples of Mrs. Lighthand’s wares and never felt so out of place in either of his lives – except, perhaps, at Sir Nicholas’s death-day party.

“I, um…” He stuttered a bit even as Amaranth grabbed his hand and tugged him through a curtain into the fitting area of the shop, ready and able to continue taking the lead.

“Down to your skin, Hadi.” She ordered them, pushing him behind a screen in the fitting area with its polished silver looking glass and raised podium for taking measurements and doing fittings that he was familiar with from both the Hobbiton tailor and Madam Malkin’s in this first life. “There should be a robe for you to wear and I’ll bring you a chemise and bloomers instead of those simple undershorts I know you’re wearing.”

Left adrift in the wake of Hurricane Amaranth, Harry blinked and wobbled a bit on his feet as he found himself tucked away in the corner of the fitting area behind a privacy screen looking at a simple cotton robe draped on a peg and naught else.

Knowing a losing proposition when he was staring it down and feeling a strange sense of
paradoxically anxious and excited, he blew out a breath and followed his marching orders as he heard whispers coming from the co-conspirators in the shop…if he was reading the situation right and he’d bet his last copper coin he was.

Amaranth, it seemed, had enlisted the good Mrs. Lighthand in her campaign to teach Harry the joys of all things pretty.

The subject of her machinations or not, Harry couldn’t fault her tactics.

Pretty brown eyes peeked around the edge of the privacy screen followed by Amaranth with an armful of simple white batiste which she handed over, watching anxiously as he held up the sleeveless summer-weight chemise that would fall – if Amaranth and Mrs. Lighthand had a good eye – just below his hips and the similarly simple drawers that would tie with pretty silk ribbons above the knee.

Hobbit fashions, after all, whether male or female or somewhere in-between only came down to the lower calf above the ankle.

Well, unless they were river-folk from Dunland or the Angle and wore boots, but such a thing wasn’t common in the Shire.

Harry nodded, taking a deep breath and Amaranth ducked back around the privacy screen, his hands making quick work of slipping into the drawers – little more than long shorts really – and doing up the ties before slipping into the chemise both of which were a finer weave than was common for male hobbity fashions and softer on his skin: an indulgence he’d done without as the fine weaves and knits made possible by machined fabrics tended to be horribly expensive in Hobbiton and imported from either the far East beyond Rhovanion or the far south beyond Harad.

The chemise was modest – as was appropriate for a young faunt not yet of age – and if he had a bosom to speak of, which he didn’t though it wasn’t unheard of for a dual-natured hobbit to possess one they mostly appeared flat-chested unless or until they gave birth, said bosom would have been covered by the dainty lace-edge of the neckline that rested several inches below Harry’s collar bone.

Another deep breath then he stepped out from around the privacy screen and up onto the fitting dais, shoulders back and no sign of the inner-quaking that was going on at the simple motions of putting on underthings with a simple prettiness and softness that spoke to the feminine.

Mrs. Lighthand smiled and Amaranth did a little bounce then the dressmaker was removing her measuring tape from around her neck and dictating measurements from Harry’s frame to his cousin who scribbled away on a slate with a piece of chalk. Credit where it was due: Mrs. Lighthand was faster about her business than the tailor next door, almost as fast as Madam Malkin’s enchanted measuring tape. And that was with the dressmaker needing to take a plethora of measurements he’d never had done before.

Words like **bust, underbust, overbust** almost had him breaking out in hives and running for the door.

Still, Mrs. Lighthand was no fool and had a canny eye trained by years at her trade.

She knew an anxious customer when she saw one even when nerves weren’t already anticipated as Hadley’s were, quickly moving to settle them down with a soft pat to one lovely curved shoulder bared by the simple chemise – and her eyes hadn’t lied to her, the undergarments while the simplest she carried or made for her custom were only a tad loose.
A good thing for growing faunts anyway as they would get more wear out of them that way.

Measurements in mind, Mrs. Lighthand bustled over to a cabinet filled with muslin blanks of stays which would help support young Hadley’s back and abdomen, made as they were with reed supports instead of bone or metal as she’d heard-tell some peoples preferred. She held in a sniff. If female dwarves wanted to torture themselves so who was she to judge so long as they weren’t forcing such things on their young ones?

At the sight of the stays Harry felt his eyes pop wide but still held out his arms and allowed Amaranth and Mrs. Lighthand to lace him into the simple cream-colored corset. He frowned. It wasn’t uncomfortable at all. If anything he felt his shoulders and back straighten up and his posture improve in an instant as the garment molded to his body.

“What’s that made of?” He couldn’t help but ask after all the complaints he’d heard over the years – in person and on the telly – regarding female undergarments and some of the torture contraptions he’d learned about in history classes. The piece stopped at his hips, wrapping around his back and resting just above his hips on the sides before tapering to a point in the front.

“It’s a muslin blank with reed boning.” Mrs. Lighthand told him as she tucked the lacing tails under the stays to hide them. “Lightweight and breathable for summertime fittings. Stays I sell are made of batiste with reed and faced with another fabric for decoration.” She chucked Hadley’s chin. “Just because a garment is functional doesn’t mean it can’t be pleasing to the eye – yours most of all.”

Harry frowned – as much at the chin-chuck as the statement – one hand resting over his stay-covered belly.

He supposed she had a point…

And at least she wasn’t clucking on about prettying himself up for a suitor or husband the way his aunt’s trashy magazines in England were always doing to sell lingerie or makeup or whatever.

“Arms up.” Amaranth prompted him as Mrs. Lighthand came back over from another part of the shop with a skirt – or was it a petticoat, Harry didn’t know – made of the same white batiste as his under things but with a deep six-inch hem of lace that looked like it had a base of white but embroidery picking out flowers in soft pinks, purples, and yellows with deep contrasting green leaves.

Arms up on command, Harry felt the soft lace and batiste brush over his skin as the fabric coasted down his young frame under the skilled direction of Mrs. Lighthand who buttoned it with a pair of tiny mother-of-pearl buttons.

As she stepped back he couldn’t help it – he swished, grinning just a little at the movement of the skirt around his calves.

Amaranth clapped her hands and giggled as her cousin gave in to the age-old impulse of wearing a skirt and enjoying it swish around you.

Hadley wasn’t wearing a crinoline so they wouldn’t get the true ringing-bell effect that some skirts had but both Amaranth and Mrs. Lighthand agreed that any outfit with complicated underpinnings or too many layers would likely scare Hadley after not wearing any like it for so many years.

Honestly, just getting her cousin into stays was a step she hadn’t been certain they’d manage.

Perhaps her cousin had been more curious or interested in pretty things than it had seemed the day
Brushing his hands down the skirt, he looked up at the indulgent expression on Mrs. Lighthand’s face who was ready and waiting with more fabric in hand, questioning.

“That is a summer-weight petticoat with a silk-embroidered lace hem.” She supplied, already making a note that Hadley needed explanations for every piece not just stays. Internally she groused at Mistress Baggins. What was she thinking allowing her faunt to be so uneducated even if Hadley had never shown interest in such things – or more likely knew the late Master Baggins, not to speak ill of the dead, wouldn’t approve? “Arms up again.” She guided the circle skirt in a rich brown, a color Hadley had long been noted to prefer in their clothing, made of a shimmering brocade with a light pink contrasting pattern of scant scattered flowers across the fabric then helped Hadley into a matching bodice with a thin line of mother-of-pearl buttons marching down the smooth front and echoing the fastening in the back.

“A circle skirt will stay out of your way, you can even run in it if you need to.” Amaranth took up explanations as she helped tweak the skirt and bodice into place. “The fabric is silk brocade.” She beamed up at her cousin. “A simple – if very pretty – Highday outfit of your own.”

“Needs a few adjustments.” Mrs. Lighthand pursed her lips. Hadley was slimmer in the waist even without the stays than her eye had led her to believe. “But yes, yes I think it might do with a pin here and there.”

That said she set to work, pinching fabric here and there along the skirt and bodice.

A petticoat and underthings could be a bit loose so long as they stayed where needed but not the outer garments.

Her reputation would be in tatters if she allowed a customer to step out of her shop in anything less than a perfectly fitted ensemble.

His fingers brushed over the soft fabrics and pretty – if simple – designs with a fluttering in his stomach.

Mrs. Lighthand and Amaranth had been fastidious about keeping him facing away from the mirror as they draped and dressed him – and if he weren’t certain of collusion just a look at the close fit and his favored color of the brocade would have him suspicious.

As the dressmaker worked, Amaranth’s hands were also busy with ribbons and fussing with her cousin’s fall of hair and a few hair pins with mother-of-pearl heads that gleamed in the light from the windows.

“A summer bodice without sleeves – though if it still suits come colder weather they can be added,” Mrs. Lighthand assured him. “And as your cousin said a circle skirt both in matching silk brocade for Highday.”

“Silk ribbons and mother-of-pearl hair pins.” Amaranth gave a firm nod, happy with the crown of braids she’d managed in addition to the usual tumble of riotous curls, the remaining ribbons in both palest pink and rich brown wound through thin braid on either side of Hadley’s pretty face. She beamed another smile up at her cousin as she and Mrs. Lighthand turned Hadley to the mirror.

“You’re a vision, young Hadley.” Mrs. Lighthand proclaimed as Hadley’s eyes popped wide, a flush dusting golden-tanned cheekbones as they caught sight of themselves in the silvered glass. Harry couldn’t breathe.
They had a mirror in the master bedroom of Bag End.

He knew what he looked like.

That said… he never thought he could look like *that*.

When Amaranth insisted on hauling him to the dressmaker due to his perceived lack of pretty things he’d agreed mostly to humor her. He hadn’t thought… That was it he supposed. He just hadn’t thought of it no matter what his mum had told him about being able to be male or female or something in between or neither.

Some changes, he supposed, required visual proof of them to sink in.

And while the changes his being dual-natured had brought to his body they hadn’t been as shocking as being born into a whole new species.

It became just another fact of life.

“What do you think?” Amaranth demanded with the impatience of youth, teeth nibbling fiercely at her lower lip. “Do you like it?”

“It’s…different.” Harry allowed, then darted his locked gaze from the stranger in the mirror to his cousin with a quirk of a grin tugging at his lips. “Can’t say I’ll ever go for it daily or even regularly but…” He tilted his head to the side, watching the fall of his rich cherry red hair fall to the side and he swished the skirts around his legs once more, enjoying the shimmer and sway of the fabric more than he ever thought was possible.

In the end he supposed it wasn’t that different from the robes worn in the wizarding world, simply with an entirely different connotation.

He smiled at the figure in the looking glass, able to connect – for the first time – with the notion of being Hadley Baggins as much as Harry Potter despite everything else he’d done and experienced since being reborn.

“I think I like it.” He turned his head, looking back at Mrs. Lighthand over his shoulder. “For Highday and festivals, dinner parties.” He warned. “Not everyday. A carpenter or blacksmith can’t be running about in skirts.”

“I think we’ll manage to find things that suit you, Miz Hadley.” Mrs. Lighthand shared a triumphant glance with her young protégé, plans already flitting through her head regarding young Miz Amaranth’s future if they decided on a route other than early marriage and managing a household. “Let’s get you changed back into your things and we’ll take a look at the pattern books and fabrics and see what we can do.”

…

Belladonna was surprised and Bilbo confuddled at the sudden interest Hadley showed in ribbons and skirts and dresses but despite that neither had a problem paying the bill at the dressmaker to support the choice their faunt/sibling had made.

Hadley was young still, not even yet a tween, it was expected that they would experiment and try new things.

Just because Hadley had made a decision about their future employment early didn’t mean that they were exempt from the testing and trying and learning that came with young adulthood.
As Bilbo settled into being the Master of Bag End and all the duties and responsibilities that came with it, Belladonna made another change at Bag End, transforming her late husband’s study into a bedroom a year after his death and thereafter moving out of the room she’d spent so many years residing in with her beloved Bungo into the transformed study next to her sewing room. She did this not only to help herself – as much as someone mourning their spouse could be helped – move on for more than the sake of her faunts but also in recognition that her faunts weren’t fauntlings anymore. Hadley really was too old to still be rooming in the attached nursey to the master bedroom. And Bilbo…well, he was the Master of Bag End, a fine gentlehobbit of good looks and excellent breeding.

The change wasn’t just for her sake but her way of supporting her faunts as they grew into adults.

Despite all of the objections of her faunts – and they each had plenty to voice – Belladonna moved into the new bedroom leaving the master bedroom for Bilbo and allowing Hadley in turn to move into Bilbo’s fauntling-hood bedroom, the nursey turned into the study it once was before the Bagginses began having young ones.

And if Belladonna let Hadley keep the next orphaned kitten they came across in their wanderings of the woods and fields of Hobbiton, well.

None of the current residents of Bag End were the sorts to be bothered by such an event.

And life carried on.

Bilbo remained a staunch bachelor despite flirtations with a few of the eligible female and dual-natured hobbits of the Shire and Buckland.

Hadley filled their new second-wardrobe with pretty things and continued on with their apprenticeships and wanderings and rescuing of small animals from the woods and fields though they no longer needed Belladonna’s help to minister to them.

And Belladonna…Belladonna endured despite missing Bungo down to her bones.

Her faunts, while they loved each other, could rub each other the wrong way for all that Hadley adored his older brother a feeling that Bilbo very much returned towards Hadley.

They still needed her.

A thought which kept her alive and present – if a bit melancholy – for a good eight years after an illness took her Bungo.

Then in her sleep Belladonna faded away, though she did regret hiding her deep weariness from her faunts she couldn’t remain any longer. They were both strong, kind, good hobbits. And while she rued that she didn’t make it to her Hadley’s coming of age, her youngest wasn’t so young that the busybodies of Hobbiton would try and separate them from under Bilbo’s guardianship.

Her faunts were safe and loved each other dearly.

There was no more a mother could ask when she had no more time to give them.
Chapter 5

Sons of a Took

Author’s Note: I want to make it clear that when boarhounds are mentioned I’m talking about Great Danes not a type of English Mastiff or what have you. And being working dogs they’ve had their ears cropped for safety not for cosmetic purposes so they don’t sustain an injury to a hanging, floppy ear if attacked by a wolf or boar or what-have-you in the forest or fields when running around with Harry.

Chapter Five: An Unexpected Hobbit

Late Astron, 1341 Shire Reckoning, Bag End

Hadley Baggins, who had been of age not quite a year, young sibling of confirmed bachelor Bilbo Baggins and orphan of the last seven years and counting, rode on one of his matching dappled grey mountain ponies with his faithful boarhounds loping easily at Tulip – the pony’s – side.

The great working dogs were as large as Hadley on four paws and taller than most Men standing upon their rear legs alone, a joint gift from his favorite cousin Amaranth Brandybuck and their siblings for his coming of age the Mid-Year prior. A black dog and grey brindled bitch respectively, Gamble and Ash were his constant companions. And most importantly to their ongoing indoor privileges at Bag End quite excellent at sniffing out mushrooms and truffles in the forests.

Tulip and her sister Daisy were likewise presents for his coming of age though a happy accident.

As it happened, both Bilbo and their cousin (and current Thain of the Shire as of two years before) Fortinbras Took II had the same idea of gifting him a steady, reliable pony to pull a cart or for riding as he traveled the Shire and surrounding lands both on his wanderings as well as seeing to his work and commissions as a Jack-of-All-Trades.

Nevertheless, Harry had kept them both, Bilbo blustering his way through becoming Harry’s first commission at his trade by having him build a small stable for the ponies and an enclosing fence around the backside of Bag End’s high hill that had long been allowed to run fallow as their late father hadn’t kept livestock and Bilbo hadn’t seen any reason to change that as they were well able to purchase what they needed from the market or their tenants.

His cousin Otho, who he and Bilbo both had long agreed was much more likeable when separated from his mother and/or his fiancé Lobelia Bracegirdle, had supplied Harry with a gift just as useful and less ostentatious in a finely crafted dwarven tinker’s box to fill with tools and supplies of all sorts and fit nicely in a saddlebag.

Stable, ponies, and puppies aside, Harry’s feet still often led him away from Bag End much to Bilbo’s dismay.

Whether mending a fence in Waymeet or shoeing ponies in Needlehole, Harry wandered far and wide since finishing his apprenticeships in blacksmithing and carpentry.

As soon as Gamble and Ash were old enough to keep up, he took more commissions farther away – or simply went on his wanderings for pleasure alone.

Thanks to this habit of wandering, Harry often was out of the loop on the Hobbiton gossip but
knew quite a bit of the goings on outside of the sleepy little town he grew up in and had quite the best socialized and trained hounds in the Shire much to Farmer Maggot’s dismay at having his title usurped.

So, when it was that he returned home and settled Tulip in her stall before coming round to the front door – Bilbo did get so het up when he snuck in through the cellar, especially if he was returning earlier than expected, though the startle he got for it from his big brother (if only by an inch, blast him) was often worth it – and saw a glowing blue rune etched in Bag End’s front door he knew he’d missed something more than the usual bit of gossip over Lobelia trying to make of with his mother’s silver spoons.

Again.

As she’d been doing ever since she’d started courting with Otho.

At this point she was luckier than she could ever imagine that Bilbo was the Master of Bag End, polite creature that he was, as if it’d been left up to Harry she’d have been barred entrance years ago.

As it was it seemed – or so rumor had it – after the third attempt she suddenly had no luck at all with trying to grow anything but weeds whenever she touched a garden patch.

Funny that.

“Bo?” Harry asked after he unlocked the door and padded inside, Gamble and Ash on his heels. “Why is there a magical rune on our front door?”

A clatter sounded from the kitchen, Harry sharing a look with his faithful hounds, followed directly by a shouted: “What?!”

…

Bilbo stood shoulder-to-shoulder with his wild Took of a sibling, Hadley’s hounds gamboling around the lane and remarking the territory which he politely pretended not to notice feeling in no mood – given the circumstances – to get into another fruitless row with Hadley over yellow patches in the hedgerow.

Dogs, Bilbo had been told emphatically more than once, would be dogs.

That Harry had trained them to do their business outside and either in the forest or empty fields when at all possible would have to be enough of a concession on the part of the gentle giants that stood almost eye-to-eye with the pair of hobbits.

“Can you fix it?” He asked, a sinking feeling deep inside him. It wasn’t even tea time yet and already he was eager for this day to be over. At least that way tomorrow he might wake up and convince himself it was all a horrible dream from adventure-seeking wizards to magical graffiti on his front door.

Harry crouched, examining the work a moment then shook his head.

“I’ll probably have to sand the door all the way down and repaint it.” He admitted. It was a magical etching after all. It wouldn’t do to just touch-up the paint and call it a day. “Irritating old bat.” He groused, scowling. “I just painted the door before I left to fix Missus Brandybuck’s chifforobe.”
“Bother and botheration.” Bilbo blew out a frustrated breath, hands reaching up to tug at his sandy curls. “What does it mean, do you know? It’s no language I know.”

“I think it’s Cirth.” Harry cocked his head, studying the rune another moment. “Certainly has the spiky angles I’ve seen on dwarven maker’s marks before.”

“Blast it.” Bilbo cross his arms over his chest with a huff, shifting anxiously on his feet. “I told him no. No adventures I said!”

“Hey now.” Harry grinned at his brother, standing up and cracking his neck. It wasn’t a lengthy trip from Buckland by any means, especially on horseback but the beds at the Tawny Lion, an inn and tavern much like Hobbiton’s own Green Dragon, in Buckland left much to be desired. “I might like an adventure with the old meddler.”

Bilbo’s deadpan look was as dry as the deserts of Far Harad. “Hence why I also told him to try across the water in Buckland or Bree. It’s not my fault he didn’t listen.”

That Bilbo wouldn’t have been upset in the least to have Gandalf’s machinations pass both of them by didn’t need saying.

Neither of them was eager to be separated from the other after losing both their parents.

Bilbo took his charge of older brother seriously thanks to the age difference between them, he wasn’t about to let some conjuror sweep his little sibling away on a scheme and a twinkle that might see Hadley not coming back at all like their Uncle Hildifons who left on an adventure and never returned to the Shire.

Hadley’s gentle heart married to their zest for wandering and adventure made it beyond likely that they would agree to whatever cockamamie mess Gandalf was hip-deep in this time.

Not taking a no for an answer had not softened Bilbo to the meddler’s plotting in any way, even if the way Gandalf had spoken made it seem that the wizard was just as – if not more – interested in making off with Bilbo for the scheme as he was Hadley with barely a polite question regarding the younger Baggins in Gandalf’s speechifying.

Though, given how Gandalf was said to never age, it was entirely possible that the old man had forgotten that Hadley was of age by now.

If so: that was perfectly fine with Bilbo, thank you very much, and he’d not be enlightening him anytime soon.

“Calm, brother.” Harry soothed, seeing in Bilbo’s disquiet a true bout of nervy tension. “I’ll get cleaned up and we’ll stress bake after we go to the market. Best case scenario we have a lovely spread for tea and breakfast. Worst case, we can always bury the wizard under scones and hobbity politeness.”

…

Shopping was done, tea drank, baking overflowed their kitchen and pantry, and dinner was shared by the pair before Bilbo’s nerves settled and Harry bid him goodnight as he wasn’t the night owl his brother was especially after a ride from Buckland and a busy day of calming his brother’s rare spate of nervous twiddling all around the smial they shared.

He’d been asleep for a bit but not long enough to be deep within the realm of dreams when the bell rang – and while that alone wouldn’t have been enough to rouse him even with the threat of
wizarding meddled hanging over the occupants of Bag End, the loud voice booming through the
smial and carried easily to Harry’s bedroom by the excellent acoustics of the woodwork certainly
was.

Rushing from his comfortable bed – his two fearsome hounds barely lifting their great heads from
the foot of the Man-sized bed before collapsing back onto the bedsprea with canine groans the
overgrown pups, or half-grown as it was – Harry tossed on a simple pale blue silk robe that had
been a Yule gift from his cousin Primula, Amaranth’s younger sister, over his sleeping shirt and
shorts, and sped from the room.

He followed the sounds of the loud voice and Bilbo’s quieter, fussing tones – and oh did Harry
know that confused and/or frustrated but I’m a Baggins so I’ll be polite tone – through the smial to
the dining room and came to an abrupt halt at the sight of a large dwarf, easily almost a foot or so
taller than either Harry or his brother, looming over Bilbo’s supper of fried fish as Bilbo wrung his
hands to the side.

“Hadley,” Bilbo almost sighed the name in relief.

... 

Dwalin, son of Fundin, straightened up immediately at the name that came from the soft little
hobbit’s mouth, scowling fiercely at somehow having missed the approach of the newcomer.

He blinked, mouth opening and closing several times at the vision in the open archway to the hall,
then shook it off. It wasn’t that the new hobbit was that attractive, though if a dwarf was inclined
towards prettiness over strong, broad noses, complex braids, and stout forms he was sure he’d think
otherwise – a worry for Balin to manage the Durin sons then, Dwalin was in charge of their
physical safety not their idiocy – but even he could admit that any dwarf who wasn’t craft-blind to
others would find their fingers itching to set braids in the rich tumble of hair that was like to shame
the richest of rubies. More: the wizard had told them to expect one hobbit not two and most
definitely not a lass.

And most especially not one so visibly caught in disarray wearing naught but her sleeping clothes
and dressing gown.

A bright blush dusted his cheeks, only partly hidden by his great beard as he snapped a crisp – if
belated thanks to his shock – bow.

“Dwalin, son of Fundin, at your service, Missus Baggins.”

His greeting was answered by a light laugh and a smile when he rose from his bow.

“It’s Miz Baggins, actually.” The lass dipped a bit of a curtsy in turn with a nod of her pretty head.
“Hadley, Bilbo’s younger sibling. At your service, Master Dwalin. I’m afraid you’ve caught us a
bit off guard, Master Dwalin, we weren’t expecting company.”

Dwalin’s brows rose at that as the pair of hobbits exchanged almost knowing glances at his
surprise.

“The wizard,” he stumbled a bit, fucking hell, this was the sort of mess Balin was adept at handling
not him. Give him a skull to crack with his warhammer or split with his axe. Not the unraveling
mess of an accursed wizard. “He told us there would be supper and rooms for us...”

A derisive snort came not from the pretty lass with her fists propped akimbo on her hips but her
timid brother who before that he’d have thought had more in common with a scared rabbit than a
burglar.

“Oh I just bet he did…” The male, Bilbo, Dwalin thought, muttered sarcastically under his breath. “Meddling old badger.”

“Come now, brother.” Miz Hadley moved to placate her brother with an arch of a brow at Dwalin. “Our issues with Gandalf can wait for him to appear at the least convenient moment as is his wont when he’s about his mischief. It seems we’re to have guests. How many should we make ready for, Master Dwalin?”

“Just Dwalin, Miz Hadley.” Dwalin shifted bashfully on his steel-capped boots. “An’ thirteen plus the wizard I’d expect, and soon.”

“Great.” The male groused, plopping himself down onto a seat and snapping up the fish dinner Dwalin had been eyeing. “Fantastic.”

“You eat, brother, have a glass or two of wine.” The lass ordered – however dulcet the tones Dwalin was a soldier and had been all his life, he knew an order when he heard one – spinning in a whirl of fiery hair and the redheaded temper to go with it. “You leave that meddling old goat to me. Dwalin?” She called behind her, glancing back over her shoulder. “If I show you our party table could you set it up for me in the atrium just here,” she waved to the great open space that linked several of the halls to the dining room and what he thought might be a pantry.


“Good.”

With that she strode – so soft of foot for all of her temper that he couldn’t make it out even listening for it – down the hall, likely to get dressed for all that she’d shown no chagrin or bashfulness at being caught disheveled.

And left a dwarf lord in her wake that felt like he’d been thrown into the center of the wind devils that plagued Dunland during the dry summers.

“Yes.” The male hobbit agreed, coming out of the door he’d disappeared through at some point when Dwalin had been distracted by his sister. “Hadley does that to those not used to them. Best thing to do I’ve found when my sibling is in a temper is what you’re told until the storm passes.”

“Aye…I can see that.”

...

From what Harry could tell in that first glance into the dining room, the gruff dwarf had been giving Bilbo one hell of a time before Harry appeared and was taken for a female hobbit.

Never let it be said that Harry was a fool.

Give him a weakness like that and he was going to take full advantage of it as long as possible, especially since in a few minutes he’d gotten more answers and compliance out of the burly male than Bilbo – kind, patient, stuffy Bilbo – likely would’ve gotten if they’d stayed there until the unmaking of the world.

Quick hands as accustomed to fine work in his trade or leisure activities as they were to braiding his mass of hair had the riotous tumble in a thick plait down his back with only a few curls kept loose to soften his face from the androgynous handsome it tended towards without proper framing
into the Tookish prettiness he’d inherited from his second-mother. Not knowing what he was going to be dealing with that night, he strapped a dagger to his thigh necessitating keeping on his short male-style undershorts (though he had all of his made by Mrs. Lighthand out of soft batiste rather than the coarser linen the Hobbiton tailor favored) in place. The press of time had him slipping into a simple sleeveless chemise and a pre-laced set of stays that fastened in the front with hooks and eyes.

A canny eye plucked out a set of his more delicate appearing outfits, gauzy petticoat tugged into place and buttoned then a shell-pink circle skirt in silk with his favored dark brown embroidery in motifs of trees and leaves. The matching bodice – not laced tight, he’d have to have Bilbo do him up – went on top with its elbow-length sleeves then a rich brown full-apron to protect the silk of his skirt and bodice made of starched muslin finished it. A single ribbon in shell pink wrapped several times around his neck and tied with a neat bow topped it all off and as soon as Bilbo managed his laces for him he’d be ready to play Mistress of Bag End for an audience of dwarrow.

He peeked his head out of his bedroom door, easily catching sight of the dwarf working at setting up the oaken party table.

“Master Dwalin, could you send my brother down?” He called lightly. “I need to borrow him a moment.”

“Aye lass.” The dwarf turned and nodded at the sight of him peeking out of his bedroom. “That I will.”

Then – glory of glories – rather than bellowing for his brother, the dwarf rose and fetched Bilbo.

Harry held in a snicker at the dazed look on Bilbo’s face. Apparently, he still hadn’t recovered from the impending dwarrow invasion.

In truth, compared to some of the things Dumbledore had done to Harry in his first-life, thus far Gandalf’s intrigues had been almost tame in comparison.

... Shaking his head at the sight of Hadley, Bilbo set to lacing up the back of his sibling’s bodice, at ease with the chore from years of helping his mother and sibling alike once Hadley took to feminine fashions even if his sibling – that nine days out of ten was his brother rather than his sibling but almost never his sister – only needed help once every fortnight or so, preferring clothes that Hadley could get into and back out of without an excess of help.

“Playing with your prey before you devour them, dear?” He snarked, still put-out but quickly recovering thanks to Hadley’s own confidence in handling the situation.

Hadley smirked at their brother over their shoulder. “But of course. Wouldn’t want Cousin Amaranth to think their lessons went to waste now do we?”

Bilbo snorted a laugh then stepped away having tucked the laces out of sight.

“The day you two ventured into Mrs. Lighthand’s shop the world – and the Bag End coffers – was forever changed.”

“That might be a good thing.” Hadley pursed their lips in a thoughtful moue then linked their arms together, steering Bilbo from their room thanks to their linked elbows – but left the door cracked in case their hounds were needed to subdue rude dwarrow. “Since it looks like otherwise we
might’ve had a much worse time getting answers from our first dwarven guest.”

Smiling brightly and letting loose of Bilbo, Hadley nearly skipped over to the dwarven guest in question, studying the completed job of the set-up dining table and benches that should handle feeding a company of dwarrow easily enough considering some of the hobbit feasts it had seen in its day.

“That’s excellent, thank you Dwalin.” Harry beamed up at the bald dwarf, not put off for a moment by the gruff voice, bushy beard, and tattoos. Siri had tattoos and Hagrid was a literal giant and the two of them were some of the best people he met in his first life – at least when it came to those they cared about. “Bilbo and I will be busy in the kitchen putting a dinner together, in the meantime if you could shed your boots in the entry way and set your bigger weapons aside, and have the others do the same if we’re occupied and not able to answer the door, that would be lovely.”

Once again, Harry spun and left Dwalin staring at his back – albeit a back draped in silk and lacing – dazed in the wake of Hurricane Harry.

Coughing to cover up his snicker, Bilbo patted the massive dwarf on the arm and followed on his sibling’s heels.

After all Hadley wasn’t wrong: they did have a dinner to prepare for more than a dozen hungry mouths.
Chapter 6

Sons of a Took

Chapter Six: An Expected Tongue-Lashing

Fortunately for Dwalin’s peace of mind and equilibrium the next dwarf through the round door of Bag End was none other than his diplomatic brother Balin.

Though he wasn’t certain that even Balin was up to the job of disarming Miz Hadley’s temper.

The redhead whirlwind was giving even Lady Dís a run for the dwarrowdam’s gold – though with a marked lack of shouting curses down on Thorin’s head as was the usual cause of that lady’s temper.

“Brother,” Balin smiled at the large form – really what did their dam eat whilst pregnant with that monster? – of his younger brother. “Put into service as a doorman are you?”

“By my beard.” Dwalin snorted. “You’re shorter and wider than last we met.”

“Wider, not shorter.” Balin corrected the pair clasping each other by their shoulder than slamming their foreheads together in traditional dwarrow greeting to family. Then he frowned as he stepped into what looked like a quite comfortable – perhaps even lavish – hobbit hole. “Where is our host?”

“In the kitchen with ‘is sister.” Dwalin growled, one hand fisting as he shut the door behind his brother’s form. “Boots there, cloak there, large weapons against that wall.” He rattled off, pointing then continued his explanation as Balin’s prematurely whitened brows – a result of having to handle Thorin’s lack of diplomacy as well as trying to teach the Morgoth’s spawn that passes for the young princes no doubt – rose at the directions even as he complied. “They didn’t know we were comin’, brother.” He huffed, angered by the sheer audacity of the wizard. “Had no idea.”

Balin frowned thoughtfully, pausing in removing his boots before carrying on having already put up his cloak and axe.

“If they didn’t know about our arrival then…”

“Aye.” Dwalin agreed. “That is my thought as well given how puzzled the male hobbit was at my appearance.”

Then what his brother said clicked into place for the royal advisor.

“Did you say they and male?”

“Aye.” A huff. “Tharkûn left out a few things when speaking to Thorin as well. It seems that this isn’t the home of one hobbit but two: brother and sister.” He lowered his voice to a whisper that still carried to keen hobbit-ears to much amusement on the parts of Bilbo and Hadley, his embarrassment ripe in his tone. “The lass was set for sleeping, brother. Wearing naught more than her shift and a robe, hair tumbled about her shoulders.” He shook his head fiercely. “It was an indecency she was treated to it was, having a dwarf intrude on her home like that and with no warning of our arrival at all.” His eyes narrowed, tone darkening. “The wizard has a few thumps coming for a such a disgrace to our line for my actions, intended or no.”
“Aye.” Balin’s mood turned just as dark as his brothers. “I wonder what he’s playing at…”

“You’re not the only one, brother.”

…

“Think we’ve let them stew long enough?” Harry asked his brother, eyes dancing with mischief.

A sharp grin from Bilbo and a nod had the pair moving into the parlor where the Fundinsons had taken up seats by the warm fire as they awaited the presence of either the rest of their company or their hosts.

The elder – or so they both supposed based on the white hair – rose at once giving a bow just as crisp as Dwalin’s to Hadley presenting himself: “Balin, son of Fundin, at your service.”

“Bilbo Baggins, at yours.” Bilbo nodded then waved to Hadley as his sibling dipped and nodded in turn. “This is my younger sibling Hadley Baggins.”

“Master Balin.” Hadley smiled demurely at the older dwarf, hands lightly folded in their apron.

“No need for that, lass.” Balin rushed to assure the pretty creature thoughtfully. Though he wasn’t certain lass was the correct address. Their youth was apparent, yes, as was their beauty. It wasn’t hard to see what had his brother in a tizzy either given the thick red braid threaded with ribbon hanging over one curved shoulder.

However, Balin son of Fundin had been raised for his position as Thorin’s advisor from his youth. With such an expectation he was given the best education Durin’s Folk could manage – and given the former glory of Erebor that was quite a bit – including the various peoples of Arda.

He wasn’t as ignorant of the other peoples dotting the lands from the western seas to the eastern steppes to the northern wastes and the deserts of Far Harad as other dwarrow.

And if he remembered rightly, hobbits, or hobytla as they were called when they populated the vales of the Anduin, were unique among the Free Folk. Legend had it – taken with a grain of salt – that they were the last Children of the Valar. And that the Lady Yavanna, wife to Mahal Himself, had taken from the elder siblings of the Free Folk, borrowing the best of each for the Last Children…among which traits was a combination of the dual-natured Firstborn and the split-sexed Men and dwarrow, giving modern hobbits a possible three sexes instead of the standard two found everywhere else save for the single-sexed and dual-natured elves.

Balin wasn’t certain by any means that Miss Baggins was once such dual-natured hobbit but he wasn’t discounting it either.

“Balin is fine, Miss Hadley.”

“Miz, if you please.” Harry smiled at the older dwarf, liking the sharp intelligence he spied in wary eyes. This dwarf wasn’t willing to take anything at face-value.

Good.

That should make things even more fun.

For Harry at least.

Bilbo excused himself back to the kitchen to keep an eye on the cooking, heating, frying, and so
on, while Harry smiled prettily up at the dwarves.

“How may we be of service, Miz Hadley?” Dwalin asked, stepping forward.

“We have casks of mead and cider that the two of you should likely manage with far more ease than my brother or I.” Harry tilted his head fetchingly. “If I show you to the wine cellar could you set them up on the dining room table to await the rest of the party?”

“Aye, lass.” Dwalin agreed after a confirming glance at his watchful brother. “That we can.”

Following in the wake of the skirted hobbit, Balin and Dwalin spoke softly regarding the rest of the company in Khuzdul as they were led through the long halls paneled in golden wood to a cellar that required unlocking from a key the hobbit took from their apron pocket.

“Those,” Harry waved to a pair of casks. “And this.” He tapped another with one finger. “Three casks should do?” He asked, as they’d know better than him.

“Should do.” Balin nodded, already nodding his massive brother over to the far casks as the hobbit selected a trio of wine bottles from a rack and moved out of the way.

Dwalin, bruiser that he was, tossed both casks up onto his shoulders while Balin followed with just the one, taps already laid out on the table waiting for them, and Balin caught the sight of a flash of pink darting back down the hall – likely to lock the wine cellar back up. These hobbits were quite well-to-do from all he’d seen. He didn’t know what magic Tharkûn was intending to use but if it were him there was nothing that could pry him from such a comfortable living, let alone for total strangers.

…

The pair of fraternal dwarves were doing an excellent job of corralling their fellows from what Harry and Bilbo could tell from the kitchen where they were hard at work, keeping them milling about the east hall and the parlor and out from underfoot while their hosts worked on the last-minute meal when Harry and Bilbo surveyed what they’d done and traded nods of satisfaction then began hauling trays and platters out to the long party table, the dwarves having set it once they’d been told where to find the dishes and silverware.

Everyday stoneware and steel sets, not their mother’s good West Farthing china and silver, neither of them were fools for all that they were half-Took, as rough as dwarves were reputed to be that was just asking for trouble.

Bilbo was heading out with the last of the platters and Harry the baskets of fresh rolls when the dwarves realized that the food was ready and the sound that Harry had been waiting for hit his ears: Gandalf’s voice.

He was counting off dwarves from what Harry could tell as he softened his step after handing off the baskets of rolls to a passing random dwarf in a knitted sweater, creeping up behind the tall lummox and crossing his arms over his chest, tapping one foot lightly on the bare floor just waiting.

One of the dwarves – with an axe-head buried in his skull of all things, maybe dwarves really were made of stone after all – said something in guttural Khuzdul and made a gesture, Gandalf agreeing.

“Yes, Bifur, it seems we are missing a dwarf.” Gandalf turned, and – though he’d deny it until the day he left for Valinor – jumped in shock at the sight that awaited him: one of an irate Hadley who from what he understood of the Shire gossip shouldn’t be present at Bag End at all. “Hadley,
“What?” Harry snapped as a low-voiced phrase in Khuzdul had the dwarves settling in to watch the show even as they filled their plates, Bilbo leaning a shoulder in the kitchen archway and likewise playing audience with patent amusement at Gandalf’s discomfiture. “Didn’t expect me, Gandalf? What was your plan you old meddler? Dump a bunch of dwarves on my brother’s head and expect his Baggins manners to feed and shelter them and allow you to genially bully him into whatever harebrained, cackhanded, softfooted scheme you’ve come up with this time?! What? Nothing to say?! What about me? Was I to return to Bag End, my home, to find the pantry emptied and my brother missing without a word? And you dare to call yourself our mother’s friend? That is how you would treat the children of your old friend? Well?!"

Panting, just a bit, Harry finally wound down at the utter shocked and flabbergasted expression on Gandalf’s craggy face. He took the mug of cider passed to him by a quiet – but smugly pleased if he knew his brother at all, Bilbo’s manners might not let him give it to Gandalf with both barrels but his Took vindictiveness enjoyed watching Harry pop off on those deserving nonetheless – with a thankful nod. Taking a drink, Harry watched as – far too soon for his taste – Gandalf gathered his wits and puffed himself in indignation.

“Have you nothing to say, Bilbo?” Gandalf demanded, waving an arm to encompass Hadley’s… everything. “To this affront on the hospitality of Bag End?”

“No.” Bilbo smirked viciously up at the old badger. “I think Hadley covered things quite satisfactorily.”

Coughs sounded from the tableful of dwarves, perhaps the worst attempt at covering ill-timed laughter in the history of Hobbiton.

“The halfling has spine after all.” Dwalin muttered as much to his mead as to his brother. “Interesting.”

“They make quite the pair, to be sure.” Balin ran one hand down his beard as he watched the Baggins siblings tag-team the wizard and keep him off-center for long moments before they let up and at last allowed him to sit and eat at an imperious wave from Miz Hadley. “Remind you of anyone?” He shot a knowing look at Fíli and Kíli.


Meanwhile, across the table, another pair of brothers was noticing the Bagginses as well – though for an entirely different reason.

“Stop staring.” Fíli hissed in his younger brother’s ear. “Unless you want to be next on the chopping block!”

“If it was her swingin’ the axe I wouldn’t mind it.” Kíli almost whimpered as the hobbit lass’s face flushed becomingly.

“You’re an idiot.”

“An idiot in love.” Kíli nodded, even as he ducked his head when the attention of their hosts swung from giving the wizard a tongue-lashing, one well-deserved from what he could tell, back to the company of dwarves that were feasting in their hall. “You can’t deny she’s fetching, Fee.”
“No, that I can’t.” Fili’s Durin-blue gaze darted over to take in the long braid of hair a deeper red and skin a golden tan that he’d never seen on a dwarrow in his life. “If you like that sort of thing.”

“What’s not to like?” Kili demanded, not having to watch his volume as the party picked up, the other dwarrow laughing and talking and paying little attention to the Durin heirs with plenty of food and drink to pass around. Not that Kili and Fili weren’t putting a dent in the feast themselves.

“A temper to rival Amad’s for one.” Fili pointed out drily. “And a protective elder brother for another.” He nodded his chin towards the sandy-haired male hobbit who was watching Kili with narrowed eyes.

Kili rolled his eyes with a snort.

As if he was afraid of some soft hobbit.

He was a warrior of Durin’s Folk and the best archer to be found in any of the dwarrow kingdoms.

Soft Mister Baggins wasn’t any match for him and he told his scoffing elder brother so in no uncertain terms.

“I don’t know, Kee.” Fili rubbed at his whiskered chin for a moment, eyeing Mister Baggins for a moment then darting another quick glance at the pretty Miz Baggins – though neither had yet to be formally introduced to anyone but the Fundinosons, too busy preparing the feast. And in the case of Mister Baggins setting aside a plate for the missing member when his sister was done ringing a peal over Tharkûn’s head. “I’d go to serious lengths to protect you – and you’ve heard the stories of what uncles Thorin and Frerin were like when Adad requested to court Amad. I wouldn’t count out the soft little halfling just yet.”

... 

“You’ve got some admirers, sister dear.” Bilbo snickered, taking far too much enjoyment in the obvious dazzlement of the pair of young dwarves and playing overprotective brother crossing his arms over his chest and scowling at them – more for entertainment than anything. As if Hadley was in any need of his protection – or anyone’s – whether in silk skirts or heavy twill trousers. Of the two of them anyone with sense would be far more terrified of Hadley than Bilbo. That they were still watching his sibling whenever they thought that the Bagginses weren’t glancing their way said a lot over the two’s self-preservation instincts as far as Bilbo was concerned. The young bucks of the Shire – and more than a few of the lasses and dual-natured – had learned when Hadley was just coming into tween-hood that being pushy or presumptuous with the younger Baggins was a guaranteed pass into a world of bruised faces or egos depending on the transgression.

“That’ll probably last right up until one of the older dwarves figures out I’m dual-natured and drops the fact on their infatuated heads.” Harry rolled his eyes with a soft snort, nudging Bilbo’s shoulder with his own silk-covered one. He wasn’t quite sure when Bilbo had managed to scamper off to his bedroom to change but the simple trousers, shirt, and bracers was definitely an improvement over his patchwork dressing gown. “Dwarves from what I understand don’t have dual-natured people among them.” And Harry know full-well how people reacted to things at were new and strange to them. “Who do you think they’re missing?”

If Harry was a bit disappointed – though he’d never admit it – that the handsome pair of dwarves were certain to be anywhere from put-off to downright repulsed by his dual-nature...
“Easy bet on the leader.” Bilbo murmured quietly, voice far too soft for any but sharp hobbit – or elven if any were present – ears to catch, his eyes watching the interactions and manner of the rowdy dwarves and one wizard tossing food back and forth, though Hadley was quick to point out when he winced that nothing was ending up on the floor or walls, nothing wasted as the hungry dwarves tore the feast down to shreds making him glad that he’d thought to set a plate in the warming tray of the oven for their missing member. “None of them seem to defer to any of their number, not even to Gandalf.”

Harry nodded, seeing the same, his eyes just as sharp – and far more used to looking for the dark side of things than Bilbo for all that he had little reason to practice the skill in his second-life thus far aside from bartering here and there or keeping Lobelia’s sticky fingers off their mother’s silver – as his brother’s.

“I’m surprised your pups haven’t come to investigate the noise.”

And the scent of food, hungry young things that they were.

“They’re out cold.” Harry smiled softly at the thought of his young dogs. Then he added at the incredulous look from his brother: “and I ordered them to stay.”

Bilbo chuckled. *That* was more like it. Though Valar-forbid any of the dwarves try and snoop in Hadley’s bedroom, they’d likely lose a hand for intruding on their person’s space without permission if Hadley ordered them to guard as well as stay put.

Once the party had wound down, Gandalf rose and gestured for the dwarves to do the same, taking the lead on finally getting to the introductions that had been skipped as Hadley had been more concerned with taking him to task than following the proper hobbity manners taught from the cradle in the Shire.

“A wonderful repast.” Gandalf tried – though given the arch of Hadley’s brow he wasn’t certain how successful in such an endeavor he’d be until their temper was fully placated – to soften them up with a well-earned compliment. “Bilbo, Hadley, this is the company of Thorin Oakenshield,” he went around the table rattling off the names of the dwarves. “Balin, Dwalin, brothers and the sons of Fundin. Dori, Nori, and Ori, another set of brothers. Fíli and Kíli, sons of the Lady Dís of Ered Luin. Bofur, his brother Bombur, and their cousin Bifur of Ered Luin. And last but certainly not least we have Óin and Glóin, sons of Gróin and cousins of the Fundinsons.”

Each dwarf popped a quick bow – from the practiced to the ridiculous – at the introduction, Bilbo nodding back and Harry treating them to a – near-regal – nod.

“Company.” Gandalf waved to the pair of hobbits. “May I present Bilbo Baggins, the Master of Bag End, and his younger sibling Hadley,” Gandalf beetled his brows a moment then asked in an aside: “Hadley dear, have you finished your apprenticeships?”

“I have, Gandalf.” Harry smiled, exasperated at the dottering-grandfather act but a bit charmed nonetheless, a reaction that the grey wizard was used to if the gleam in grey eyes was any sign. “Last Mid-Year’s day as is tradition.”

“Ah, fabulous, fabulous!” Gandalf beamed, clapping his hands then turning back to finish his introductions. “And Hadley Baggins, a handyhobbit skilled in both carpentry and blacksmithing.”

Brows popped up on various dwarven faces at *that*, while a pair of younger dwarves found themselves even more smitten at the avowal of *craft* from the wizard than they were before by Hadley’s beauty alone.
A quick elbow to Kíli’s side from his brother kept him from any ill-timed exclamations as the dwarves murmured a chorus of “at your service” to the pair.

Some quick discussion passed between the dwarves then Dwalin made a gruff command in Khuzdul.

Thereafter followed the most raucous – if entertaining – bit of cleanup Bag End had been privy to since its inception.

…

Harry laughed at Gandalf’s side – still not pleased with the old meddler but not completely out of temper with him anymore either, the dwarves were just so damn entertaining! – as Bilbo ran around in a fuss as plates and cups and platters flew through the air and bowls were rolled down the hall to the beat of stomping feet soon joined by the clink and ching of the steel cutlery.

“Oh, please don’t do that!” Bilbo fretted, hovering – a bit uselessly but not as much as his completely useless sibling who was laughing at him the traitor – behind the still-seated dwarves. “You’ll blunt them!”

“Oh, do you hear that lads?” Bofur asked, grinning, eager to tweak the hobbit’s curls – just a bit. “He says we’ll blunt the knives…”

“Blunt the knives, bend the forks.” Kíli sang as he tossed plates and cups and cutlery through the kitchen door to Bifur who manned the sinks. And if he showed off a bit as the pretty hobbit lass laughed and clapped that was his own business…not that it kept Fíli from doing the exact same thing though in competition or to show off himself despite whatever codswallop he tried to sell Kíli – or himself for that matter – regarding the redhead.

“Smash the bottles and burn the corks.” Fíli added, grinning, not to be outdone by his younger brother.

Then the rest joined in, Dwalin grabbing his viol from his pack and Bofur snagging his clarinet.

“Chip the glasses and crack the plates
That's what Bilbo Baggins hates!

Cut the cloth, tread on the fat
Leave the bones on the bedroom mat
Pour the milk on the pantry floor
Splash the wine on every door!

Dump the crocks in a boiling bowl
Pound them up with a thumping pole
When you're finished if they are whole
Send them down the hall to roll

That's what Bilbo Baggins hates!”

Laughter rang through the smial as Bilbo shoved his way into the kitchen around dwarves – many of which had their pipes in hand – only to come to a staggering halt at the sight of a sparkling clean kitchen and piles of pristine dishes.

Exchanging an exhausted glance with Hadley – this day had been too much even before the dwarves arrived – he gave into his natural good humor and laughed, several of the dwarves
winking or patting him on the back making it clear that while they’d been teasing with their song it
wasn’t maliciously meant at all – on the contrary they were nothing but thankful for the excellent
meal and libations Bag End had provided, and on such short notice.

A trio of thumped from the door interrupted the merriment, the dwarves and Gandalf turning
serious in the blink of an eye.

“He is here.”
Chapter 7

Sons of a Took

Chapter Seven: The Dangers of Assumptions

“He is here.”

... 

Gandalf strode through the smial only to be stopped in his tracks before he could open the door, facing down Hadley who had their arms crossed over their chest and an impatient foot tapping on the carpet beneath their feet.

He took a single glance at the look on the younger Baggins’ face and stepped to the side, allowing Bilbo to scoot around him and open the door.

That look was plain as day, even the least-socially-capable person could have read it.

It said: you’re not the master here, old man!

While Hadley was managing the wizard – and continuing to do a phenomenal job of it from what Bilbo could tell and to the ongoing amusement of the dwarves – Bilbo straightened his waistcoat and opened the door to the smial, as was proper as the master of the house and eldest sibling.

And then he almost swallowed his tongue at the sight that met him.

He and Hadley weren’t that different after all, all things being equal, and among the things they shared was an appreciation for larger, muscled males with fine features, though Bilbo’s preferences weren’t as accepted in the Shire as Hadley’s. Family and offspring were paramount to hobbits after all and dual-natured hobbits tended towards slighter or middling frames, not the height and muscles the siblings appreciated. It made courting a sticky subject for Bilbo given that another male hobbit couldn’t carry on the Baggins name should they wed.

Bilbo had settled into being a confirmed bachelor and that was that with the trysts of youth set firmly in the past and hung the hope of the Baggins name continuing within their line on Hadley’s strong shoulders though his wild sibling hadn’t yet shown any partiality to their suitors beyond a few youthful trysts of their own.

However, as Bilbo had aged his appreciation for the male form had aged with him, settling into a strong preference for mature strength over the youthful exuberance of, for example, Hadley’s newest admirers in the young Fili and Kili though he recognized them as handsome enough dwarves their eager innocence was a bit off-putting to a hobbit who’d settled himself into middle age in the last handful of years.

All Bilbo could think staring at who – there was no doubt now – had to be the leader of the company of dwarves, one Thorin Oakenshield if Gandalf was correct, was a flustered oh my.

The, well, regal looking dwarf stepped forward while Bilbo was still searching for his wits – and his tongue – gaze splitting between Gandalf and the quiet little hobbit at the door, though he did note the one in silk skirts who’d backed down the wizard from the split-second tableau he’d caught before she’d turned aside to step next to the quiet male.
“Gandalf.” Thorin Oakenshield, Crown Prince of Durin’s Folk and Lord of Ered Luin, greeted the grey wizard as the male hobbit shut the door behind him. “I thought you said this place would be easy to find.” He charged, turning in a circle and taking in the rich wood paneling of the hobbit hole along with the tapestries and paintings on the walls and the thick carpets farther into the hall – as well as the stacks of weapons and dwarven boots in the entryway, unfastening his cloak and handing it off to his youngest nephew who stepped forward at once to take it the two exchanging a grin – on Kíli’s part – and a soft smile of greeting. “I got lost, twice, wouldn’t have found it at all if it weren’t for the mark on the door.”

“Yes, the mark.” The female hobbit tapped one curly-haired topped foot on the hall floor as she turned such a look on the wizard. “That reminds me…”

Gandalf blustered a moment, rushing in before the younger hobbit could build up another blistering tirade.

“Bilbo Baggins, Master of Bag End,” he announced as Thorin turned his gaze back to the hobbits, paying more attention to the would-be burglar of his Company than who he assumed – being quicker of eye in social situations than Dwalin – was his sister from the family resemblance they shared despite some incongruities in their features. “May I present the leader of our Company: Thorin Oakenshield.”

“So,” Thorin mused, circling the hobbit as the little creature stepped forward at Gandalf’s wave. “This is the hobbit.” He crossed his arms, feeling distinctly unimpressed with Gandalf’s choice. From what he’d seen – silk skirts aside – the sister had more fire in her little finger than her brother did in his entire body. “Tell me, Mr. Baggins, have you done much fighting?”

Harry’s brows arched, shooting a glare over Bilbo’s – and by virtue of his behavior Thorin’s – heads at a worried Gandalf, a storm brewing anew in his green eyes.

“Pardon me?” Bilbo blinked, turning this way and that to try and keep an eye on Master Oakenshield – as was only polite when having a conversation, even as odd of a one as this. At least the strange situation had snapped him out of his internal sighing over silver-threaded black hair and bright blue eyes…and hands that looked like they’d have no problem at all pinning him to any convenient flat surface.

“Axe or sword, what is your weapon of choice?” Thorin continued, making it perfectly clear to all that he’d found Mister Baggins wanting.

Bilbo huffed, tried of being bullied, teased, and badgered for one day, and snapped back, tone harsh:

“I have some skill at conkers if you must know.” Bilbo drew himself up to his full height, which despite what the dwarves around him might think wasn’t that much shorter than them. A few inches smaller than most of the dwarves if nearly a foot shorter than the tallest – one of whom had finally stopped circling and was back to staring down at him condescendingly. Well, if nothing else, the attitude of the handsome dwarf would do more to kill any attraction Bilbo might have had to him than anything else.

It certainly wouldn’t do him any good at anything else when it came to dealings with the hobbits of Bag End.

“Though I fail to see how that’s relevant.” He finished with a disdainful sniff.

Harry snorted a laugh, covering his mouth when the sound drew eyes his way, waving it off, as the
dwarves and Gandalf didn’t know his brother well enough to take heed to the warning signs that Bilbo’s temper – if not as infamous in the Shire as Harry’s own but just as formidable – was mere inches from snapping and taking an insufferable dwarf or meddling wizard with it.

“Thought as much.” Thorin dismissed him, shooting a look back at his Company. “He looks more like a grocer than a burglar.” Giving a condescending little smile to the Master of Bag End, Thorin stepped away, only to hear a soft whistle and a curse from the hobbit he’d just been working to make squirm.

Bays and howls charged through the smial, the dwarves parting in a rush to keep from being bowled over as Gamble and Ash answered their person’s wordless call.

Thorin stopped in his tracks at the sight of the female hobbit blocking his way, having not even noticed that she’d moved from one side of the entryway to the other to bar his passage farther into the hobbit hole where he smelled good food wafting through the air.

If he were anyone else he would’ve done more than stop when the pair of monstrous hounds came to stand beside Hadley Baggins, the hobbit gently resting one hand on the high back of each animal flanking them.

The dogs were almost bigger than the hobbits at the head and had the gangly frames of pups and stared with matching fierce looks of threat at the dwarf facing their lady who stood fearlessly between them.

“Would you like to rephrase your greeting to my brother and the Master of this House, your highness?” Harry asked with cloying sweetness. “I’m afraid Gamble,” he patted the black back of the slightly larger hound on his left. “And Ash,” then the brindled blue/grey coat of the smaller hound on his right, “are quite intolerant of rudeness in their home.”

Wordless – and rather impressive, though Thorin would never admit it – threat delivered as he stared at the odd grouping of dainty hobbit who so easily controlled massive hounds that would be as tall – if not taller – than Gandalf on their hind legs, Thorin bowed as formally and correctly to Miss Baggins as he would to the Queen of the Red Mountains.

“Your pardon, Miss Baggins, Master Baggins,” Thorin apologized to the shock of those who knew him and his legendary pride. “Thorin Oakenshield, at your service.”

“That’s quite alright.” Bilbo announced, pushing his way passed Gandalf and nudging Ash aside to flank his sibling. “It’s been a trying day for all of us,” he shot a confused look at Hadley. “Did you say, your highness?” He nearly squeaked in shock.

Bilbo wasn’t certain how many more surprises he could handle in one day.

Another whistle and a motion from Harry’s hand had the hounds decamping to curl up before the parlor fire, wary – or fascinated depending on the dwarf – eyes watching them pad away.

“Yes, I did.” Harry smirked at his brother, lording his superior knowledge over his head if only for a brief moment. “I knew I’d heard the name Oakenshield before but it took awhile to place.” He nodded towards the dwarven ruler who was speaking lowly and greeting his company after Bilbo’s smoothing over of the situation, even deigning to doff his boots and heavy weapons at Dwalin’s prompting. “That,” he jerked a thumb towards the dwarf now following his company towards the cleared table as the hobbits followed, detouring into the kitchen for the warming plate of food while one of the dwarves set the regal creature up with a mug of mead. “Is the uncrowned King of Durin’s line and heir of Erebor.”
“Ah.” Bilbo nodded, taking the plate from his sibling who gathered up a napkin and silverware – their mother’s good set, he noted approvingly, fit for royalty though the very idea of having royalty in their smial was mind-boggling – to carry over to the table. “Which means what, exactly?”

Harry muttered quietly as they rejoined the dwarves and single wizard at the table.

“If we listen I’m sure they’ll tell us.” He frowned. “Wizards like Gandalf don’t get involved in everyday affairs, after all.”

“That’s not very reassuring.”

“I didn’t mean it to be, brother dear.”

…

Harry tucked himself away in a corner of the dining room, just one wall separating him from the conversation of the Company of Thorin Oakenshield and Gandalf the Grey, Bilbo hovering around and taking in expressions and asking questions while Harry just listened.

Closing his eyes and resting his head back against the paneling of the wall, he lifted his feet up and curled his toes over the edge of the chair, hiding his legs under the draping silk of his skirt and petticoat.

He heard it all and likely more that the dwarves and Gandalf weren’t aware they were saying but not saying.

“How came you by this?” Thorin’s voice was tight as he stared at whatever Gandalf had produced – though bless them for stating the obvious, the youngest pair of dwarven brothers enlightened him soon enough – even as Gandalf’s answer made it clear that whatever lingering hope Oakenshield had of seeing his father again was in vain.

Thráín was dead by Gandalf’s own testimony.

Thorin Oakenshield truly was the King of Durin’s Folk and Heir of Erebor.

Harry didn’t like what he heard regarding the dragon Smaug, not one little bit, as the scope of the Company’s quest – and why they might be searching for a hobbit to join them – became clear.

Though the moment Gandalf’s purpose for shoving thirteen dwarves upon Bag End became clear, Harry was up off his comfortable chair and rounding the wall.

Just in time to watch the wizard gather his power and darken the shadows surrounding him, with an echoing “Enough!” to the bickering dwarves.

“If I say Bilbo Baggins is a burglar then a burglar he is!” The wizard announced. “Hobbits are remarkably light on their feet and can go unseen by most if they wish. And while the dragon is accustomed to the smell of dwarf, the scent of hobbit is all but unknown to him which gives us a distinct advantage.”

“So it’s true then.” Harry said, face drawn, the dwarves turning their attention to where he stood just behind his flabbergasted brother as Gandalf lowered himself back into his seat. “You did intend to repay our mother’s lifelong friendship and that of the entire Túk Clan by stealing away my brother whilst I was away on business and leave me here alone without him.” He stepped forward, linking hands – however weakly on his part, the very idea of Bilbo disappearing without word or notice making him faint of breath – with his brother, Thorin turning almost fully in his
chair to be able to see them both. “Is *that* what friendship and trust mean to you, Mithrandir?” He charged the abashed wizard who looked away from his accusing eyes and the near-replica face of Belladonna. “Because it’s not what they mean to me.”

“Nor me.” Bilbo nodded, locking eyes with his sibling. “I would not have left you without word, Hadley. Not for all the gold in this, *Erebor.*”

Gandalf cleared his throat noisily, turning his attention once more to Oakenshield.

“You charged me with finding a fourteenth member for your Company,” He reminded the dwarf King. “I have chosen Mister Baggins. There’s a lot more to him than appearances would suggest. And he’s got a great deal more to offer than any of you know. Including himself.”

“*Considering the fire of his sibling I don’t doubt it.*” Balin murmured in Khuzdul, gaining nods and snickers from the other dwarves and a *look* from Thorin and Gandalf alike.

“Very well.” Thorin agreed, nodding at Balin. “We’ll do it your way, wizard. Give him the contract.”

“And an extra, if you don’t mind.” Harry piped up, a hair-singeing glare in his eyes for anyone who would naysay him – even Bilbo.

“Wha-what?” Bilbo sputtered. “Hadi, what are you…?”

Harry snorted. “If you think I’m going to let you go *alone* on this idiotic, suicidal quest then you’re a fool, Bilbo Baggins.”

Bilbo chuckled, despite himself, the two lowering their foreheads to rest against each other in a display of affection that even the dwarves could understand.

“Well, there’s no fool like a fool of a Took.”

“Hold on now!” Dwalin protested loudest and most vigorously of all the dwarrow of the Company – and there was *quite* the uproar at Hadley’s request.

A request that had Balin and Gandalf both smirking – knowing something that likely the rest of them don’t the wankers – as Balin passed over a pair of contracts to the hobbits, Thorin considering them both with intelligent eyes – eyes that picked out details he’d missed before in his shock at Miss Baggins’ utter audacity.

Calluses and scars on hands – of the sort he well recognized from his own trade.

Strength hidden under silk wrapping.

Strong bones that *did* bear a resemblance to their sibling’s.

And last, Balin’s comment.

His advisor was a cunning dwarf, one who insisted that things be named rightly to prevent costly miscommunications.

And Balin had dubbed Hadley Baggins as Master Baggins’ *sibling* not his *sister*.

An important – if small from the protests of his company – difference that when dealing with hobbits was actually vitally important as Hadley themself made clear to the shouting cadre of dwarrow as they nipped the contract lightly out of Balin’s hand.
“The wilds are even less a place for a gentlehobbit lass than they are a lad!” Dwalin finished his argument at full volume.

Harry smirked.

“Good thing I’m not a lass then, isn’t it?”

If Thorin wasn’t holding tight to his control between the disappointment of the dwarrow envoys, the confirmation of his father’s death, and so on, he would’ve laughed aloud at the shock and confusion on the faces of his company at the hobbit’s wry statement.

Except, he took care to note, on that of Gandalf, Balin, and to some shock Bifur.

In the latter case it wasn’t, though most would think it who didn’t know the warrior dwarf turned toymaker, that he didn’t understand. No, Bifur knew Westron well. He just couldn’t speak it any longer thanks to the axe buried in his skull.

It made Thorin wonder what else Bifur picked up on that other dwarrow missed…

…

“Hobbits.” Balin explained in the exasperated teacher tone he did so well as the pair of creatures in question took their contracts off to the elder’s study for review, leaving him and Gandalf to explain the situation to the still-complaining dwarrow of the Company. Though only some of the complaints were over having the hobbits join them while the rest were regarding confusion over Miz Hadley’s statement.

Thorin wasn’t going to be of help, blast him, tucking back into his meal – quite the spread Master Baggins had squirreled away for the missing leader, including the most excellent baked ham with honey glaze and cheese scones – and leaving the hard work to Balin like he always left his paperwork to his advisor when he could get away with it.

“Are a different folk than the rest of the Free Peoples of Arda.” He lectured, gaze stern whenever it lit on those who should know better from their studies – including his own stone-headed brother. The princes and his own apprentice Ori at least had the excuse of youth. If this was the sort of discernment he could expect from the rest of the company then he’d been quite right in his statement – however impolitic – regarding the lack of bright-lights in the group. “Known to the learned as the Last Children of the Valar, they were created with a myriad of traits from other peoples. Among them the dual-nature of the elves, giving hobbits a possibility of three common sexes: male, female, and the dual-sexed or dual-natured folk.” He puffed on his pipe. “Considering Miz Hadley’s appearance and words, they are the latter, making their comment regarding not being a lass quite correct.”

Fíli didn’t know what to make of that and neither did Kíli if the stunned-stupid look on his brother’s face was any sign.

And imagining it didn’t help, only making his trousers a bit tight when his mind insisted on imposing his imaginings on the frame of the pretty redhead, a discomfort he wasn’t alone in if Kíli’s sudden squirming meant anything.

A shame that.

Kíli was just asking to be teased by being so transparent and Fíli couldn’t take advantage of it for once.
It wasn’t sporting when he was hardly in any better straights than his younger brother.
Harry and Bilbo leaned over their contracts, Bilbo feeling faint in a few places, then switched which had them each frowning and confused within a few minutes.

Gamble and Ash, who had followed their person into the study despite there being hardly enough floorspace for them, grumbled as no handouts were in the offing from anyone in the smial despite the nice smells – and strange but interesting – smells filling the air.

Bilbo sat back heavily in his desk chair, picking up both of the contracts and staring between them.

“If I didn’t know better,” Harry said, thoughtful as he lowered himself down between his pups and started petting them with firm strokes. “I’d say that your contract is written to either scare you off or to take utter advantage of you if Oakenshield was of a mind to.”

“I’d like to protest.” Bilbo was still frowning between the lengthy sheets of parchment. “But with the proof staring me in the face I’m finding it hard to do.”

“Offhand I don’t think they have any idea of hobbit culture and education.”

“Considering the humorous mix-up regarding you my darling mischievous sibling I think you’re rather right.”

Harry smirked. “What kind of host would I be if I corrected their misconceptions?” He asked innocently.

“A Took.” Bilbo snorted. “Especially as you didn’t fail to take advantage of it.”

“Pot, kettle.”

Bilbo tossed the contracts down in disgust then gave into his childish impulses and stuck his tongue out at his troublesome sibling.

“Why are you doing this, Hadi?” He asked, sighing and scrubbing his hands over his face. “I’m a Baggins of Bag End. This is where I belong not running off on an adventure and faltering in my responsibilities.”

“So don’t come.” Harry shrugged, knowing that Bilbo would never do that. They had their differences and squabbles but when it came to loyalty to each other they were solid as Arda’s bedrock. “Or do. I’m not forcing you, Bo, but you know as well as I do that you want to. You want an adventure. You want to give into your Took side like you did when we were little before Father managed to stifle it and strangle that joyful imp that mother and I loved so well.”

“And do you not now?” Bilbo asked weakly, shifting his head on his hands to stare down at his beloved sibling in dismay. “Am I so objectionable to you now?”

Harry rose in a flurry of silken skirts, coming to kneel down at Bilbo’s side and tangling his hands with his brother’s under one smooth cheek.
“Never.” He swore. “You are my brother and I will love you fiercely until the day I die. Nothing could ever change that. Even if you became the stuffiest of stuffed shirts to ever be Arbiter of Hobbiton.”

Bilbo chuckled at that, then teased: “even if I turned as sour as Aunt Sackville-Baggins?”

Harry’s repulsed expression was priceless.

“I should hope that no one raised by our mother and keeping company with me would end up that way.” He sighed, put-upon. “But no, even then I would still love and defend you to the last. I’m doing this because I still see that adventurous faunt in your eyes, crying out for more than this,” he waved a hand around the study. “Life is for the living, Bo. Adventures and journeys and life exist best outside of your books, brother. Come with me. For you. Not for them.” He jerked his curly head toward the direction of the hallways. “For you and all the dreams you gave up to twist yourself into the Baggins of Bag End.”

Sighing, Bilbo glanced back towards the contracts.

“These things will have to be rewritten.” He wrinkled his nose with a huff. “Arbitration in Khuzdul, indeed.”

…

While Bilbo muttered and scowled, taking notes on all the changes that were needed to the second contract for the both of them, ignoring the one for the “burglar” altogether, Harry left the study in search of Balin and Thorin Oakenshield to herd them into the study for what he was sure would be quite the row until everyone was satisfied – and that was only the tip of the iceberg that needed managing before they left with the Company.

Sending Gamble and Ash back into his bedroom, he closed the door behind them as he doubted he’d need them again for wrangling rude dwarves despite how tempting it was to have them sit on Oakenshield until he agreed with their terms for coming on his insane journey to retake Erebor.

He found them speaking in the hall off the parlor where the other dwarves and Gandalf had gathered to smoke and talk by the fireplace, softening his footsteps and listening – shamelessly eavesdropping – to their conversation.

“…after all, what are we?” Balin was asking his King. “Merchants, miners, tinkers, toymakers. Hardly the stuff of legend.”

“There are a few warriors amongst us.” Thorin reminded his friend, tone amused even to Harry’s uneducated-in-Thorinisms ears.

“Old warriors.” Balin shot back.

“I would take each and everyone of these dwarves over any army from the Iron Hills.” Thorin said fiercely. “For when I called upon them they answered. Loyalty, honor, a willing heart? I can ask no more than this.”

“You don’t have to do this.” Balin stood, Harry watching from the shadows of the corridor. “You have a choice. You’ve done honorably by our people. You have built a new life for us in the Blue Mountains. A life of peace and plenty. A life that is worth more than all the gold in Erebor.”

Harry rocked back a bit on his heels hearing the old dwarf echo Bilbo's turn of phrase.
“From my grandfather to my father this,” Thorin held up Thrain’s key. “Has come to me. They dreamt of the day that the dwarves of Erebor would reclaim their homeland. There is no choice, Balin.” Thorin whispered, almost pleading with his oldest friend. “Not for me.”

Balin shook his head.

Well, he had to try, even being more than familiar with the stubbornness of the Line of Durin. He was one of them after all.

“Then we are with you, Thorin.” Balin patted him on the back. “We will see it done.”

Harry came around the corner with steps a bit heavy, allowing the pair to straighten up and in the case of Thorin tuck away his father’s key.

That little tête-à-tête at least answered some questions he’d had swirling in his mind.

“We need you in the study, Master Balin, Master Oakenshield.” He nodded to the dwarves. “Regarding the contracts.”

“Aye, we’re coming.” Balin sighed, girding himself for what was sure to be a doozy of a talk considering he knew full-well the contents of the parchments he’d handed over.

Thorin, he knew without even looking up at his king, was not going to be pleased.

…

After reading through the altered contract and nodding at his brother Harry left Bilbo to argue the contractual changes with Balin and a grumpy bastard of a king after spinning them verbally until Oakenshield agreed to staying a second night at Bag End to allow an early start the day after and settle their affairs.

If scowls could set him on fire Harry would be nothing but ash by now.

He felt a little sorry for winding up the grump before loosing Bilbo on them but in this area – Arbiter – more than any other Bilbo was confident and unrelenting.

Those dwarves weren’t going to know what hit them by the time his brother was done with them.

Though since they were asking for a set payment – no matter what happened on the journey – versus a nebulous share of theoretical treasure he anticipated that neither dwarf would fuss overmuch at the other changes.

Or so he hoped.

But who knew?

Maybe they had more stubbornness than sense.

It wasn’t like he and Bilbo weren’t going to have plenty of time to learn about dwarves for themselves on the long road – months at that – to Erebor.

In the meantime Harry had sleeping arrangements to sort out before finally collapsing into bed.

He definitely agreed with Bilbo: this day had been too damn long.
“Gandalf.” He sauntered into the parlor, swallowing a laugh at the wide-eyed looks and double-takes he was subject to. *Someone* had educated the dwarves on hobbits then – or at least as that subject pertained to Harry. Damn. He was sorry he missed it. Though the utter shock had been entertaining when he refuted status as a *lass*. “The Big Folk bedroom is in the same place and has had a recent cleaning. We’ll be leaving close to dawn the day after tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Hadley.” Gandalf puffed a pink butterfly out of smoke from his pipe.

“Do you need any help, er,” Dori stumbled remembering that he wasn’t dealing with a Miss and not knowing how to properly address the hobbit.

“Miz Hadley is fine when I’m in skirts, Master Dori.” He enlightened the dwarves. “Harry is fine otherwise.”

Dori blinked, several of the other dwarves mouthing *Harry* in confusion – which really, Harry doubted he’d ever stop finding entertaining – then nodded.

“Miz Hadley then, can we be of assistance?” Given the late hour and their leader still in conference with Master Baggins it was apparent that they’d be bunking at the comfortable Bag End rather than tromping back down to the Green Dragon where their ponies and baggage was kept.

“A few hands to change sheets and others to make up pallets would be helpful, thank you Master Dori.” Harry nodded agreeably as the silver-haired stout dwarf rose, nudging the smallest dwarf onto his feet, his younger brother Ori, Harry thought.

An elbow from Dwalin had the other young dwarves – the princes as it turned out from the greetings traded between Thorin and the pair – jumping up to help as well while a hand tangled in a collar had the one with the star-shaped braids and beard yanking upward for his freedom which Dwalin resolutely refused with a growl of Khuzdul that had – Nori, Harry thought – pouting but staying in place.

“Where do you want us, Miz Hadley?” Fíli asked with a bright, incorrigible grin, his brother almost bouncing next to him as they cut off the ‘Ri brothers to reach the linen closet at the pretty hobbit’s side.

A knowing smirk and an armful of linens shoved in his arms was all *that* gained them each.

Harry passed more blankets and linens to the ‘Ri pair, directing them to the guest room where three or four dwarves should be able to share the space if they didn’t mind making up a pallet or two on the floor in addition to the beds.

“Follow me,” Harry told the princes, leading the way to his brother’s room. “You two and your uncle will be staying in the Master bedroom that my brother has graciously,” and damn Bilbo’s Baggins manners anyway. “Ceded for your stay. You can make up the bed with fresh linen while I gather a few things for my brother to wear in the morning from the dresser.”

“And where will Mister Baggins be staying then?” Kíli frowned. Surely not in his study. Kíli didn’t think there’d be enough space for either of the hobbits in the book-strewn room.

“With me, Yavanna help us.”

Whatever thoughts either dwarf had regarding about being *willing* or even *eager* to share space with the pretty hobbit they were wise enough – or skilled enough flirts – to know not to test Harry’s patience given the rest of the events of the night.
Wrong time, they agreed with a look shared between them then a glance at the stern set of Hadley’s shoulders.

Definitely the wrong time.

…

Harry couldn’t tell you what time his brother stumbled into his room if a hundred bars of gold was on the line.

What he did know what that he barely woke for the event despite grousing from Bilbo regarding everything from having to share the bed with dogs – as if having his sweet pups at the foot of the bed his toes didn’t come within a foot of was such an imposition – to what might’ve been a wish to confusticate these dwarves.

One of the many differences that when they were younger and sharing a room once Harry was old enough to leave the nursery was Bilbo’s night-owl reading habits and Harry own long-ingrained habit of rising with or even before the sun depending on the season.

Glad that there should be a distinct lack of dwarves in the kitchen, Harry set about making himself a pot of tea and heating a few scones that had escaped the fearsome beast that apparently was a dwarf’s sweet-tooth.

First breakfast was a light affair after all, only enough to ready a hobbit for the morning chores, and Harry had a few that needed seeing to that morning.

Knowing the routine by now as well as he did, Gamble and Ash met him at the backdoor of Bag End, the entrance used by Harry alone and over which the sign for his handyhobbit business hung in polished wood, an advert for his skill with woodwork as much as a reminder that those seeking Harry’s trade rather than that of the Master of Bag End or visiting socially were to present themselves at the backdoor.

Little arrangements such as this were what kept a pair of brothers happy with each other’s company – and out of each other’s affairs as much as possible for two grown hobbits cohabitating to be.

After letting Gamble and Ash out for their morning romp, Harry pulled on a set of simple working clothes in heavy cotton fustian dyed his rich brown then threw on a loose, straight-front waistcoat with pockets in a lighter cotton in the same color but embroidered with simple rich blue daisies that matched his blue bracers, all of this over a simple pair of batiste undershorts and shirt.

Padding outside and closing the door behind him he set to finger-combing his heavy fall of red curls before rebraiding it on the go.

He had ponies that needed let out to pasture and a measure of feed, a pair of ponies masquerading as dogs that were going to be whinging for breakfast, and a smial-full of dwarves that were going to want the same before long, and that was all before second breakfast.

Shooing Tulip and Daisy out into the pasture he made quick work of mucking their stalls into the heap of droppings that he and Holman both pillaged for compost, then whistled for his pups, knowing they’d find their bowls filled next to the stables when they came running and make quick work of them before meeting him at the smial door.

Hailing his neighbor, Harry loped over to the separating hedge and rested his forearms on the even line that he and Holman traded turns trimming – though the professional gardener that had the run of Bag End’s fields while Harry managed the front gardens and herbs had a better hand at it than
Harry – and returned Holman’s pleasantries before getting to the meat of the matter.

“Would your oldest boy be willing to serve as runner to the Great Smials?” He asked at the appropriate time. “I’ve finally convinced Bo into an adventure and we’ve a letter for our cousin appraising him and giving him stewardship over Bag End and Hobbiton in the interim until we return.” Harry grinned bright enough to fluster even someone who’d known him all his life like the older hobbit. “You and Tansy are welcome to the stocks in the pantries and cellars that we don’t take with us, of course. No sense in letting them go bad when we won’t be back for some time.”

“How, how long are you planning to be away then, Master Harry?” Holman asked, scratching as his thinning hair. The news wasn’t much of a surprise to the gardener nor would he imagine to many others who knew the Baggins siblings. Quite a few wagers were likely to be settled down at the Green Dragon for certain. “Tansy and I will look after Bag End and the gardens, o’ course we will. It’s just…”

Harry laughed. “You don’t have to finish that thought. Lobelia and her future mother-in-law aren’t a curse I’d wish on any hobbit. At least a year Holman.” Harry sighed, looking East for a moment and smiling at the sight of the sun peeking over the horizon. “Perhaps two. I’ll remind Bo to put instructions regarding your seeing to Bag End for the Thain.”

“Oh, thank you Master Harry.” Holman blushed, knowing – and glad it wasn’t said – that his wages would still be paid despite the absence of Bag End’s Master and heir. “’Preciate it. We’ll take right good care of things and I’ll send my Hamfast over to run to Tuckborough.”

“Thank you, Holman, we’re grateful truly.”

…

Harry didn’t just pick up the letter Bilbo had written the night before, the two of them each well-aware of what the other’s tasks would be whilst readying for departure that they’d barely needed to discuss it the night before while muttering over their company contracts to ensure they covered everything between them.

The majority of Bilbo’s tasks were represented by the letters he found bundled together for deliver to the Great Smials, setting things in order regarding Bilbo’s duties as the Master of Bag End and Arbiter for Hobbiton.

Harry had never been happier to be a simple hobbit of simple business and a spare heir in his life – either of them.

All he had to do was change out his sign to his “Closed for Adventuring” one that his cousin Rorimac had made for him as a joke only to find the joke was on him when Harry actually used the silly thing and set it to swinging every month or two over the backdoor of Bag End.

He also unlocked a secured drawer in Bilbo’s desk and fished out the pair of Last Wills they’d each had jotted up upon his coming of age by their uncle-by-marriage Gorbodoc, Rorimac’s father and the Master of Buckland.

Skimming them quickly, he nodded, finding everything still accurate and up-to-date since little had changed in the last year.

Adding them to the bundled letters and dashing off a note to their cousin the Thain, he wrapped the parchment stack in some of the thin waxed leather that they kept for sensitive documents, tying the
bundle with one of his ribbons that was getting a bit tatty and sealing it with a glob of candlewax and Bo’s Baggins seal he kept in the same drawer with their Wills.

He was sure his brother would’ve thought of the Will eventually, but better that it was all taken care of and tidy.

Less chance of too-curious dwarves seeing something they aughtn’t that way.
The dwarves alternately fucked off to the Green Dragon to collect their packs and ponies or got underfoot.

From what Harry could tell they didn’t really have any other plans for the day.

There were dwarves *every-fucking-where* driving him right up the damn wall and sending Bilbo into hiding in his study after they’d signed the pair of contracts together with Thorin Oakenshield and Balin serving as a witness.

Dwarves naked and singing raunchy pub songs bathing in the wash room.

Or alternately naked dwarves doing their wash and waiting for their clothes to dry in the wash room.

Dwarves inspecting the workmanship of the smial or the stable or sitting on the garden bench smoking.

Dwarves helping themselves to the last of the cookies.

Dwarves making another mess in the kitchen (but that was Bombur making luncheon and the mess cleared up as miraculously as the dinner dishes had done the night before so Harry wasn’t too irritated with the shy rotund dwarf.)

Just…*dwarves*.

The littlest dwarf made his way – rather sweetly and politely – into Bilbo’s study and ended up spending the majority of the day there talking about books with Harry’s brother while the more seasoned wanderer of Bag End managed the packing of their shoulder packs and saddlebags, even if the former would likewise be carried by the ponies.

He dusted off Bilbo’s oilskin and gave the walking coat he’d purchased for the one time Bo had accompanied him to Mithlond to see elves two years before serious scrutiny for wear and tear before tucking emergency funds, rations, a tinder box, and what not in the interior pockets.

Then when all that was done he went back and repeated the whole affair for his own things.

What the dwarves thought of his industry in comparison with Bilbo’s apparent lack thereof he really didn’t give a damn.

Bilbo worked away at balancing their accounts and sending off payments before they left or writing out lists of instructions for their cousin the Thain or the Gamgees while Harry managed the packing of their supplies and the preparatory shutting-up of Bag End that could be handled whilst still in residence.

Harry looked ahead: Bilbo looked behind, and between them they managed everything needing doing.
For all his frustration at having an audience for every little thing he did outside of the privacy of his room once the dwarves awoke for the day, he did get some small entertainment out of their doubletakes when they saw him in what Amaranth called his “Harry” clothes and their fumbling over how to behave around him.

Unkind of him perhaps, but with the staid nature of many hobbits he’d learned when he was still a fauntling to make his own amusements where he could.

At Harry’s advice, Bilbo had joined him in only eating four of their usual seven meals so the ways of road rationing wouldn’t be as great of a shock to his brother.

Even if, thanks to needing to clear at the majority of their perishables, those four meals had been larger than usual, between the pair of hobbits and Bombur managing to put on near-feast size meals for second breakfast, luncheon, tea, and supper.

Though where Gandalf was – and what he was up to – none of them had any idea.

It was a long day of preparations on the part of the hobbits and rest, eating, and cleaning up before returning to the trails through Eriador by the time the Company of fifteen – plus a wizard that reappeared just in time for supper and a large glass of wine – sat around the party table still clogging up the atrium hallways of Bag End.

…

Supper that night wasn’t quite as lively as it had been the one previous though whether that was from having their hosts seated with the dwarves or due to that of their King wasn’t entirely clear though if Harry was placing a bet his gold would be on the latter over the former.

It wasn’t as if his and Bilbo’s presence had curbed them the night before and that was while they were still convinced he was, as Dwalin put it several times before being corrected, a lass.

Conversation was light and genial however and for the sake of clean-up and Bilbo’s nerves Harry was glad to see far less food being tossed about.

Harry had tucked Bilbo into the seat at the head of the table with an imperiously arched brow at both Gandalf and Thorin Oakenshield, leaving them to decide between themselves who took place of pride at the foot.

Oakenshield, to a bit of surprise on Harry’s part, ceded to the wizard before rounding the long oak table and motioning for his dwarves to budge down a seat to take the place formerly held on Bilbo’s right by Balin, a shuffle ensuing that had Bilbo taking on a flustered blush on his cheeks at the to-do and Harry swallowing a laugh at his brother’s left.

For his part, Harry found himself with the curious company of one Nori at his side to many glares and grumbles from the youngest dwarves of the company, including Nori’s own brother.

Though how that came about, Nori’s presence that is, Harry hadn’t the foggiest idea.

“Everything sorted, Bo?” Harry asked, taking the dish of bubble and squeak from Nori with a nod and dishing up then passing it on.

With the grumbles and sneers directed at the salad and roasted tomatoes he wouldn’t think the dwarves would be very interested in such a dish given the “green food” that it contained but it might be a case of what they didn’t know not hurting anything as a great many culinary sins could be covered up or disguised via a healthy application of butter, bacon, and cheese such as the bubble
had that night.

“I’ve kept the Gamgee boys running back and forth all day.” Bilbo gave him a crooked smile. “You?”

“We’re packed, the notices hung out, and the bundle for the Thain sent off with Hamfast.” He reported. “All that needs doing in the morning is dropping the keys with Holman.”

Bilbo nodded, tucking into his supper with a gusto spurred own by the reduced meals through the day.

“Not to pry.” Balin said, dividing his attention between his plate of food and the pair of hobbits. “But what precisely is a handyhobbit, Mister Baggins?”

“Jack of all trades, master of none, but better than a master of one!” Harry and Bilbo recited the children’s rhyme with grins at each other, hazel and green eyes dancing as they met each other over the table before Harry turned back to the white-haired dwarf.

“I’m a hobbit of general work I suppose you could say.” Harry shrugged, taking a long drink of his cider. “My father allowed me to apprentice in blacksmithing and carpentry though neither is considered an appropriate occupation for a gentlehobbit.” He smirked. “But since he had no idea how to handle my energy otherwise and having me underfoot all day proved quite disruptive he conceded. I manage everything from home repairs, shoeing ponies, running messages to Bree, crafting furniture or metalwork, whatever’s needed and I’m capable of really.”

“You’re a tinker!” Bofur, farther down the table called, not one of the dwarves interested in pretending they weren’t paying close attention to the conversation between the hobbits and whoever was speaking to them at the moment. “Like me cousin.” He jerked a thumb towards Bifur who was the only dwarf munching on the provided salad – albeit with an edible pansy caught in his beard.

Harry laughed, agreeing with a nod.

“And you, laddie?” Balin posed to Bilbo. “We gathered last night, despite being told otherwise,” he shot a look down that table at an innocent-faced Gandalf. “That burglary is not in fact your profession.”

“Oh well, I,” Bilbo blushed.

“Modest as ever, my brother.” Harry shook his head in fond exasperation. “You’ve heard it said several times: he’s the Master of Bag End.”

“Aye…”

Now it was Bilbo giving into an ill-mannered eye-roll.

Dwarves.

“You lot really don’t know much about hobbits.” He snorted. “As any hobbit in the Shire and surrounding lands could tell you that the Master of Bag End is both the Head of the Baggins Family and the Arbiter for Hobbiton which would be quite enough to keep any hobbit busy on its own, thank-you-very-much.”

That took the dwarves aback, Gandalf choking on a laugh at the looks on their faces as to a one they looked like the Baggins siblings had slapped them with a wet fish not told them of their
occupations.

“Our burglar is a lord.” Nori said in a deadpan to Thorin across the table who looked like he’d swallowed a whole crate of lemons from Harad by the pinching around the royal mouth.

“Quite.”

…

Bilbo, pipe in hand, wandered into the parlor after supper having had enough of watching the younger dwarves toss his stoneware about no matter how cheerfully, finding not only a few of the older dwarves, Thorin included, and Gandalf sitting in the comfortable room but also Hadley.

His brother was sat with his legs tucked to one side, petting his pups in front of the fire and humming under his breath.

“You can’t sing that.” Bilbo told him, nearly hissing into his ear, slipping into Green Tongue.

“It’s not for them.”

Harry looked up at his sternly disapproving elder and shook his head then answered: “We’re returning, Bilbo. You know the maps between here and there as well as anyone. If not now, then when would be a better time for it?”

“In Common then.” Bilbo sighed, shaking his head. If they weren’t already going to lose their respectability by going off on an adventure then singing one of the songs from the Wandering Days for an audience of outsiders certainly would clinch it. “And on your head be it.”

“Oh, is Mister Harry singing?” Ori asked in his sweet voice, the others piling in behind him and staring at the pair by the fire.

Harry arched a brow and Bilbo sighed, taking a seat on the stone ledge of the fireplace and picking up the lute from the stand beside it, setting his pipe aside for the moment.

“Did you know,” Gandalf mused, in what one could assume was a non-sequirter if the meddling old badger didn’t know far too much of supposedly-secret lore from all of the Free Peoples. “That hobbits didn’t always live in the Shire, young Master Ori?”

“They didn’t?” Ori blinked, already digging out his journal and ink to take notes. “Then where did they come from?”

“Our homeland is far to the east, not unlike your own.” Bilbo wrinkled his nose at Harry as he finished checking the tuning of his lute and strummed a few lines. “During the first part of the Third Age however, the threat from Dol Guldur at the southern tip of the Greenwood became too serious what with orc raids and bandits and evils of all sorts. It heralded a migration of the majority of our people west. Exiles, of a sort.” Bilbo’s hazel gaze cut on crystal-Durin-blue across the parlor.

Taking his cue, Harry began to sing:

“Land of bear and land of eagle
Land that gave us birth and blessing
Land that calls us ever homewards
We will go home across the mountains.”

On the chorus, Bilbo – and Gandalf who’d heard the tune before joined in – followed in time by several of the dwarves who were enchanted with the simple tune that spoke of a longing they understood far too well.

“We will go home, we will go home
We will go home across the mountains
We will go home, we will go home
We will go home across the mountains.”

“Land of freedom land of heroes
Land that gave us hope and memories
Hear our singing hear our longing
We will go home across the mountains.”

By the second chorus even Thorin had deigned to join his voice into the tune and Dwalin had picked it up on his viol, Bofur on his clarinet, and the young princes on their fiddles. It was a simple tune, it was true. But in some ways all the stronger for it.

“We will go home, we will go home
We will go home across the mountains
We will go home, we will go home
We will go home across the mountains.”

“Land of sun and land of moonlight
Land that gave us joy and sorrow
Land that gave us love and laughter
We will go home across the mountains.”

“We will go home, we will go home
We will go home across the mountains
We will go home, we will go home
We will go home across the mountains.”

“When the land is there before us
We have gone home across the mountains.”

“We will go home, we will go home
We will go home across the mountains
We will go home, we will go home
We will go home across the mountains
We will go home, we will go home
We will go home across the mountains."

Then after the last round, Bilbo stilled his fingers on the lute, the dwarves following the signal, leaving only Harry’s voice to rise and fall over the final lines of the Song of Exile:

“To the land that gave us birth and blessing,
Hear our singing, hear our longing,
We will go home across the mountains.”

Applause and cheers broke over the parlor, dwarves being quite fond of music and that tune exactly the sort of thing they cared about, Harry rising with a bow as Thorin came forward to stare into the fire as the gathering shifted and reformed into new groups and began to hum in turn, his dwarrow easily picking up the song as the hobbits and wizard watched.

“Far over the misty mountains cold…”

…

Thorin returned to the master bedroom of Bag End more than an hour after the rest of the Company had made for their beds, staying up late in discussion regarding their quest with Balin and Dwalin.

The latter of whom was still displeased regarding the inclusion of the younger hobbit.

For his part, Thorin would sooner take the fiery – if infuriatingly disrespectful – younger sibling over the gentle fussbudget of their elder brother.

Master Baggins, from what Thorin could tell, only found his courage in the presence of his bold sibling.

But if the elder refused to stay whilst the younger was in danger – an attitude he could appreciate if nothing else – then it was best to have them both.

Even if they were already proving to be massive distractions for the Company without even having left their home as of yet.

Case in point: upon opening the door to the master bedroom Thorin found a pair of wide-eyed dwarflings staring at him in guilty surprise instead of his heirs and best fighters and scouts getting a sound sleep before returning to the trails of Eriador on the morrow.

Kíli opened his mouth to levy what would no doubt be some lack-witted excuse only to shut it with a click of teeth at a sigh and a raised hand from his – as far as Thorin was concerned – long-suffering uncle.

“Whatever it is, I don’t want to know.” He sighed, rubbing his eyes. “Just… get some sleep. This quest is going to be trying enough without starting off on a fight and a lack of sleep.”

“Yes, Uncle Thorin…”
Chapter 10

Sons of a Took

Chapter Ten: Stubborn Dwarves and Infuriating Halflings

Harry wasn’t surprised that the first argument of the Quest for Erebor occurred before they even left Bag End the morning they were to away.

A quick, if hot, breakfast had been had by all and Bilbo had passed off the keys to the smial to the Gamgees as planned with the dwarves and Harry saddling ponies in the back field behind Baggins Hill, Gandalf again nowhere to be found, when Master Oakenshield noted a – rather deliberate on the part of the hobbits’ – omission he’d overlooked.

That of Harry’s hounds who rather than being locked inside the smial or handed off like so much baggage to the Gamgees were tousling playfully in the grass edging Bag Shot Row with thick leather collars the width of a dwarven hand around their necks along with what appeared to be modified saddlebags strapped to their backs.

They weren’t heavy, neither of them were full-grown yet and Harry was as ever conscientious of that fact, but the little they carried (their dishes and a few emergency supplies as neither could be trusted with food) helped lessen the burden on other backs without hindering or hurting them.

Gamble and Ash were boarhounds after all and more than strong enough to manage that much, even half-grown.

“This journey is no place for pets, halfling.”

Thorin sneered the words as if they were interchangeable, making it a very good thing for his continued existence that the only hobbit in earshot was Harry. His temper might be formidable but Bilbo in particular had a dislike for that sort of thing. Harry had been a hobbit longer than he’d been a wizard but first lessons learned often lasted the longest making Harry Potter, who’d been dragged through the muck and grime of slander and adulation alike, an inordinately thick-skinned hobbit…when he chose to be anyway.

When it came to his own self it took more than that to get a rise out of him.

In that he and his brother were almost identical, rising faster and fiercer to any challenge of their loved ones than they would that leveled at themselves, a fact of dealing with the Baggins siblings which stood to make the trail to Erebor quite interesting indeed.

“Gamble and Ash aren’t pets anymore than Tulip and Daisy are.” He answered the foul-tempered dwarf placidly. “They’re boarhounds, trained specially to assist in foraging and protection aside from being quite capable hunters,” not that Harry particularly enjoyed that fact of life but it did make traveling with them easier when he hadn’t enough extra to fill their growing bellies. “And can fend for their own stomachs so long as there is small game about.”

“They’re boarhounds?” Glóin perked up, craning his head around the pony he was helping pack with supplies purchased in the Hobbiton market once it became clear that the hobbits had mounts of their own, allowing for more supplies to go with the riderless ponies. He’d heard of the breed before as he traveled with the merchant caravans, quite fierce beasts from all accounts. “Then he’s right, cousin.” He told Thorin unrepentantly at the scowl shot his way by his King. “They’ll
likely be more useful to have about then our princes."

“Oi!” Fíli and Kíli protested *that* in loud chorus.

“Enough,” Thorin sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger as his heirs began to bicker with Glóin. “Let us be away before the hobbits find a rabbit or perhaps a kitten they’d like to haul along as well with the rest of the menagerie.”

Snickering, shrugging, or rolling their eyes depending on the person, the Company of Thorin Oakenshield did just that to the small audience of the neighboring Gamgee family and a single raven watching from the branches of Bag End’s oak before taking wing towards the East and home.

…

It took all of a minute stopped at the crossroads outside Hobbiton for Harry to sigh and turn Tulip towards the path that would have them intersecting with the East-West Road since the dwarrow weren’t quite muttering quietly enough for him to miss that their illustrious leader didn’t know his arse from his elbow when it came to navigating the Shire…though he’d already gotten that idea given he’d – by his own admission – gotten lost *twice* trying to find Bag End.

Made him rather glad the broody lump that his brother kept sneaking peeks at hadn’t left the immediate vicinity of Bag End yesterday lest they’d have to spend the evening searching for his royal lostness.

“*Honestly,* Gandalf.” Harry rolled his eyes at the wizard who was content to smoke his pipe and bring up the rear of the Company on his horse – though where he’d procured it or even where the *fuck* he’d come from since he definitely wasn’t with them when they left Bag End – instead of being useful. “You’ve run amok in the Shire for *how* many centuries now? Surely you could’ve told His Royal Broodiness which way to Bree.”

“Our quest is to remain a secret, Mister Harry.” Balin rode up beside the handsome dappled mountain ponies – from Rohan or he was an elf – the hobbits rode, the younger with much greater ease than the elder. “If that wasn’t properly conveyed before.”

The Baggins siblings snorted in stereo before looking at each other with bright grins and almost fell off their ponies laughing.

Balin looked in utter bafflement between the siblings and his kinfolk.

“I don’t know what I said that was taken as humorous.”

“This is the *Shire,* Master Balin.” Gandalf enlightened, huffing a chuckle of his own. “I’m afraid that dwarves are not a common sight here. A company of thirteen plus a wizard and two hobbits would be a matter of great interest to most. Secrecy, insofar as to the Company heading to Bree, will be quite difficult if not impossible to attain.”

“Word has already spread from Michel Delving to Tuckborough and back or I’m a badger.” Bilbo predicted. “Might as well make good time and use the good road before heading to less traveled paths.”

“Hiding in plain sight is a time-honored hobbitry tradition.” Harry grinned unrepentantly after brushing away a few tears of mirth from the corner of his eyes. “If we don’t *act* like there’s something to hide until we reach a point where our very presence won’t arouse interest we’ll be of little note to the hobbits of the Shire, gossipy creatures that they are.”
“Excuse me.” Bilbo arched a brow at his brother.

Harry shrugged. “You’re excused. That doesn’t make me wrong.”

“Perhaps if you didn’t give them so very much of interest to talk about…”

“Excuse you!” Harry narrowed his eyes viciously. “But if I recall, I wasn’t the one who took up – quite scandalously – with Farmer Maggot’s oldest lad for six months before a public row…”

“Why you…!”

Almost in unison the dwarrow and one wizard pulled back from the two hobbit-bearing ponies and the hounds loping along at their sides.

They may not understand their hobbit companions – yet – but some things were universal.

And any dwarrow worth their stones knew better than to get in the middle of squabbling siblings lest they make themselves a target of both.

…

Though it ran contrary to their initial impressions of the hobbith, the dwarrow were to a one glad to see the pair of hobbith appear from their shared room at Bag End the morning of the quest dressed in sturdy traveling attire rather than silks or brocades.

As the sun neared the western horizon, preparing to set for the day, they could barely tell that either hobbit had spent the day on pony-back aside from the grey hairs clinging here or there to brown (Harry) or dark green trousers and coats, the pair almost passing for twins they were dressed so similarly save for colors with Bilbo’s dark tans and greens contrasting with Harry’s dark browns and blues.

Harry was still in the lead of the Company by the time it came to rest for the night, turning them down a near-hidden lane that adjoined the East-West Road between Bywater and Frogmorton.

A quarter-hour later and the dwarrow had their opinions once more adjusted as rather than Bilbo, as both the elder and head of family, taking the lead as they approached what appeared to be a prosperous farm but Harry who clicked his tongue and whistled for his hounds who bounded over the hedgerow returning from whatever doggy-business had had them parting from their person’s side.

Trotting up to the hobbit who looked up from their work by the barn, the dwarrow watched in either curiosity or boredom – or a mixture of the two – as the youngest member of their company arranged their stay at the homestead.

“Farmer Brownfoot offers use of his corral for the ponies and the hayloft for us as well as all the fresh water we could want and porridge in the morning.” Harry reported to Thorin as despite how it looked at times he was aware that the other was in fact in charge of the Company he’d signed on with. “We’ll have to sort our own supper and keep any fires out in the stableyard contained.”

“How much?” Glóin, the ever-cautious merchant and banker, nearly grunted the question.

Harry didn’t mind as he was well-aware that the content of his answer would determine – for some of the dwarves at least – his usefulness insofar as negotiations with his fellow hobbith was concerned.
“Nothing from you.” Harry side-stepped the truth of the matter. Hobbit secrets would remain just that, thank-you-very-much, secret. At least until he’d decided for good and all if the lot of stone-headed dwarves could be trusted to keep what they learned to themselves anyway. “Just that I take a look at a few of his fields and livestock while we’re here and my brother takes his evening constitutional in the fallow field beside the hedgerow.”

The dwarrow exchanged confused looks – meanwhile Gandalf didn’t look near enough confused for either hobbits’ liking – but agreed easily enough, dismissing it as more hobbit oddness and not letting it bother them in the wake of what was – for them – quite the tidy arrangement.

Except for Thorin, who leaned over to Dwalin and growled a stiff “watch them” into his ear in Khuzdûl.

…

“Well?” Farmer Brownfoot asked the Baggins pair as they met back up after their – as Harry had put it to the dwarves – “evening constitutional.”

“Wild mustard greens seem to have taken root in your fallow field.” Bilbo mused over his pipe, all three of the hobbits knowing full-well that they were being watched and their words were justifiably guarded in turn. “As well as radishes.”

“I think you can expect a bumper – and early – crop of all your leafy greens, herbs, and peas.” Harry added with an exhilarated grin.

There was nothing he liked better than letting his magic, his inborn hobbit power of the earth, to run wild through a field or forest. Thanks to the control he’d had in his first-life, he was better than any other hobbit at working with fields and forests, animals, and all living things instead of being suited to perhaps one or two plants that took to him particularly well or perhaps shy of a dozen or so if he was particularly talented as the Gamgees and Greenhands tended to be. It made him a valuable commodity in the Shire and one of their best-kept secrets.

His occupation as a tinker was part of that secret, not that he didn’t truly enjoy it – he did. But if anyone knew what the youngest Baggins faunt was capable of he’d be kidnapped by some heathen looking to make a few gold pieces and kept chained to the land in some arid region such as Harad or on the estate of a greedy Man.

If the fields of longbottom-leaf tended to perk up after he’d been to South Farthing to fix a fence or Farmer Rumble’s goats kidded twins when Harry’d paid a visit during breeding season, well that was just luck wasn’t it?

Bilbo had a dab hand with the wilder growths, made for forests rather than fields, while others like Lobelia who could barely manage stinging nettles and mint were mightily jealous of the skills that good, respectable Baggins blood wedded to the wild Took ramblers had produced as much as they were of Bilbo’s prize-winning tomatoes and Hadley’s sunflowers that grew larger than a grown hobbit’s head.

No, the dwarrow of the Company didn’t need to know what a hobbit could do just by walking through a field if they chose.

Perhaps in time it was a secret they could be trusted with.

But for now, like the dwarrow’s grumbling and growling in Khuzdûl, hobbity things were best left to the hobbits.
The dwarrow of the Company of Thorin Oakenshield kept to themselves that night and the next two after that, as Harry found them willing farmers with a barn and a field for their ponies to borrow with an ease similar to a skilled dwarrow miner locating an ore vein.

Everyone they passed in the Shire seemed to know their hobbits and was willing to put up with strangers roosting in their haylofts if it meant that the Company’s hobbits walked a field or inspected livestock.

It was one of the strangest things the dwarves had experienced in their collective lives.

Well, maybe not Nori, but as a wandering thief by his second trade he had a higher threshold for odd than the rest of his kin.

On the fourth day of their journey they approached Bree…and the next, rather inevitable, clash between one Hadley “Harry” Baggins and Thorin Oakenshield, King of Durin’s Folk.

“What did I say?” Harry hissed, a tight smile on his face as he walked far too close to the massive — well, in comparison anyway — dwarven king through Bree with his hounds at his heels rather than left with the ponies at the ostler as the King would prefer. “Hiding in plain sight! Entering the town for supplies then disappearing before nightfall when there’s not another settlement within an easy ride is not bloody subtle!”

Thorin growled something back in Khuzdûl that Harry was glad no one was willing to translate.

No matter how rude it was that the stubborn dwarves did that shit all the time!

They were one growl-and-laugh (though it had to be noted it was mostly the older dwarves behaving as such with the exception of an in-constant-state-of-disapproval Dori) away from Bilbo and Harry conversing solely in Green Tongue for a week for a taste of their own tonic!

His brother had suggested Sindarin, but Harry wasn’t as fluent as Bilbo and there was a chance that the royals at least knew some of the language for diplomatic purposes.

No matter how far from royal or diplomatic the head-bloody-dwarf insisted on behaving beyond being utterly high-handed when sensible hobbits lodged sensible hobbity suggestions.

At this point Harry was willing to risk a tongue-lashing from Great-Aunt Pumpernickel if it meant getting one over on the rude dwarves he’d saddled himself with.

Worst of it all was he only had himself — and, well, Gandalf — to blame.

Left to his own devices with a younger sibling still at home, nothing short of blasting powder would’ve likely worked on getting Bilbo dislodged from Bag End for something so fraught with risk as an adventure — the amount of mooning, however discreet, Bilbo was doing over Thorin-bloody-Oakenshield’s singing voice aside.

Once again, Harry’s saving-people-thing mixed with a healthy sense of adventure and curiosity and a distinct lack of self-preservation had given him his comeuppance…only this time it was in the form of tear-inducing stifled frustration instead of deadly peril…though there was some of that too should they make it to Erebor.
Throwing up his hands in exasperation, Harry shot Balin a crystal-clear look that verily shouted for the advisor to *do something* with the stone-headed dwarf he called King.

Given that the quick-and-dirty discussion took place in Khuzdûl and left neither dwarf looking pleased at the end of it before Balin took charge of negotiating their one-night stay at the next inn they came to, it was apparent that while logic had prevailed, the war against Oakenshield’s terminal case of grumpy uncooperative obstinacy had yet to be won.

Harry was halfway certain at this point that the King-in-Exile needed a swift kick up the arse more than any mountain…and that Gandalf had wanted a hobbit along to keep the blasted idiot from leading the Company right off a cliff when he got lost one time too many.

As not one of the dwarrow would ever truly naysay or fight Thorin’s decisions once they were made, each was entirely plausible if not a particularly charitable opinion of the dwarven King.

Maybe Harry was just cranky – in fact it was entirely possible that a good half of his discontent with his dwarrow companions was due to him being cranky – but he thought it was an idea that still held merit nonetheless.

Other than Bofur and Bombur, both of whom were perennially good-natured, none of the dwarrow had gone out of their way to be friendly with the hobbits after all and more than a few of them tended to slip into whispered conversations in Khuzdûl more often than not, further excluding him and his brother from their company, a trend that had started after the revelation of Harry’s dual-nature.

It wasn’t…foul or spiteful, of that he was relatively certain.

More, if he had to wager on it, it was a case of just plain not knowing what to think about him or how to act around him as he was neither male nor female, leaving the dwarrow somewhat adrift when it came to him and correspondingly Bilbo.

The young trio were a different sort of confused and tongue-tied altogether, sheer bashfulness on the part of Ori or Harry was a horklump, while the other two...well. They were hardly the first young males in the world to find themselves at a loss when it came to the object of their all-too-obvious infatuation. Infatuation that rather than shrink or disappear or sour as he’d expected, only grew as they watched him butt-heads with their uncle.

No, it was the - if he had to guess - elder toffs that were having issues truly coming to grips with things that was causing a lot of the rudeness.

Dwarrow, Harry knew from his limited interactions with them in Needlehole or Bree, had rather rigid beliefs when it came to treatment of dwarrowdams as they were so rare among their people, hence the instant respect and actions taken by Dwalin when he’d met Harry. That, he thought, was rather the sticking point of the dwarrows hot-and-cold behavior. He looked and behaved – most of the time – in ways that would correspond with male stereotypes but their initial impressions of him to a one was that of a female albeit a fiery one with a steel backbone.

They didn’t know how to handle ambiguity from what he’d seen in the last week or so.

Not a lot of flex or compromise in their characters except maybe Balin and the younger dwarrow who as a diplomat and just being *young* hadn’t either the luxury or the time to settle into intransigency.

Nori just flat-out didn’t trust *anyone* from what Harry could tell.
Which when the thief siddled up to him in the taproom of the inn that night while Harry was looking over maps and considering various routes for them to take, surprised him more than a little since it definitely wasn’t to try and swipe his coin purse.

The thief had learned the folly of that the first day on the trail after he’d found himself tripping over every root, branch, and thicket in sight until Harry and Bilbo’s purses were returned – almost magically – to their bedrolls that night.

Nori had been eyeing them speculatively ever since but hadn’t rushed to make any decisions from the vibe Harry got off of him.

“Going straight on the East-West road to the Misty Mountains is asking for trouble.” The thief started at once as he thunked his pint of ale down onto the table along with a half-pint of the spiced cider he’d noted the dual-natured hobbit favored. Interesting creature the hobbit. Or perhaps hobbits. They made a curiously effective team at maneuvering those around them, made ever more entertaining – for Nori at least – that almost none of the other dwarrow noticed it.

Honestly, he couldn’t say what either Balin or the wizard took note of one way or another, their minds working in such odd ways that trying to sort out those quagmires was left for dwarrow with a lot more time – and interest to be perfectly blunt – than Nori cared to give to contemplation of the subject.

The hobbits were a different story.

From their secrets – of which he was sure they held more than one and quite a few of the sink-your-teeth-into variety – to their interactions with each other and the hobbits they’d come across on the road to their behavior the first night with the Company and every night since to how they treated and were treated in turn by the Men of Bree.

Nori would’ve bet good coin that the almost childlike-way the Men treated the grown hobbits – near patronizing it was – would’ve seen them treated to a diatribe of the ilk Gandalf and Thorin alike had been the target of by one or perhaps both hobbits. Instead… Instead they not only tolerated it they did little things, almost unnoticeable shifts of behavior and speech, that encouraged it.

He didn’t know if it was sheer cunning or pragmatism or most likely a combination of both but whatever spurred it on, it was impressive as it saw them treated to the best “small folk” rooms the inn boasted, an excellent meal, and hot baths when the dwarrow of the Company had to pay over good coin for the same sort of service and with not anywhere near the level of congeniality from the innkeep or his maids.

“Aye, that it is.” Harry agreed after a long moment of switching his bright green gaze between the tankard – likely part peace-offering and part bribe – and the thief with his star-shaped hair-and-beard coif. “Sticking to the road was fine for the Shire – and diverging would’ve drawn attention we didn’t and don’t need, but a bit of befouling the water is in order at this point I think in case anyone is looking for the Company of our illustrious leader.”

“That’s all well and good.” Nori threw out the bait, wanting to see how the hobbit’s mind worked before venturing his own thoughts. “But it’s a bit hard to hide thirteen dwarrow, a wizard, and a pair of hobbits passing through.”

“We don’t need to hide it.” Harry smirked, having a decent idea of what the thief was doing but playing along – to a point – nonetheless. “My plan, or what I have of one, counts on the opposite actually.”
Nori arched a brow. “You really are a fan of the *in plain sight* method of concealment, aren’t you?”

“Oh you have no idea,” Harry muttered almost too softly for the dwarrow to pick up, thinking back to more than once where misdirection and trying to be underhanded had bit him in the ass. Or gotten someone he loved killed. “The simpler the plan the less variables there are to screw up.”

“I’m listening.” Nori tilted his head, getting a better look at the maps laid out on the table and noting the handwritten notes in several of the margins. Notes that belonged to the hobbit beside him if his snooping at Bag End had borne any good fruit. Hadley Baggins had a less…*flourishing* hand. One more practical and to-the-point than their brother’s elegant script. Much like the hobbits in question he thought. “Tell me your idea and I’ll help you make it into something our *illustrious leader* can accept with minimal fuss and balking if I like it. If I don’t I’ll help you refine it into something that a dwarrow won’t throw a fit over.”

“Deal.”
A soft knock on the door holding Thorin and his nephews – he wouldn’t allow them to bunk anywhere else, especially in a town of Men, grown (supposedly) dwarrow or not – turned the trio from their near-meditative work sharpening their various weapons.

Nodding to his nephews who took hold of their swords, Thorin moved to the door and cracked it open.

He wasn’t sure what he expected to see on the other side.

Hadley Baggins standing side-by-side with Nori however wasn’t it.

The frustrating baggage of a hobbit had what was likely a rolled map in their hands while Nori simply arched a brow at Thorin, sending a wordless message to the dwarven King to let them in and listen to whatever scheme they’ve cooked up.

Holding in a sigh – as well as a groan and an eye roll – Thorin stepped back and waved them in, the lads taking that as their signal to return to their task.

Though how effective they were going to be at it with the hobbit in the room Thorin couldn’t vouch for.

Mahal to be that young and clueless.

At least they’d latched onto the fiery dual-natured hobbit instead of their brother, the age difference alone between Bilbo who had – if Thorin remembered hobbit lifespans correctly – perhaps five decades of life remaining ensuring that any feelings his sister-sons developed towards the elder Baggins of a romantic nature would make the match supremely ill-advised above and beyond the issue of, well, issue.

Thorin and his two visitors moved to the table where he put his sword in the sheath hanging from his chair, Kíli and Fíli spread out – especially given the arsenal of knives the latter liked to tote around – on the floor by the room’s hearth and leaving the other chairs for Hadley and Nori.

“We’ve an idea to keep our quest – and path – over the Misty Mountains as secret as possible.” Nori began as Hadley spread out the map, showing a rather-detailed depiction of Eriador complete with notes and warnings in Westron in the margins. “With the meeting of the envoys of the other kingdoms word is sure to spread of your purpose, Thorin, no matter what promises they made.”

“I’m listening.” He sat back, watching them closely.

“That the Company went through Bree is impossible to disguise.” Harry spoke up, gesturing around the room in a vague gesture. “The idea is to play off of what are common notions of the Breefolk to cast a false scent for any hunters on our trail.”

“You had my ear,” Thorin arched a brow. “Now you have my attention.”

Harry ignored the eyes almost burning into his back from the younger dwarrow as the brothers did
a piss-poor job of acting like they weren’t listening to the conversation playing out near them.

“T’m a Took at heart and known for adventures, a common sight here in Bree as I come or go for business or leisure.” Harry explained. “And I think we all know the prevailing idea regarding dwarves.”

Thorin nearly growled at that.

“So,” Harry resolutely ignored that display of displeasure. “We say we’re going treasure hunting in Fornost.” He tapped one finger on the ruined city on his map. “I’ve been before, not more than a year past and most importantly it’s not along the same path as the East-West road.”

“Misdirection.” Thorin nodded, turning the idea over a moment. “A decent plan but as you said: in the wrong direction.”

“Except.” Harry smiled, tracing a path through the forest north of Bree and over the Weather Hills. “That Fornost isn’t the only thing I’ve explored. I could lead a path through Chetwood, to the Weather Hills, and back down to the East-West Road near the Last Bridge. It’ll cost us maybe a day’s travel.”

Thorin studied the map, glancing a moment at the carefully-bland expression on Nori’s face as the other dwarf picked his nails with a dagger he’d produced seemingly out of midair.

He already knew Nori agreed or else the dwarf wouldn’t be sitting in the room with Hadley and Thorin.

“You’re certain you can navigate the path?”

Harry shrugged. “Once a hobbit knows a path it’s hard for them to forget it.” Which had more to do with their ability to read the earth and know the plants and trees and growing things but that wasn’t information the dwarves needed.

“How far north will we need to travel before striking east?”

From Thorin Oakenshield, Harry decided, that was likely as close to praise as he was likely to get.

…”

“Will that be all for you, Masters Baggins?” The genial – and best, gossipy – innkeep asked the brothers the next morning as the Company enjoyed a hot meal before they’d be on the trail for weeks without a stop at an inn, tavern, or convenient hayloft for respite.

“Yes, thank you.” Bilbo smiled politely at the rotund man as he dug into his hobbit-portioned plate of fried eggs, a rasher of bacon, cheese scones, and fried tomatoes.

“Better eat up, Bo.” Harry lightly teased his brother with a soft elbow to the side as he started on his own plate that had a ham steak instead of sausage. “Not a lot of fine kitchens between here and Fornost.”

Bilbo rolled his eyes even as he gave an internal frown, Glóin asking a question in Khuzdûl that was answered with a flurry of answers from the younger dwarves. If he had to guess it was the same that was circling his own brain to the tune of Fornost? Still, he did what he always did when Hadley surprised him and went with it until they had a moment for private conversation.

“Ah,” the innkeep chuckled. “Back to the ruins is it this time, Master Hadley?”
“A spot of treasure hunting with my brother and friends.” He shot a charming grin at the innkeep. “Not the worst path for a spring walking holiday if I do say so…” His grin turned cheeky as he darted a glance at his brother. “And it’s about time I got Bilbo out of the Shire for a spell again.”

…

“Fornost?” Bilbo asked quietly as they were mounted and on the road north out of Bree less than an hour later, the dogs sent off to track and scout or whatever it was they did without Hadley watching over them directly.

“A bit of misdirection.” Harry shared a smirk with Nori. “We’ll keep to the road until lunch then veer east through Chetwood and to the Weather Hills.”

Bilbo, well aware of the dangerous things his sibling’s brain was capable of, wasn’t sure if he liked this sudden comradery Hadley’d developed with who he’d tagged as the rogue of the Company’s dwarves.

Though the lack of arguments to start the day between said-sibling and the Company’s kingly leader was almost worth the trouble that that friendship – or whatever it was – would be certain to cause.

Glancing at the other members of the Company, Harry switched to Green Tongue and lowered his voice significantly.

“I need you to keep looking behind while I look ahead once we leave the road, brother.” He shot a pointed look at the other hobbit then the visible trail in the short spring grass that the Company left along the rarely-used northern road save for the Dúnedain Rangers. And those folk liked when the roads and paths and trails they traveled became overgrown the mad buggers. “Something is telling me that just getting to the Mountain won’t be as easy as the others think.”

“Whatever you need, Hadi.” Bilbo agreed, then frowned. “What of the risk?”

What of their secrets?

Harry winced, jerking a shoulder in a rough half-shrug.

“Hard to say. We will simply have to take things as they come.”

Bilbo groaned. “You know I hate it when you do that. Planning is prudent and good hobbit-sense.”

“Plans also rarely survive first contact with an outside force.” Harry counted easily. “Which is why I rarely worry about sticking to them.”

“Brat.”

“Fusspot.”

…

That night as they made camp under the eaves of Chetwood, Bilbo and Hadley found themselves – rather abruptly – sucked into the friendly chatter of the Company’s dwarrow as if the tacit approval of Nori had broken some sort of waiting tension or perhaps levied the final opinion the others had been waiting on.
If so, Harry rather approved of this show of sense.

He knew from his first life that the regard of a Slytherin could often be far harder to gain than any other of the Houses, and once lost was gone forever.

And Nori was a Slytherin if ever he’d met one in his second-life, right up there with a few of his Took cousins and a manipulative wizard.

His hounds had located a rather excellent cache of wood-ear mushrooms as well, putting the hobbits – and Bifur who of all the dwarrow seemed to appreciate “green food” or anything not meat, cheese, potatoes, or bread the best – in quite the state of contentment as Gamble and Ash sat just behind the hobbits, Bilbo using the black dog Gamble for a backrest as Harry did the same with his brindle-grey bitch Ash.

Harry held in a huff.

And Thorin wanted him to leave them behind.

Thus far, his hounds had been of far more use than more than half of the dwarrow of the Company and considerably more useful than Gandalf.

He would, naturally, make an exception for Fíli and Kíli who served as decent enough scouts and hunters, Bombur’s skill with the cookpot, and Glóin’s ability to spark a fire no matter how damp the fuel they could find but the rest he wasn’t certain of their value beyond being barmy enough to follow Thorin to face a dragon for all that Bofur and Ori were quite genial conversationalists and Balin managed to wrangle Thorin better than anyone else.

He’d also noticed a slight – but visible – divide among the dwarrow that had taken him a day or two to sort.

And it was one as simple as nobles and commoners.

Fucking stupid in his opinion considering that things like traveling rough and epic quests tended to break down social barriers but he thought they might get there eventually. The look on Bilbo’s face – followed by the sheer disgruntlement of his brother for the rest of that third night on the trail before they reached Bree – was entertaining as hell. He’d thought it had to do with family – and it did to an extent.

Kíli always had his bedroll stretched out between Fíli on one side and Thorin on the outside edge with Dwalin on the outside of Thorin and Balin near his brother but closer to the fire. Nearest to Balin, without fail, were the pair of Óin and Glóin, then the brothers ‘Ri with Ori tucked between Dori who was always closest to Glóin and Nori who was also close to the out edge of the camp. The ‘Urs came next with Bifur nearest the outside and Bombur the inside, then Hadley closest to Bofur and Bilbo closing the ring nearest the royals. It was rigid and unchanging with Gandalf often rolling out his bedroll beyond the circle near a convenient tree or shrub.

Interesting in concept since it allowed the most dangerous dwarrow easy access to stop an attacker.

Frustrating in practice since it rather encouraged the class lines to remain intact outside of meals and the hours they spent on pony-back with the hobbits hovering in a bit of no-man’s land since the dwarrow were aware that Bilbo was a landholder – or a lord as they saw things – with Harry as his heir but they also weren’t dwarrow and subject to the class strictures of their culture.

It said quite a bit about Harry he thought that he happily flouted their class lines the moment he became fully aware of how entrenched – if invisible – they were, speaking as easily with Balin as
he did with the Ur’s and making more of a point of it as well.

He was tempted to rearrange their bedrolls one night for shits-and-giggles but wasn’t quite *that* irritated with them yet.

Though he wasn’t ruling out that he’d get there eventually as they had *months* together to look forward to irritating the ever-loving-shit out of each other.

The siblings’ inclusion into the dwarrow’s circle came without warning as the trail had been the same as ever with Harry at the front – Bilbo on one side or back talking to Gandalf or Bofur, Thorin on the other – and navigating their way off the northern road and east to Chetwood with Fíli and Kíli ranging ahead to scout or hunt if they could, with a pair of hounds tailing them more often than not.

Harry wasn’t certain what to think about his beloved pups getting along so well with the dwarrow princes but he knew it was in the best interest of the Company as the princes and the hounds served, basically, the same purpose of scouting and hunting and foraging.

He didn’t have to like it…but he wasn’t sure if he disliked it either, which was his issue with the princes in a nutshell.

They’d been overt about their interest in him – even if it was just a shallow interest upon first meeting – at Bag End before backing off a bit with the revelation of his dual-nature. But not all the way. They still shot him intrigued looks though the bright-red blushes have diminished in number, but still occurred. It was clear they were confused – about him, about how to deal with him, about his dual-nature, et al. – and as a result were being rather reticent when from his observations, they didn’t behave that way about anything or anyone else.

They would start to approach him or Bilbo then stop and go elsewhere.

Look like they were going to strike up a conversation only to click their teeth shut and scurry off.

It had been entertaining…until yesterday when their burning gazes in Thorin’s room as Harry discussed the plan with Thorin and intently listening postures made it clear that their interest in him had in no way waned.

They just didn’t know what the fuck to *do* about it.

He was tempted to bet with Bilbo over whether it was their ages – not much over maturity from what he understood – or Harry himself that was causing the problem.

Or the quest.

The seriousness of the quest staying their hands was entirely possible.

Though the whole situation, when the princes plopped down with their pipes on his right and Ori crowded in on Bilbo’s left, the others coming close to “their” part of the camp and fire instead of ranging out in their rigid-ordered circle, brought another concern to mind.

If they *did* stop dancing around the fact that it was clear to him, Bilbo, the Company, and even the birds in the trees that the princes fancied him, *what* did Harry intend to *do* about it…and did he fancy them in return?

…
“Can you tell us more about hobbits?” Ori asked sweetly, his journal open and pen in hand, which was a bit of a surprise to Harry.

He’d been focused so much on the quest and their path to Erebor and so on that he hadn’t paid much attention to what his brother was discussing with the younger dwarrow and Bofur on their rides.

“What’ve you been telling them, ‘Bo?” Harry asked with a bit of a laugh and a wrinkled nose for the pipe that his brother lit. He didn’t mind the smell, especially out in the open when it didn’t linger, but he was too much – still – the product of his first-lifetime to indulge for himself in the tobacco-like pipeweed.

Now the more…herbal, or, ah, mellow dried weeds that ended up in a pipe at the Great Smials was a different story but on the trail was no place to get giggly, hungry, or inordinately sleepy.

He brought oil infused with the mellow-weed that hobbit-healers used for pain relief and sleep tonics but that was strictly medicinal and not recreational given the efficacy of it.

“Just a few things about our way of life, Hadi.” Bilbo reassured his suspicious sibling with a wave of his pipe. “And our history as they were interested after you shared the Song of Exile with them.”

“Ah.” Harry apologized with a half-smile for his tone. “The Wandering Days as we left the Vales of Anduin. It took what, a few hundred years before we found a land that truly suited us?”

“A gift from the Green Lady was the Shire.” Bilbo sighed, eyes half-closed in peaceful reverie as he felt the life of the forest under his feet and let it cycle through him, well aware that his sibling was likely doing the same though for different purposes. Bilbo was using his particular talent for the wild things to hide any trace of their path whilst Hadley, per their agreement, would be seeking the path ahead for danger.

It wasn’t a perfect thing what Hadi was doing as Bilbo well knew. What was dangerous to a hobbit wasn’t necessarily dangerous to a tree or a flower after all. But it helped, that couldn’t be denied.

And as his sibling had reached maturity and grown fully into their abilities they’d only gotten better at refining the spectacular gift that the Green Lady had given him.

“What do you want to hear about this time, Ori?” Bilbo asked after a long moment as he focused on the conversation around him once more and noted that they had the attention of more than just the younglings as the elder dwarves were paying strict attention to them without seeming to pay any at all. Though other than Nori and Balin they weren’t the best at it.

“Actually,” Ori shot a bashful look at Harry. “I was wondering if Mister Harry minded tell us about dual-natured hobbits.”

Harry chuckled lightly. “I wondered how long it would take one of you to come out and ask since I imagine the information dwarrow possess on the subject is both scant and theoretical given that Aulë didn’t fashion you that way.”

Ori blushed as the other dwarrow shifted, caught.

“Let’s make this easy.” Bilbo slapped his hands on his thighs as he finished his pipe then started tapping out the ash and cleaning the bowl before stowing it away in his traveling coat. “What do you know about dual-natured folk?”
“Just that, really.” Ori shrugged, fidgeting as the eyes of the rest of the Company turned and locked on the youngest members of the Company, shy from all the attention. Especially from both his mentor Balin and his King, Thorin. “Dual-natured folk are both male and female, with the uh,” his blush turned a heated red from the tips of his ears to the top of his chest as his quill shook a bit in hand. “Functions of both.”

Bilbo and Harry shared a gaze before rolling their eyes in unison, Bilbo waving towards his sibling and sitting back, the very picture of this one’s all yours.

“While I don’t know how elves,” he continued despite the curses and sneers the mention brought forth. “Handle things or how things are done in hobbit settlements outside the Shire, our mother always made it clear that I could be male or female or neither or both as I chose when it came to my gender and all that it entails.”

“We have that same belief with our people.” Thorin spoke up gruffly from where he’d been hovering behind his nephews as he half paid attention to the conversation and half kept-watch. He had to say it as no one else would, dwarrow as serious about their secrets as any species and more careful with them then most. Among the Company only Balin would truly dare to speak as he next to Thorin had the best idea of what could be shared and what should be shared with outsiders. “As many of our dwarrowdams prefer to dress and act as dwarrow when outside our halls.”

“Right.” Harry arched a brow and dipped his head in acknowledgement of the King’s input. “But that’s a matter of gender and all that entails: dress, behavior, what professions we’re open to, courtship, marriage, the whole lot and isn’t as flexible as what dwarrow allow except in the matter of our dual-natured faunts, which is determined by physical sex.”

There was more than one wrinkled brow over that.

“You mean…” Ori trailed off as he scribbled fiercely to jot down every word.

“That flexibility of gender is only allowed for dual-natured hobbits?” Bilbo asked drily as he leaned back with his hands folded over his belly against Gamble. “You’d be right and even then not all families or clans keep to that overarching culture norm.”

“Like who?” Fíli asked, a bit of dread pooling in his stomach at the dark looks on the faces of the siblings.

“Like the Baggins family.” Harry supplied with a derisive snort when Bilbo firmly shut his mouth with a pinched look on his face, all without opening his eyes. “Our late father didn’t hold with the idea of letting a dual-natured fauntling freedom of choice and fought often with our Took mother on the subject. As a result while I knew – intellectually – that I could choose realistically I presented myself as male until his death.”

“Hobbits,” Gandalf added from the shadows, startling more than one of the Company at the abrupt reminder that he was still around. “Are bound to certain expectations of behavior depending on the family they were born into. The Baggins Family and the Took Clan might be the strongest remaining bloodlines of the old Fallohides but in behavior and demeanor they tend to be quite disparate.”

“Baggins keep the records and the histories.” Harry wrinkled his nose. “Tooks make history.”

“Ahh…” Murmurs and nods of realization abounded through the Company dwarrow as certain clans of dwarrow also tended toward certain trades and professions.
“Our parents were quite the scandal.” Bilbo smirked, opening his eyes a fraction in a satisfied-cat expression. “The wildest Took of her generation wedded to the staidest Baggins son – and the Heir no less!”

The siblings snickered in unison, Harry leaning over to nudge Bilbo’s shoulder with his hand.

“We’ve strayed a bit from our topic however.” Harry said around a yawn, ready to bed down for the night, though thankfully Thorin’s paranoia served a handy purpose: neither hobbit was yet expected to take a watch shift. “Dual-natured hobbits can inherit the same as a male, court or be courted, can wed either a male, female, or another dual-natured hobbit as children are possible in any permutation, and most professions are open to us though given our fertility we’re often expected to wed-and-bed rather than seek employment. Really,” he sighed. “We’ve the most options and freedom of any hobbit which others can sometimes resent though even we’re not able to escape from all expectations. If I wasn’t so thick-skinned when it comes to gossip for example, I never would’ve been able to become, as you say, a tinker rather than a landholder or maybe a tailor or seamstress.”

“Hobbits sound a bit…” Fíli chewed on his words a moment though leave it to Kíli to say what he was thinking with his normal lack-of-tact.

“Stuffy.”

Bilbo scowled as Harry howled with laughter before snuggling down into his bedroll using Ash as a breathing pillow.

“They are.” Bilbo said drily. “As Hadley would be more than glad to inform you loudly and at length when they’re not so tired. And no: my sibling won’t excuse me from that most-horrible, in their opinion, appellation.”
Chapter Twelve: Edge of the Storm

The next morning, Thorin, who always took last watch as Dwalin took first, watched as the siblings went through a now-routine round of Hadley waking up before everyone else save for whoever was on watch and rousing their brother just enough to get him to stop snuggling with whichever hound had served as half-pillow and half-heater – Thorin couldn’t lie, the beasts were large enough that whoever was on the far side of one of the siblings, usually Thorin himself and the miner-turned-toymaker Bofur, got the benefit of the extra heat-source – and send them off into the wood or surrounding area. The younger hobbit would see to their own ablutions while the hounds took care of their own needs, often shaking out outer layers of clothing for dust and dirt, then would rouse Bombur to help with the morning porridge. Hadley Baggins did this every morning save for when they were in Bree, for the last days despite often being one of the last to sleep.

They were, Thorin had to admit, an interesting creature if not to his personal taste for paramour as the redhead obviously was to his nephews.

Betting regarding that mess was fast and furious with – though it would shock most outsiders – Dori holding the book, as the dour dwarrow was far too straight-laced to cheat and nearly partook of betting himself.

Though from the flickers of frustrated looks on the hobbit’s part – never there for long and oft-missed by most – Thorin might lay down some gold on the hobbit changing the current rather entertaining flustered confusion of his nephews if for no other reason than to stop having the pair dance around them.

Cunning and intelligent Hadley Baggins certainly was.

Patience, however, didn’t seem to be a trait they possessed even if Thorin wasn’t certain if it was lacking in general or only when faced with the constant source of frustration, irritation, and/or confusion on a day-and-night basis.

Which when he thought about it that way, Thorin likely wouldn’t be any better…and if the redhead’s brother, soft creature that he was, was a source of similar frustration for Thorin with his quick-and-hidden glances at his face and form that quickly turned to scowls and temper whenever Thorin actually spoke that was no one’s business but his what was making him foul-tempered.

Or, well, fouler-tempered than usual.

This morning, it seemed, was the first that had Hadley Baggins deviating from their routine as after sending off their hounds and shaking out their outer layers before redressing, they went to a pack that had sat untouched on the back of their pony. It was long, as long as the hobbit, but not very wide. And when they opened it and took out what the pack had hidden Thorin arched a surprised brow, seeing why the pack was so oddly shaped and light.
The bow was the simplest recurve Thorin had seen in his life, nearly a longbow without the angular lines of dwarrow-craft while still retaining the proper shape of a recurve, the simple brown wood without any carving or embellishment but smoothly polished. Its bowstring that Hadley removed from the pack in a simple coil of black appeared to be horsehair, the hobbit working with quick and clever – and strong, Thorin admitted seeing the muscle required to set the string – hands to string the bow and test it with a simple draw and relax before making a minor adjustment and repeating the motions until they were satisfied. A simple quiver in plain brown to match the bow with arrows of varying size and fletching was the last item removed from the now-empty pack that was folded and tucked into another pack for safe-keeping, the quiver slung on and belted over the hobbit’s travel coat then the redhead with their simple thick plait of fiery hair went about the rest of their business rousing Bombur and ignoring the surprise at the sight of them being obviously armed.

Both hobbits carried simple folding knives that were more tool than weapon, while Thorin was certain that the younger kept a dagger hidden at the center of their back.

Hobbits, Gandalf had assured them and most folk knew anyway, were simple creatures not given to fighting and warfare.

Given the state and care of that bow and the familiarity Hadley showed with it, Thorin wasn’t certain any longer if that was strictly true…much like many other things he was having to reassess when it came to both hobbits in general and the pair that had joined his Company in particular.

…

“You’re an archer?!”

More than one member of the Company – including both Gandalf and Bilbo – had to hide sudden laughter with snorts, coughs, and bitten lips at Kíli stunned-but-ecstatic exclamation upon finishing rubbing the sleep out of his eyes and realizing what the new – to them – weaponry upon Hadley’s shapely back meant.

Even Fíli, the traitor, let loose with a quickly-swallowed-at-his-brother’s-glare chuckle before turning his head away and pretending to look at the canopy overhead at the hearts almost pouring out of Kíli’s dark brown eyes at their feisty – or maybe feistier given that Bilbo had had his moments of snark and tricksey behavior – hobbit.

Harry, for his part, only smirked green eyes dancing, and drawled: “That’s generally what’s implied by wearing a bow and quiver, yes.”

Ori, gentle soul that he was, stepped in before Kíli could really step in it.

“We were under the impression that hobbits didn’t use weapons, Master Harry.”

“Oh?” Harry exchanged a devilish glance with his brother who cast a searching glance around the camp before moving over to a certain spot and bending down to pick something up and hold it until the opportune moment. “Where’d you get that idea?”

“It’s common knowledge, Harry.” Bofur piped in as cheerful as ever.

“And,” Dwalin added gruffly, arms crossed over his broad barrel chest. “Master Baggins himself admitted he had no skill with sword or axe.”

“True enough.” Harry shrugged. “But I would think after the mistake regarding me that you lot would’ve learned not to assume things about hobbits. How did you think we survived during the
Wandering Days and before? Or had archers enough to send two hundred to the Battle of Fornost if not for at least some skill at arms? How did you think we vouchsafed the borders of the Shire, with our outstanding pumpkin crop?"

“Bilbo…” Bofur asked, having been given leave to use both siblings first-names their second day on the road, as did Bombur and Bifur (and Ori though the poor lad was far too proper to do so especially under the gimlet eye of his elder brother Dori.) “What, exactly, are conkers?”

“A game of skill for fauntlings, mostly.” Bilbo stretched and swung his arms, loosening the muscles in his shoulders and upper back. “Requiring precision and aim you try and crack a horse-chestnut on a string held by one player with your own. Being able to throw a stone or horse-chestnut or acorn and scare birds and rodents away from crops is a valuable skill in the Shire.”

“Bilbo’s aim and control are unequaled.” Harry bragged on his brother shamelessly then nodded towards an – abandoned, he could tell – bird’s nest high up a tree, his brother letting loose of the stone he’d plucked up and knocking it free to fall to the ground conveniently beside where Nori was being a lazy slug-a-bed and sending him jumping to his feet with a curse lest it smack him in the face. “Though,” he continued with laughter in his voice as Nori rained down curses on both their heads as the others guffawed. “As in many things I lean Took with weapons as well, hence the bow.”

“Why?” Ori was once more scribbling away even as the chaos of packing camp went on around him.

“Since they adventure more than any others,” Bilbo explained at a nudge from his sibling, Hadley whistling for his hounds to return from their morning ramble and wandering off to saddle their ponies, Bilbo knowing to follow with their packs in a bit. “Tooks learn the bow as faunts as well as to toss a stone or use a sling as well as, as Gandalf noted, how to go unseen and unnoticed as we wish.”

If Ori had a tail it’d be wagging, not unlike Kíli’s own nearly-vibrating with excitement self.

For while he had no romantic interest in either hobbit, it was nice to have something else in common with them since while he had many things to talk about with Bilbo as another bibliophile, Hadley was more than a bit intimidating to the quiet and shy dwarrow.

That said, there was another round of guffaws and eyerolls over the noise and cacophony of breaking camp when Kíli tugged on his brother’s tunic like a wee pebble and repeated: “Fee, Hadley’s an archer!”

…

To say that the direct consequence of Harry revealing his ability to use a bow was him gaining a Kíli-shaped shadow would not be an exaggeration.

If he thought the young dwarrow was showing signs of infatuation before, he’d underestimated the dwarrow ability to fall arse over anvil for a pretty face that had skill at both craft and arms for all that Harry had yet to show the latter as the former was proved out by his helping Thorin and Bifur re-shoe any of the dwarrow’s ponies that threw a shoe, something which Glóin’s mount Mabel – as named by Bilbo upon discovering that the dwarves hadn’t named their ponies – did far too often.

Chetwood took a few days to traverse and in all that time none of the dwarrow saw Harry actually use his bow though his care of it every night the same as he brushed down and cared for his ponies and hounds, proved that he at least knew how to best maintain it.
Which, needless to say, led to questions.

The dwarrow, from what Harry could tell, would bring up certain topics around the fire at night that they all were interested in whilst leaving the rest – mostly concerning history that Bilbo and Ori would discuss for hours at a time – for the trail.

They also were wise enough not to pester the hobbits with inquiries everyday no matter how obvious it was that the younger dwarrow – and the more impatient like Dwalin – wished they could do just that.

Balin’s doing if Harry had to guess, to allow them to settle into something like an ease just shy of complacency before broaching a new topic.

Such as Harry’s dual-nature or on this night with the Ur’s snagging the spot next to Bilbo and – as ever – Harry’s princely shadows who’d yet to do anything about it already beside him with Ori on Fíli’s far side and Thorin hovering behind them as ever both far too regal to deign to join in fully with the discussions and too paranoid to allow their Company to not have at least someone keeping watch.

It was their last night under the eaves of Chetwood by Harry’s reckoning before they reached the plains that skirted north of the Midgewater Marshes between the northern road/Chetwood and the Weather Hills, when his disuse of his bow came into question and had him and Bilbo carefully dancing around the one hobbity secret they were still striking a hardline on keeping as long as they could manage the feat.

The dwarrow watched as Harry unstrung one end of the bowstring and wrapped it in a loose and easy-to-undo loop around the bow itself and then return it to its place in his quiver at the side of his bedroll before ever-tactful Glóin asked the question.

“So, can you use that bow Master Harry or is it just for show?” He asked gruffly with a light scowl for the very idea. Especially with how excited his youngest cousin had gotten at the idea of a fellow archer – he was resolutely ignoring the rest of what might have added to that excitement being sternly disapproving of the very idea of anything more than a bit of friendship between the young ones – in the Company.

When it came to dwarrow traditions, there were few higher sticklers among the Company than Glóin son of Gróin. As a cousin of the king, he’d had all the same education and been long held to the same standards as the ruling line of Durin, though given the givens he and his were the least likely of the descendants of Durin to take the throne. The only other dwarrow who held the same standards of behavior and propriety was Dori for similar – and at the same time very different – reasons.

The thought of the heirs of Thorin – no matter how good of lads they were – taking up with an outsider let alone a strange hobbit halfling, let alone courting and wedding outside of dwarrowkind was enough to make his stomach churn though he wasn’t so pedantic and unyielding that he’d object of this Hadley Baggins returned the boys’ affections and proved themself worthy of wedding into the direct line of Durin.

If, in fact, that was what the boys were considering.

And considering that they weren’t being their normal roguish flirts of princely charm when they spotted something pretty but cautious and flustered, he had his gold on them being rather more serious than dwarrow purists would prefer.
Still and all it wasn’t his place or problem to deal with the matter as *that* morass landed straight on the shoulders of his cousin Thorin the poor bastard as he’d be the ultimate decider of whether they’d be allowed to pursue one Hadley Baggins for more than a dalliance or could offer them their gifts and beads of courtship.

“I can.” Harry responded after a long, drawn out moment where he dragged his gaze over the watching dwarf, cataloging the various expressions. Aghast. Irritated. Grumpy™ Thorin which was a thing of its own. Placid. Studiously uncaring. Intent. Set-Glóin-on-fire which was coming from Bilbo (as expected) as well as his princely shadows which was only half-expected. “But I don’t hunt so unless we’re attacked or come across a wounded animal that needs put out of its misery I won’t.”

Now *that* threw the dwarf for a loop.

“You’ve trained your hounds to hunt.” Glóin continued, choosing his words with rare care after a hidden wince at the *look* his princes were giving him. Baby cousins or not, having those two put out with you was never a happy place to be from mild discomforts such as rocks in boots and sticks in bedrolls to things going “missing” or a sudden dunking in a swift stream. And if you *really* offended them then you had either Thorin or Dís on your arse and *that* was even worse than the pranks that ranked from irritating to out-right malicious. “But you don’t hunt yourself?”

Granted, his tone was incredulous but he couldn’t really be blamed for that with the looks on his fellow dwarrows’ faces…he didn’t think.

“Hadley has always been a gentle soul.” Bilbo interjected, tone nothing short of darkly warning, ignoring the *Really?* side-eye from his sibling at how he chose to side-step the real issue they had with killing things. Granted, that Hadley was a sweetheart was part of it…at least with birds and other animals. People: not so much. “More prone to patching up the wounded creatures in the woods than scaring them off with a well-aimed rock. Why bother hunting when we’ve always been able to purchase what we need? Or,” he added at a few mutters in Khuzdûl. “Can contribute to the cookpot in other ways.”

It wasn’t like the dwarves had a leg to stand on in that regard. Between their supplies and both the hobbits’ and Hadley’s hounds’ abilities to forage for spring wild veg and fruit, they’d been well fed…for the road. It wasn’t anything like the plenty of the Shire, but hobbits were so well-padded in order to best survive lean times.

“At least I eat meat.” Harry said, only reveling a little in the irony of being unwilling to harm most living things but having no problem fucking up a person’s day, life, or face. “As long as I don’t have to kill it – mercy killing aside – I’ll eat it. I just…” He shrugged. “Live and let live, I suppose.”

“You’re…” Fíli struggled to think of the Westron word for a moment, asking Balin a question in Khuzdûl then finishing: “a pacifist?”

Gandalf nearly choked on his pipe smoke and the hobbits falling into side-splitting, cackling, uncontrollable laughter.

“Fuck no.” Harry chortled, brushing aside a few tears of mirth when he finally caught his breath, Bilbo having fallen onto his side and wrapped his arms around himself as he tried – and failed – to stop his giggles to the point of Ash nuzzling him in concern. And he steadfastly ignored the shocked expression on Dori’s face at his vulgarity what with some of the language he’d heard Dwain and Bofur in particular resort to when Ori wasn’t around to be “tainted” lest they risk a scolding from the silver-haired dwarf. “I could care less about most people. It’s other living
things I like and appreciate.” He turned solemn and stared into the fire. “At least they – with a very few exceptions – are rarely intentionally malicious.”

Glanced were exchanged among the dwarrow before they seemed to give a unanimous shrug.

Hobbit had a point with that, even if they didn’t have any desire to absorb his philosophy for their own selves.

…

Harry knelt on the ground outside of Chetwood with his hands buried deep in the loamy soil, his eyes closed, as they stopped to rest the ponies and have a quick meal of fruit and waybread with Bilbo and his hounds blocking him from view of the rest of the Company – except maybe Gandalf because who knew where the wizard was or what he was doing unless they had eyes directly on him at that very moment.

“We need to swing a bit more north.” He murmured, focusing on what he could sense through the land. He rose, dusting his hands free of dirt and staring south swinging his gaze both east and west for all the good it did him. They weren’t close enough to see what he knew through his earth-sense. “Or we’ll have a miserable time of it for a few days or more until we clear the storm a few hours off that’s moving west from the mountains.”

Which being mid-Spring wasn’t all that shocking.

It wasn’t a true deluge more a consistent wetting that would have everything caught by it getting a good soaking.

“Do you think we’ll manage to avoid it?” Bilbo asked as they wandered back over to the main group of the Company thankful that being out in the Lone Lands hadn’t given them a good chance to wash up other than the random stream so a little more dirt on Hadi’s hands wasn’t likely to be noted or commented on.

“Maybe.” Harry pursed his lips, speaking in between bites of an apple he’d fished from Tulip’s pack. “It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve danced the edge of a storm, though whether the dwarves will realize what I’ve led them around is the question.”

And then question how he’d managed it or perhaps mark it down to luck.

“I need you to do something, ‘Bo.” Harry announced, pinning his brother with his otherworldly green gaze for a moment just out of earshot of the dwarrow.

“Anything, you know that Hadi.”

“See if Oakenshield will let you take a look at that map of his.” Harry told him, frowning lightly. “Gandalf is certain there’s secret directions hidden in it and that Lord Elrond can help.” Which hadn’t been a pleasant ongoing fight for anyone of the Company to be witness to since leaving Bree. “I want to know why he thinks that and you know more about dusty ancient history than I do.”

Bilbo shifted, distinctly uncomfortable with his sibling’s charge but willing to try – for Hadi – nonetheless.

And it wasn’t like he wasn’t curious himself.

He just normally wouldn’t be so bold as to try and get a look at the map without Master
Oakenshield offering…and of all the Company he was well-aware from the looks the great lump blessed him with that he only wasn’t the king-in-exile’s least favored personage due to Oakenshield’s constant aggravation with Gandalf.

“I’ll try.” He muttered, doubtful regarding his chances of success. “But no promises.”
Chapter 13

Sons of a Took

Author’s Note: Yes, I’m going with “pebbles” for young/baby dwarrow because I don’t like the sound of dwarfling or dwarrowling and it goes with the whole “born from stone, return to the stone” thing they have going on.

This chapter is also a lot of introspection and not much action but I thought we could use a peek inside some heads regarding certain matters…

Chapter Thirteen: Hearts of Stone

The problem, as far as Kíli was concerned, was a distinct lack of opportunities for privacy that came with traveling rough with fifteen other souls (if one counted the wizard) following a path that only one – or maybe two he wasn’t discounting the abilities of the elder Baggins as his uncle was desperate to do the great, as his amad would say, emotionally constipated lunk was sunk so deep in denial that Kíli was surprised he could function – of them could see.

He wasn’t as silly or stupid as the other dwarrow treated him sometimes for all that he liked to laugh and joke and find the lighter side to things.

Fee could be dour enough for both of them at times what with all the pressure of being nadad’s heir on his shoulders every minute of every day since it became clear that Uncle Thorin had zero intention of “settling down” with a dwarrowdam and popping out pebbles to take up the mantle of the Line of Durin after him.

He and Fee hadn’t spoken about the situation in front of the others that didn’t mean they hadn’t sorted it while they were out scouting or hunting away from the others with only Hadley’s hounds to hear them.

They’d done everything together ever since Kíli was old enough to toddle after Fee.

The idea – that most dwarrowdams or dwarrow would insist on – of sharing a lover for more than a night wasn’t one that was new by any means but in the nobility it rarely occurred being far more common in the lower rungs of dwarrow society where having more adult dwarrow in a household meant more gold to share to support them all and their offspring. It was often a prudent lifestyle especially in Ered Luin where many of the dwarrow had lost many family members. Group households, like the Ur’s who had three bread-winners to support four adult dwarrow and a handful of little ones, were often more secure in the harder life available to dwarrow than they’d known in Erebor.

Which was where a lot of the elders had issues with the resurgence of the idea that had taken root in the dwarrow who were either born after the taking of the mountain or simply didn’t remember the prosperity they enjoyed there.

They were stuck in the glories of the past.

Younger dwarrow like Kíli and his brother were living in the present and having done everything together and seeing the joy found by dwarrow who happily joined their lives together wanted it for themselves instead of being wed to the crown and duty as their uncle was.

Prosperity meant different things from what Kíli and Fee could tell to the post-Erebor generation of
dwarf than all the ones who still remembered life under the mountain.

To Thorin, Balin, Dori, Óin, and Glóin, it meant the wealth that languished under the belly of a dragon.

To the others it was three meals to eat, warm clothes, and a home with a hearth filled with laughter and song.

Perhaps that was why the younger dwarf took to the hobbits so well: they held the same ideals regarding prosperity as each other even if they otherwise disagreed on many subjects.

A home like Bag End to return to every night after hunting in the woods or working at their crafts would suit both sons of Dís down to the ground though they’d like it a bit better if Bag End was fashioned of good, solid rock instead of packed earth and wood.

Though with a spouse like Hadley Baggins to return to they’d take the earth and wood over stone in a heartbeat.

Years before the pair had discussed – idly at the time since while the idea of a spouse appealed neither was truly ready to court another let alone marry – what their ideal One would be like and while neither could say if Hadley was their One they were eager to find out.

A large tick mark in their favor being what would put off many dwarf: that they are dual-natured.

All the swagger and bravado (and cock which was important for Fee in particular though Kíli wasn’t partial either way) of a male wrapped around the gentle-but-fierce temperament of a dwarrowdam.

Fee needed someone to stand strong and proud at his side when he became King, a spouse as solid as bedrock to support him through the trials and tribulations of rulership and provide him with heirs.

Kíli wanted someone who wouldn’t crush his wilder nature and would walk through the woods at his side as easily as they did the halls of their home, who loved him and his brother and their children and protect and shelter their hearts as much as they did their bodies if danger came.

And that was just the highlights.

They weren’t an easy pair. Anyone who’d listened to the complaints of their amad and nadad and the Fundinsons knew that. It would take strength and understanding in equal measure to tame their hearts.

And Hadley Baggins had started luring them to – at the time her – with a scathing tongue-lashing for a wizard in defense of their elder brother.

That Hadley also boasted a rare beauty and rich, thick red hair any dwarf would find their hands itching to set courtship beads in didn’t hurt either even if the brothers were well-aware that neither of them were bastions of dwarf handsomeness with their too-fine features and Kíli’s ongoing lack of a mustache let alone a beard.

Still…how were they supposed to know if they truly wanted to court Hadley if they were never able to spend time with them without a full Company of busybodies watching their every move or their Uncle monopolizing their ability to find the path to the Last Bridge?
Fíli knew Kee was struggling with the lack of privacy and chances to get to know Hadley one-on-one (or two-on-one) though it didn’t bother Fee as of yet. Kee was the impetuous one. The reckless one. He couldn’t blame him, he’d been that way since he’d been born and being the second-heir he didn’t have the same expectations on his shoulders as Fíli did.

And all of that was just as it should be to Fíli.

Kee had snapped up the Durin temperament to go with the height – the wanker – nose, and hair color.

Fíli was…more cautious.

Reserved though he loved a good joke or prank as much as the next dwarrow, character traits that were natural but had been encouraged as good traits for a future king.

Their amad said, when she could bring herself to speak of their adad, that Fíli inherited his father’s temperament along with his golden hair.

His explosive temper once riled however, that was as Durin as the color of his blue eyes.

A good thing, all agreed, that Fíli got their father’s patience and their mother’s temper while Kee got the Durin impatient recklessness and the easy-going temper of a simple bowyer and hunter from the Blue Mountains.

Hadley, from what Fíli could tell, was as both steady and fierce as the very earth below them: capable of unending support and world-shaking violence at a moment’s notice.

If ever a being had been fashioned more suited for him and Kee, he wouldn’t lay gold on meeting them in this life.

The only thing causing him to hesitate and rely on his innate caution rather than moving ahead with the boldness that was born from his skills and ability as it was his self was the knowledge of the hobbity lifespan. If Hadley was only a year over maturity then – if they were lucky – that was only seventy years – give or take – to live and love and watch their beloved leave them to age or infirmity. And that was if they were lucky.

In seventy years he and Kee might just be reaching middle age for a dwarrow.

Was it worth that pain of loss to have their love for so short a span of time or would it be better to lose them now before they were enjoined and lost utterly to one another and risk never meeting another that could warm their hearts of stone?

Fíli didn’t know and asking his eternal-bachelor uncle was out of the question.

So he waited, and he watched, and he listened as Hadley joked and laughed and talked with the Ur’s and the younger Ri’s and he pondered the situation from every angle he could think of while keeping a rein on Kee lest his brother jump ahead and leave Fíli scrambling to catch up as he was wont to do on a hunt of another – quite different – sort altogether.

Harry led the Company half a day’s travel off the storm washing through Eriador for almost a week before the earth told him that it was safe to start swinging south.
Which was good, because he had no desire to tackle the northern arm of the Weather Hills when the southern arm was much lower in elevation and saw more traffic thanks to Rangers who liked to camp at Weathertop.

The passing of the storm as they made their way southeast to retake the East-West Road before the Last Bridge left the trails muddy in places or soft and shifting underfoot – or hoof – in others but nothing truly dangerous so long as they stuck to the path Harry and his hounds led them on avoiding perilous cliffsides, valleys, or precipices.

Gandalf watched him with a canny eye, having a decent idea – wizards – that missing the storm was more than the simple luck the dwarrow credited him with.

Bilbo, meanwhile, was working on using his ever-growing friendship with Balin and Ori as the most scholarly souls among the Company to get a look at the map but had yet to succeed. Harry wasn’t worried however. He knew his brother. He was quite capable when he put his mind to it and as cunning a hobbit as any. If it could be done, Bilbo would manage it and he didn’t need Harry standing over his shoulder or micromanaging the matter.

Now in the case of Bilbo’s still alive-and-well attraction to the King of Brooding, that he thought his brother could use a quick anchoring boot to the bum over.

He’d never thought Bilbo’s tastes ran to tall-dark-and-grumpy but then with their age difference he wasn’t surprised that he didn’t quite know Bilbo’s tastes in bed-partners quite as well as Bilbo could guess at his own.

It was the dismissiveness that bothered him.

Thankfully as long as Thorin-Bloody-Oakenshield kept acting like a right prat to Bilbo, even as mild as it had been to the point of being restricted to the occasional scoff or glare rather than out-and-out shitty behavior, he didn’t have to worry about Bilbo’s libido overriding his sense and self-esteem.

Now if they were in a position for Bilbo to have a tumble-and-dash with the King it might be a different story but as that was out of the question Harry didn’t have to keep an eye on that situation other than the random internal groan over the oblivious sexual tension hot enough to start a forest fire between His Grumpiness and the Master of Manners.

It was if they ever got over themselves that Harry would have to worry.

In the meantime he had his own problems to ponder over.

Like a pair of princes that had yet – going on three weeks into their journey – to do any-bloody-thing about all the fluster, moon-eyed glances, and blushes they graced him with especially at the start of their journey before they got, at least mildly, used to his presence.

More often than not he was tempted to unplait his hair in the firelight just to watch them swallow their tongues, but it wasn’t worth scandalizing the fuddy-duddies for as much entertainment as it’d get him, if only to get them to do something.

Anything.

As long as it gave him an answer as to what the fuck they wanted from him whether it was a shag, a fling, hell anything just give him a point of reference for the love of the Green Lady’s fields!

Anything at all.
He was still way too bad at reading romantic cues and situations without a bit of forwardness to make a move himself but if this continued on much longer he would if only not to have to live with the bloody uncertainty anymore along with the snorts, eyerolls, sour-faced expressions, and chuckles from the rest of the Company over the impasse.

Both were as attractive to Harry’s eyes as it was possible to be, even if he thought Fíli’s mustache braids a bit ridiculous he knew they were an important status-symbol to dwarrow, with strong frames taller than his own and beautiful eyes.

Kíli’s smile was as roguish and wild as his laughter and spirit while Fíli’s was as sweet and slow as a winter sunrise after a storm.

They adored their uncle and strove to both emulate and impress him in all they did it was plain for even a blind man to see, from working until they panted for breath with their swords under Dwalin or Thorin to hunting and scouting near and far along the trail.

Just having them around the campfire at night lightened the mood of the whole Company with their smiles and laughs and jokes.

They were just good even if Kíli at times had a dangerous edge to his smile and Fíli might lose himself in introspection now and again…how could Harry not grow to care for someone, let alone two someones like that?

He’d always had a soft spot, since he was eleven the first time, for tricksters with hearts of gold. Good people who weren’t afraid to fight and protect others. Fíli and Kíli turned him around and tempted him in ways that none of the hopeful hobbits back in the Shire likely ever could’ve managed.

They were simply too…tame for someone like him to be happy.

And by the Valar if he ever got married in his second-life – and second-chance – he would be happy and in-love and willing to risk everything for them like his parents, both sets, had done.

He didn’t know if Fíli and Kíli could or would be that for him but damn if he didn’t want to find out.

…

“I’m gonna say it.” Bifur growled in Khuzdûl. “If you two don’t ask to court that hobbit you’re fools.”

They were sitting around the remnants of the campfire a good three weeks into their journey as the others were slow to wake that morning – or maybe they were just early up for once – and gotten to serve as witnesses to the tempting sight of Hadley letting down their hair and combing out their lush cherry-red mane before plaiting it back up with clever fingers.

A sight that any decent dwarrow would’ve shut their eyes upon and allowed the hobbit their privacy but…nobles they might be but no one ever accused them of being decent in the face of such temptation.

Bifur had caught them at it, being close enough to their bedrolls to notice their open eyes and where they were focused when they should’ve been looking anywhere else or made noise to alert Hadley of their solitude, save for a back-turned Thorin who was quite notably not watching the spectacle, being breeched.
And now they’d jumped from the forge to the fire as not only were they caught like callow youths catching their first sight of loosed hair but it’d been by the one of the most dangerous members of the company that’d taken to the hobbits at that in Bifur.

Bifur quite enjoyed watching and commentating on both Hadley’s arguments with Thorin or Bilbo as well as Bilbo’s fussing over his sibling and the younger dwarrow to many blushes from Ori.

That neither hobbit treated him like he was simple because he couldn’t speak Westron but did their best to communicate and hold conversations without it simply endeared them to him further.

If anyone was going to defend the honor of the hobbits – besides they themselves – it was Bifur.

Of all the princes’ bloody fucking misfortune.

Fili and Kili exchanged abashed looks and blushes as they stood before the warrior with an axe buried in his skull, their uncle just to Bifur’s side with a foreboding glower on his face as the rest of the camp worked at breaking their site and diligently ignored the tableau playing out between the princes and their uncle and Bifur.

“What’s stopping you, boys?” Thorin asked with a sigh as he scrubbed one hand over his face. He knew this situation would come to a head eventually and he’d need to talk to his heirs but he hadn’t expected the manner in which it’d happened when Bifur came to him with his concerns over their actions – or rather distinct inaction – of that morn. “While we do not know either hobbit well enough yet for a marriage to be approved or even advised, that is what courtship is for: discovering if you would suit one another, if they are your One or Ones in your cases, and other matters of the like. I’ve never seen you – both – so hesitant in your lives.”

Well. The princes exchanged chagrined glances. When he put it that way…

“We didn’t know if you’d approve of us courting a hobbit who hasn’t proven themself to you.” Kili said slowly, playing on the fact that Thorin tended to be gentler, a bit more permissive, with him since he wasn’t the direct or chosen heir like Fee. “Or even sharing a courtship with a single One at all.”

Thorin snorted a laugh before coughing to cover his slip in demeanor.

“You two have been attached at the hip since Kili could toddle.” He rolled his eyes and waved that off. He wasn’t nearly as hide-bound as others in his generation anymore than their mother was else Dís certainly wouldn’t have been allowed to court and wed a simple bowyer when they were hip-deep in scrabbling out the beginnings of a settlement in the Blue Mountains. And he wouldn’t have two fine – if occasionally rock-headed – nephews for heirs. Sons of his heart if not of his flesh. “I would have been surprised if you’d chosen individual loves and while it isn’t widely known Hadley Baggins would hardly be the first instance of a triadic marriage in the line of Durin let alone the first from outside our people.”

“You mean…?” Kili gasped, flabbergasted. How did he never know that before? Why didn’t Balin or his amad tell him? Especially with how cruel the other younglings had always been over his lack of proper beard. At least now he knew why.

“A woman, married to Durin the Fourth late in his life and the mother of his heir.” Thorin nodded. “And as I said: it’s not well known. There might have been another but as it wasn’t a spouse to one of Durin’s incarnations I would have to search the archives of Erebor to remember.” If they were even still intact.
“So…” Fíli drawled leadingly.

“So,” Thorin rolled his eyes with a scoff. “Put the poor hobbit out of their misery and stopping mooning incessantly before they snap and take everyone in the area with them for the love of Mahal!”

With that he stomped off, cursing under his breath and wishing more than ever that his sister had come with them if only to wrangle her Morgoth-spawned offspring!

He was not supposed to be the one handling their first serious crush.

It was in the co-parenting contract they’d signed after Víli died for the love of Mahal’s blessed hammer!

Affairs of the heart were Dís’s problem.

Not his.

Unfortunately, Dís, along with most of Thorin’s apparent sanity and patience, had been left behind in his Halls to watch over their people in Ered Luin.

“Wait.” Bifur scruffed both princes by the backs of their tunics when it looked like they might run off and pounce on an unsuspecting Hadley Baggins right that second. “First, we’re going to find Balin, Glóin, and Dori and have a serious review of appropriate behavior regarding the courtship of your One.”

Groaning from deep within their souls, the two went limp forcing the large dwarf to almost have to bodily drag them through the camp over to where the pedants of the Company could be found having a smoke before returning to the trail.

They’d rather take a beating from Bifur and Dwalin than that.

Which was probably Bifur’s – rather diabolical, actually – point of the punishment for their transgression.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sons of a Took

Chapter Fourteen: Compromising Circumstances

Hadley and Bilbo had no idea what had happened between the young princes and the rest of the Company but if the exhausted and embarrassed looks on Fíli and Kíli’s faces were any sign – not to mention the raucous laughter from some and the scowls from the others – neither of them really wanted to know even though both Bofur and Nori tried to tempt them with dropping hints all day until they all sat down around the fire on a nice, safe, outcropping backing up against a hill on one side and overlooking the Lone Lands on the other to have their supper of Bombur’s latest stew thickened with crumbled cram.

Except for Ori.

Ori just looked confused and a bit put-out at being left over of whatever-it-is that’d stirred up the rest of them.

That both Gamble and Ash had stayed closer than normal especially going into the later hours of the day and were having issues settling didn’t help matters as Harry trusted them more than most anyone else when it came to something being off.

When Hadley found himself sandwiched between a pair of princes, Fíli passing off a bowl of stew a bit more plentiful than normal before Bilbo could return – his brother catching the byplay with an arch of his brow and a shake of his head before plopping down between Bofur and Ori, he figured he could venture a guess on what the subject causing the strange atmosphere among the Company’s dwarrow had been and at least end up in the neighborhood even if he wasn’t completely spot-on.

“Thank you,” Hadley accepted the bowl with a bit of a flutter in his chest even though the princes – he was somewhat certain – didn’t know of the significance of the act among hobbits. Which was why he and Bilbo only fetched food for themselves and each other despite usually being willing to help with food preparations, never passing off portions to the dwarrow or Gandalf. They’d been quite scrupulous about it in fact even when other hobbit customs had been left at the wayside given life on the trail amongst rowdy dwarrow and adding in a few of the dwarrow customs in their place for good measure.

“Ready for a new lesson, Master Ori?” Bilbo asked, voice dancing with laughter.

The young dwarrow scrambled for his quill and journal while still shoveling in stew with his other hand in wordless answer.

“And what shall be under discussion this eve, Master Baggins?” Balin asked, equally as entertained as anyone with a brain in their head and eyes in their skulls – which didn’t necessarily include all of the members of the Company – could see which way the wind was blowing.

“Given that a pair of dwarrow princes have appropriated my younger siblings and tendered an informal declaration of courtship I think courting customs might be appropriate,” Bilbo, the utter
troll, answered. “Don’t you?”

Blushing red enough to rival Harry’s hair, Fíli shrank down and almost buried himself under Ash who’d finally settled in near Harry’s right side with Gamble resting against his back.

Notably, he didn’t dislodge his bowl of stew during the maneuver, lose his spoon, or stop eating which Harry had to admit was rather impressive.

“Thanks, ‘Bo.” Harry sighed, shaking his head and resolutely ignoring everything else but his stew. “Thanks a lot.”

“No problem.” His brother veritably chirped back the wanker.

“All jokes aside.” Thorin took charge of the situation. “It is a situation that needs careful handling as the traditional structure of dwarrow courtship will have to be...bent considering the Quest and the traveling conditions we are currently living under.”

“Perhaps,” Balin suggested mildly as Glóin and Dori started to puff up in outrage. “Because of the nuances of the situation an informal courtship period might be allowed.”

“That’s not our way!” Dori hissed, hackles up at the very idea. “Courtship is one of the founding and most important traditions of our people!”

“Especially,” Glóin scowled. “When there is such an imbalance of status as between...”

“Between whom?” Bilbo jumped on his implied slur like Gamble on a fresh beef bone. “Between a halfling and your princes?” He huffed, tossing his empty bowl away and marching right up to the redheaded penny-pinching dwarf standing tall and looming over the seated figure, arms crossed over his chest and eyes lit with inner fire. “I’ll have you know that neither of us is half of anything, Master Glóin. My sibling is the most sought-after hobbit in all the Shire and beyond! Your precious princes should be so lucky as to earn their regard! You, you...!”

Bilbo bit off the invectives threatening to spill off his tongue restraining himself to a growl either Gamble or Ash would be proud of as Hadley came up behind him and gently laid their hands on his shoulders, clenching and releasing in a rhythmic – and rather soothing – massage before using their hold to turn and steer their brother back into his seat between a wide-eyed Ori and a silently-chuckling Bofur.

“Anndd that is why this conversation should’ve taken place without an audience.” Harry drawled, waving a hand between Glóin and Bilbo. “But long story short: hobbits are fiercely defensive of their loved ones. In our traditions an informal courtship isn’t just allowed it’s preferred unless there is a preexisting courtship contract in place, usually arranged between high-standing families to ensure heirs.”

“One would assume neither of you are under such a contract.” Balin noted.

“One would be correct though even if we were they all contain – even the most rigid – an age exemption whereby if a hobbit married before the contract was due to be enacted it is rendered null and void.” Bilbo rattled off like the Arbiter he was, the familiar topic comforting in the wake of Glóin’s implied insult even with his temper still simmering under the surface and not completely abated.

“Our mother didn’t believe in the things doing anything but making for miserable hobbits.” Harry shrugged, then gave Kíli a smile when the younger reached out gently to take his empty bowl and set it aside to join the rest in need of washing though not a single dwarrow was likely to move an
inch until the subject came to a close. “And as was usual what Belladonna Took wanted, she got, especially when it came to her faunts.”

“What are the bounds of an informal courtship among hobbits?” Thorin prompted, alternately cringing and desperately interested inside. Though as usual none of it showed through his stoic mask.

“Anything that could lead to fauntlings.” Bilbo was once again smirking at his troublesome sibling who groaned softly and buried their face in their hands as the princes exchanged looks over their head. Oh, Yavanna, he was going to have to watch not one but three troublemakers to keep their father’s bones from rolling in his grave. “And it can be broken by any party for any reason at any time though there is a certain form it must take to keep simple spats from growing out of proportion and causing undue heartache.”

“And how is that achieved?” Balin asked the question none of the others wanted to broach as the dwarrow avoided catching each others’ gazes, rolling his eyes. Never had he been so glad in his life that Mahal had fashioned him for pursuit of craft and not for love.

“A woven crown of stinging nettle and yellow carnations.” Harry finally answered after a long pause wherein Bilbo rose unsteadily to his feet and gathered up the bowls and spoons to wash in the nearby stream, Gamble following at his heels. He waited a moment, listening closely and holding on hand in the air in a wait gesture then continued. “Rejected courtships is a tender subject with my brother.”

“Lost love?” Bofur asked, sympathetically.

Harry skewed his mouth in a not-quite-grimace. “More the lost opportunity for love. My brother and I have preferences that while allowed and even celebrated in me are taboo for a hobbit male like Bilbo. He started walking out with another male when he was,” Harry did the math. “Around twenty-six, as many tweens do. It was a decade before our father passed.”

“He did not approve.” Thorin grunted, scowling fiercely.

“There wasn’t much about me and ‘Bo, he did approve of other than Bilbo’s diligence to his studies.” Harry waved off the wounded noises the princes made. It was hardly the first time he’d been a disappointment after all and at least his second-mother had been around to limit the damage. “It was the first major battle for Bilbo’s future at Bag End but hardly the last. The romance couldn’t bloom under the strain and that was the first and last time my brother courted or was courted by another settling into comfortable bachelorhood and playing the part of the Baggins of Bag End.”

“You worry for him.” Fíli noted, meeting Hadley’s pained gaze with one of soft understanding.

“Wouldn’t you if you’d watched Kíli shut half of himself away for almost half his life?” Harry shook his head and changed the subject as the sounds of Bilbo making his way back to camp reached him. “Anyway. Informal courtships – or walking out as we call it most of the time in the Shire – is what it sounds like. We go on walks, dance together at parties, make and share meals together, give trinkets and gifts – though some are considered scandalously inappropriate until a betrothal or marriage has been agreed upon – of which flowers and food are of great importance. It all revolves around ensuring that those courting are compatible partners and to give them time to learn of each other as romantic interests.”

“What gifts are inappropriate?” Thorin asked with a warning glance at the far-too-innocent looks that took over his nephews faces. He knew better than to believe that. Given Master Baggins’
fierce temper when it came to protecting his sibling – the first Thorin has seen of such fire in the elder hobbit – he didn’t want to have to challenge him over his scamps disrespecting Hadley either by accident or on purpose to get a rise out of the redhead.

“Clothing.” Bilbo answered as he stomped back to camp, feeling quite put out with dwarrow in general and the rascals causing the uncomfortable meander down memory lane in particular. “Cooking implements, and jewelry. Common courting trinkets include flower bouquets or crowns, hair ribbons for those who wear their hair long, handkerchiefs, favored sweets, and so on. Small things that show the suitor is aware of their beloved’s preferences for the most part though flowers are often used to send messages between suitor and beloved.”

“What?” Came from more than one confused dwarrow mouth.

“How can flowers have a language?” Kíli asked, perplexed. “Aren’t they just…flowers?”

“No,” Bilbo snarked curtly. “Which is why rejection flowers are always required to contain yellow carnations as they literally mean rejection.” Among other, less pleasant things.

“Different combinations can alter or add to the message of the main flower used.” Harry added, after a cautious, considering glance at his brother. “Stinging nettle is a complete rejection and sundering of the relationship. If basil is used instead it breaks the courtship with good wishes for the suitor but if candytuft is added then the reason for breaking the courtship is one of indifferent feelings, and so on.”

Fíli and Kíli blinked in confused and befuddled unison.

Courting their hobbit was going to be harder than they thought.

Ori hid an eyeroll. Honestly. They were useless.

“It’s like with gems.” He translated for the uncultured, stubborn, – or just dim – among the company. Which was more than he wanted to think about. “We know all the meanings, uses, and variants of gems and precious metals and we learn it from the cradle. Am I close?”

“Basically.” Harry’s mouth twitched, seeing the exasperation shining through the butter-wouldn’t-melt expression on Ori’s face. “Yes, from what I understand.”

“Your turn.” Bilbo turned the subject away from hobbity courting, digging out his own journal as Ori and Dori rose to wash the cookpot and Bomber’s ladle since he’d done the rest of their normal chore. “Informal courting for dwarves or a courting trial or whatever you call it?”

“Dwarrow.” Balin finally corrected as they were going to be sharing other secrets with the pair of hobbits. Though their name for themselves was the least of them and simply not widely used. Not that that hadn’t kept Hadley from picking it up somewhere. “We’re dwarrow, laddie. And informal courtships aren’t often done, especially with princes, however the circumstances aren’t conducive to a traditional courtship held to the standards of royalty so allowances will have to be made until the point arrives that Fíli and Kíli can present Hadley with their Gifts and things can proceed as expected by our people.”

Thorin growled out something in Khuzdûl and crossed his arms over his chest.

Daring, if Bilbo had to guess, any further objections over the decision he’d made earlier after much discussion with Balin and Dwalin regarding the matter.

“I heard a capital letter there.” Harry titled his head curiously as Gamble grumbled and tried to
worm his way between Ash and Harry – though not with much success unless getting a snap of her teeth near his snout could be considered such.

“Dwarf gives three Gifts to their Ones when they wish to be joined in marriage.” Balin continued to explain the matter from the dwarrow perspective. “That of Provision, Craft, and Heart. Needless to say when royalty is involved the Gifts are held to a high standard. Until that time Thorin and I have conferred and agree that an informal arrangement where the boys will court in the hobbit way – as none of the requirements and boundaries you’ve explained are objectionable as we thought would be the case – will occur, hopefully in the end satisfying the traditions of both cultures.”

“What means.” Thorin shot a warning glower at his impudent pups of sister-sons. “That while Master Harry can and should wear your courtship braids until you have offered your First Gift and he has accepted it there will be no beads offered or exchanged, am I clear?”

“Yes, Uncle.”

“Yes, nadad.”

Across the campfire Harry and Bilbo shared a glance. Dwarf. Always a production out of every little thing.

Though in the interest of fairness this time Bilbo had started it.

…

Harry would like to say that after the informative-but-uncomfortable (for everyone but Bofur and Nori who’re prats) discussion he was able to spend the rest of the evening before bed snuggled up between his princes and talking into the wee hours until they had to go on watch.

He would like to say that.

Unfortunately, life still liked to fuck with him every now and again, this time in the form of a pair of hounds that would not calm down and pass out for love, cuddles, or even treats.

It started with Gamble trying to crawl under Ash or surround Harry with his lanky body and didn’t stop for hours.

One would get up and pace circles around the camp, ears pricked and eyes glaring out into the dark.

Then the other would minutes after the first came back and plopped themselves down on Harry’s lap begging for belly rubs or pets, Fíli and Kíli just as confused by the behavior of the animals they’d gotten to know rather well as hunting and scouting partners over the last three weeks. Bilbo helped, running soothing hands down whichever back was nearest as he moved to sit near Harry. And that was their night as the other dwarrow wound down and settled into their bedrolls around them.

It wasn’t until the moon was high in the sky that the first howl came, both hounds jumping to their feet and standing stiff-legged and ready, but silent at a command from Harry, between the camp including nervously shifting ponies that Bilbo, Bofur, and the princes rushed to settle down, and the direction of the howls.

“What is it, Hadi?” Bilbo asked, a bit of a shake to his voice. “Wolves?”
Harry shook his head slowly as the princes exchanged a glance then said in unison: “Wargs.”

Thorin barked a command in Khuzdûl, striding over to where Harry stood between his hounds and watched the shadowed Lone Lands spread out before them, listening intently with both his ears and his earth-sense.

“How far out?” The king asked gruffly.

“Hard to say in these hills.” Harry answered. “Sounds carries strangely here. But the hounds are only watchful not overly anxious or aggressive. Far enough away not to be an issue.”

Yet.

A qualifying remark that Thorin heard plain as day as he snapped out a new round of orders before striding away, leaving more than one dumbfounded dwarrow – and hobbit – behind him.

“What’s with him?” Harry asked the question Bilbo was too polite to broach.

“Wargs mean orcs.” Fíli, with help from Kíli once they settled the ponies, helped Harry corral his hounds back at the fireside, and onto the bedroll that – with warning looks from both Thorin and Bilbo – had been placed between their own.

“And Thorin has better reason than most to hate orcs.” Balin supplied, telling the tale of the Battle of Azanulbizar to an enraptured audience of dwarrow, hobbits, and a wizard who had once more appeared once the discussion of courtships had dissipated. “After the dragon took the Lonely Mountain, King Thrór tried to reclaim the ancient dwarf kingdom of Moria... but our enemy had got there first. Moria had been taken by legions of Orcs, led by the vilest of all their race, Azog the Defiler. The giant Gundabad Orc had sworn to wipe out the line of Durin. He began by beheading the King. Thraín, Thorin's father, was driven mad by grief. He went missing, taken prisoner or killed; we did not know. We were leaderless, defeat and death were upon us. That is when I saw him; the young dwarf prince facing down the Pale Orc. He stood alone against this terrible foe, his armour rent, wielding nothing but an oaken branch as a shield... Azog the Defiler learned that day that the line of Durin would not be so easily broken. Our forces rallied and drove the Orcs back; our enemy had been defeated... but there was no feast or songs that night, for our dead were beyond the count of grief. We few had survived and I thought to myself then 'There is one I could follow. There is one I could call King'.”

“What happened to him?” Bilbo asked as he curled up on his bedroll between Fíli and Bofur. “Azog?”

“He crawled back into the shadows.” Thorin all-but-spat as he returned to the fire to find all the eyes of the company upon him, most filled with awe. Save for a handful, two in particular he found most discomfiting. Bilbo’s compassion was somewhat expected for all that he neither needed nor wanted it. But what manner of hobbit was his nephews’ beloved that Hadley’s emerald gaze was filled to brimming with understanding? “That filth died of his wounds long ago. Get some sleep, Master Baggins. We move with first-light.”

Chapter End Notes

This is the last of the pre-written chapters on this fic so I'm not certain when the next update will be...
“Who won the betting, anyway?” Harry asked the next morning as they broke camp in a hurry at Thorin’s urging due to the warg howls in the night. Ash and Gamble had already been sent forward to scout as with the possibility of wargs – and worse the orcs that always came with them – it wasn’t necessarily safe to have Fíli and Kíli range too far afield.

A cold breakfast of waybread and fruit with salted meat had to serve despite the grumbling from some quarters.

None grumbled too loudly however as the thunderclouds that’d cracked over Thorin’s head at the first sound of warg howls hadn’t abated with the coming dawn.

“Betting?” Bofur asked innocently enough with a wink at the pretty redheaded hobbit. “I don’t know what you mean.”

At that groans and soft curses abounded as money bags flew fast and furious for several moments.

Fíli and Kíli watched, jaws dropping in shock, as Nori, Ori, and surprisingly Thorin and Bilbo of all people, cleaned up and that they were the object of said-betting became clear.

“They bet on us?” Kíli spluttered shocked not so much about the betting itself but that neither he nor Fee knew about it. Dwarrow, most of the time, didn’t have subtle bones in their bodies.

“When we’d start courting, who would initiate it, and what fashion it would take if I had to guess.” Harry narrowed his eyes in contemplation before going back to saddling Tulip, Bilbo managing Daisy well enough on his own by now with a helping hand or two from either Harry’s princes or cheerful Bofur. Though the latter always seemed to lead to scowls cracking over the rugged good-looks of a certain dwarrow king. Honestly. And Harry thought he was bad at this. Thorin-bloody-Oakenshield made him look like the greatest of adepts in the field of romance in comparison.

And his stubborn-arsed Baggins-baggage of a brother wasn’t much better with his rampant denial.

Which wasn’t a bad thing.

If Bilbo took up with someone who was still – more often than not – dismissive at best of Bilbo, Harry would have a thing or two to say about that to both of the lunkheads.

All regarding healthy relationships and abusive behavior coming in more than one form.

“Then…” Fíli eyed the other dwarrow speculatively. “They’re also betting on other things to do with our courtship too.”

The rest of the Company devoutly did not meet the all-too-knowing gazes of the trio, including Harry’s brother and the princes’ uncle and cousins the rotten traitors.

“Fíli, Kíli, you know what this means, yeah?” Harry smirked, eyes dancing and tone filled with sunshine and devilry.
“Aye.” The princes chorus, trading grins with each other and their hobbit. “This means war.”

The rest of the Company groaned.

When Thorin approved the idea of an informal courtship, starting off with a prank war on the rest of the Company was not what any of them had in mind for how the younglings were going to go about it.

…

To the everlasting amusement of the courting trio the mere threat of a looming pranking from them was enough to have the rest of the Company twitchy.

Which rather served them right since between the, er, negotiations that took place the night before and Thorin’s hurrying of them that morning the princes hadn’t had time to set their braids in Hadley’s hair, an event that their eagerness for had caused their jump ahead to courting in the first place. Neither had Harry gotten a chance to add what would be “his” braid in the princes’ hair. Realistically the entire ritual was more for form and personal preference on the part of Fíli and Kíli as it was highly unlikely they were going to come across any other dwarrow before being able to set beads in one another’s hair which were the true indicators of things from family to status to profession and so on.

Braids could have meaning, especially in a situation – like now – where beads weren’t appropriate such as a craft Novice who hadn’t earned a journeyman’s or master’s bead yet or a child too young to be trusted to have beads safely threaded in their hair or beard.

An elaborate braiding of clear dwarrow-style would warn any dwarrow who came across Harry before beads are added of his being under the protection of the Line of Durin among other things.

Kíli for example only wore a single braid with a silver clasp engraved with the sigil of the Line of Durin, choosing against wearing the runes of his craft, social status, and eligibility to court among other things while Fíli wore seven braids: two in his mustache and five in his hair; which contained beads marking him as being of the Line of Durin, Thorin’s Heir, Master Armorer, eligible for courtship, and a Master Swordsman.

In between was Thorin who wore two beads and two braids: one for the Line of Durin and the other as a Master Blacksmith as he always did when on the road and not in the safety of Ered Luin lest someone try and visit harm upon the (former) Crown Prince of Durin’s Folk.

A braid could also contain more than one bead, depending on personal preference.

And while Thorin allowed brief rests for the ponies, such was hardly the time to work on plaiting Hadley’s heavy fall of rich red hair.

“Can you…” Bilbo started to ask only to get cut off by the shake of his sibling’s head as Hadley’s feet hit the ground.

“The connection isn’t strong enough to do that sort of search, Bo.” Harry sighed, rolling his neck on his shoulders and stretching. “I’d have to get my hands in the earth and Thorin has the others keeping too close a watch for wargs and orcs to risk it.”

Bilbo chewed his lips for a moment.

“We’re going to have to tell them.” He grumbled, the subject having been heavy upon his mind ever since Thorin made it clear he wasn’t going to stand in the way of his nephews courting
“Some of it at least.”

“Oh, I know that.” Harry arched a brow, looking back over his shoulder at his brother as they padded together over to a convenient set of bushes to see to their personal needs, a chunk of bread and some dried meat having been bolted down as soon as it’d been passed out rather than saved for the stop like many of the dwarrow. “I just figured I’d have to fight you on it considering your stance on the subject.”

Bilbo muttered under his breath as they saw to their business and then met back up to return to the Company.

“I don’t know what to think of them from one day to the next.” Bilbo admitted at last, a sigh in his breath. “But I don’t think they’re bad folk or that they’d try to exploit you. And even if they did…”

“Fíli and Kíli make rather excellent, fierce, and impossible-to-ignore deterrents, yeah.” Harry grinned, waving over at his princes who as usual spent most of the time scouting the trail even if they didn’t range as far out as was customary. “If I didn’t trust them, at least a little, I never would’ve agreed to an informal courtship that seems to have a heavy expectation to turn quite formal and serious.”

“If we all don’t die first.” Bilbo reminded his sibling as he dark sense of humor perked up for a moment. Then he groaned as a new thought occurred to him. “Yavanna, the martinets are going to riot over you wedding outside of the Shire and even the more genial hobbits aren’t going to be happy.”

Harry rolled his eyes, completely unsympathetic.

“They survived long before I started wandering their fields and they’ll survive after I’m gone.” He snarked, distinctly unconcerned over how his defection would affect the next crops of Longbottom leaf or the Proudfoots’ pumpkins. “Another issue for after the Quest.”

“We’ll let it be for now.” Bilbo decided both as Hadley’s elder and head of house. Which was perhaps the only form of authority in the wake of their mother’s death that Hadley respected, a character trait that had been nothing short of entertaining to play out between his sibling and Master Oakenshield and would likely be causing the King migraines for decades to come if the princes got their way. “See how things go. If the dwarrow are still wound up in a day or two then we’ll risk seeking through the earth for danger during the day again.”

“Whatsoever you say, big brother.” Harry sketched a cheeky salute, Bilbo shaking his head in exasperation behind him as he met up with the princes near his ponies.

“And what trouble have you two found today?” He asked, smiling from one handsome face to the other and taking note of hands held rather conspicuously behind their backs.

“No trouble, thankfully.” Fíli beamed down into bright green eyes. He might never admit it, but it was rather adorable that for all Hadley’s large personality they were, well, daintiness in comparison to him – and especially his giant of a baby brother who took after the Durins for height the lucky prat. “Though we did find a few things…” He trailed off suggestively as Kee nearly bounced in place beside him, brown eyes dancing.

“Tokens, really.” Kíli said, then the two sent each other a wordless cue and brought their hands around, revealing their “tokens” and presenting them to Hadley.
Fili showed off a handful of wildflowers, a mixture of dainty dog violets and bluebells, while at his side Kili offered a handful of vibrantly-colored feathers that likely came from a blue jay that were large enough to use for fletching save for a few smaller ones mixed in with the rest.

“You said gifts in hobbit courting are more trinkets.” Kili blushed. “I found an empty nest and thought…”

“You both did quite well.” Bilbo’s far-too-amused voice shook Hadley out of his pleased surprise, his sibling reaching out with eager hands to accept the posy from Fili and admiring the feathers with plans to use them on his next fletching chore and maybe something more with the smaller bits. “Considering you don’t have the primers and knowledge to go on that hobbit youth grow up with.”

“Thank you.” Harry blushed, then divided the flowers and handed a bit to each of the princes and turned, giving them easy access to his braid after threading one of the violets above his pointed ear as a wordless instruction on what to do.

Eager – if unerringly gentle – fingers made quick work of weaving the flower stems into his existing simple three-strand plait as the other dwarrow make a few – likely ribald given that it was Bofur who started it – jokes in the process.

“What do these ones mean, Master Bilbo?” Ori asked as he made a quick, rough sketch of the scene and a better one of the flowers being woven into Master Harry’s braid. “Or do they not have a meaning?”

“That’s why my brother said they did well.” Harry smiled, looking down as Kili and Fili allowed their hands to linger – just a bit – in his hair. “Bluebells,”

“the cup-shaped flowers,” Bilbo added in an aside at the confusion on dwarrow faces since both wildflowers the elder prince had picked were in blue tones.

“Ahh…”

“Bluebells,” Harry continued regardless. “Are for humility and kindness while violets of all species stand for loyalty, devotion, and faithfulness.”

“A very pale colored violet can also mean modesty,” Bilbo added more for Ori’s note-taking than anything else. “But since coral roses also mean modesty it is rarely used that way.”

“Besides which I don’t think the pups have a modest bone in their bodies.” Dwalin snorted, laughing at the very idea of the impudent pups and modesty being in the same sentence.

“And there’s that.” Bilbo agreed, grinning shamelessly as Harry huffed at him and the princes protested their innocence and modesty – though it wasn’t done very well or even the slightest bit convincing in the scant amount of time they had to lodge their arguments before Thorin had them back on their ponies and riding east once more.

…

“Here, lads.” Bilbo tossed a slim volume in the laps of the princes as they were conferring that night in the time between their camp-chores/arms-practice and dinner, Hadley busy with something involving their tinker box and looking lovely as ever with the wildflowers threaded in their hair despite the dusting of trail dirt, giving Bilbo a chance to nudge the boys in the right direction – hopefully without his nosy sibling catching wind of it.
If Hadi knew he’d dragged a flower-encyclopedia, even just a basic one like this, along he’d never hear the end of it.

More for teasing him over his own courtship prospects being on his mind than anything else.

He hoped – in a faint, half-hearted way – that with Hadi courting and the Quest they would be well-distracted to watch him and Master Oakenshield like a hawk. He rather doubted it, but a hobbit could hope. Especially since wistful daydreams was all he really had when it came to the broody king…though sadly for Bilbo’s inclinations being broody didn’t seem to affect his attractiveness in the slightest.

“What’s this?” Kíli asked, peering over Fee’s shoulder as his brother put away the dagger he was sharpening and opened the slim volume, arching a brow at the line-drawing of a bunch of flowers that took up the first page. “Flowers?”

“A basic guide to flowers and meanings.” Bilbo smirked, patting them on their heads before wandering off. “You’re welcome.”

“How’s it work?” Kíli muttered as he rested his chin on Fee’s shoulder, his brother answering absently as he – carefully and well-aware of the boon Bilbo had just given them – paged through the introduction portion and found pages filled with drawings of various flowers and herbs and even weeds that had names, explanations, and even time of year to find them blooming.

“Looks like its alphabetical.” Fíli noted, humming lightly under his breath. “Look,” he tapped a drawing even he recognized. “Daisies like amad likes. And they mean…” he squinted at the smallish writing. “Innocence and/or hope.”

“Huh.” Kíli scratched at the scruff that didn’t quite pass for a beard on his chin. “How many kinds are there?”

“Well, if every page is a flower…” Fíli winced, closing the book and hefting it in one hand for a moment. “A lot.”

“Fee…”

“Yeah, Kee.”

“This is going to be harder than we thought.”

“I know,” Fíli sighed. “Still, we’re Durins. We’re up to the challenge.”

“And it’s worth it if Hadley lets us play with their hair.” The glint and gleam in Kíli’s eyes was nothing short of rakish, implying all sorts of other play he’d like to get up to with the pretty, fiery hobbit.

Fíli scoffed rolling his eyes.

Naturally, that went without saying.

…

“What are you doing?” Nori leaned over his friend’s shoulder where the interesting hobbit was working with his dexterous hands, a crimper, some very fine silk ribbon in gold, bright green, and rich brown, a few tiny steel clasps, a dangerous-looking needle, thread, and some of the feathers Kíli had gifted them earlier that day. It took the thief a second but Harry worked fast enough that
his project soon took shape. “I thought Thorin said no beads?”

“These aren’t beads.” Harry looked up from his work to smirk at Nori. “They’re simple hair ties, nothing more.”

“Uh huh.” Nori snorted, moving to sit next to the hobbit and watch the process. It looked like he was using the needle and thread to thread and sew the prettiest of the blue jay feathers to the thin strands of silk ribbon before securing the addition further with the steel clasps and crimper. He considered what that would actually look like for a moment before deciding that it if was placed right it would look rather fetching – if odd. “Well, better you poking at that bear of a temper than me.”

“I’m not breaking any of his rules.” Harry chuckled – a bit evilly even to his own ears – holding up one of the finished hair ties. “I’m just working around the letter of them.”

“You know, at first I was a bit worried about you getting involved with both of those terrors.” Nori told him bluntly. “I’ve changed my mind: you lot deserve each other. Not one of you has the sense to do anything but run headlong into trouble.”

“Like you can talk, Nori.”

“Infant, please.” Nori sniffed, raising his nose imperiously. “Trouble finds me, Harry, not the other way around.”

“Speaking of which.” Harry hummed, continue to set the feathers just so on the second ribbon. “Dwalin’s heading this way.”

He was less-than-shocked when he looked back up from his work and Nori was nowhere to be found.

Harry would never admit it, but he’d led them to a campsite with a stream and a swimming hole out of pure vanity.

If Kíli and Fíli were going to have their hands twining through his hair he’d like a chance to get it at least a bit cleaner than it was after more than two weeks since his last hot bath in Bree.

A wild hobbit he might be but he’d been raised with cleanliness – in both his lives – and somethings stuck even if his practical side tended to rule more often than not.

The dwarrow were just as excited as Harry and Bilbo though they’d had to take bathing in shifts thanks to the new courtship making things a bit awkward otherwise. Balin was elected to accompany the pair as they bathed next-to-last with Dwalin and the three Durinsons finishing out the rotation with the rest of the dwarrow and Gandalf bathing earlier while the hobbits helped with the ponies and the Durins practiced their arms. It also gave everyone a chance to see to their hair and beards near the fire with whatever level of privacy they required or was considered proper.

Familial grooming was a thing in dwarrow culture as Bilbo and Harry had quickly found out on the trail.

The elder Ri’s would fuss – yes, even Nori – over Ori’s braids while he in turn helped his brothers with their rather-elaborate coifs. Bilbo had no idea how Bombur’s wide braid was managed but he half-expected magic on the part of the Ur’s. Óin and Glóin would help one another while the Fundinsons didn’t wear braids to the point of needing assistance nor did Kíli though the younger
prince and Thorin – who likewise managed his own braids – would assist Fili if needed.

Grooming involved in *courtship* however was apparently a rather private affair at least so Bilbo assumed given the fuss over who would block the view of the other dwarrow and who would be appropriate to keep watch over the younglings as they set braids in each others’ hair.

Bilbo and Thorin were the obvious choices for witnesses however Thorin chose to stand guard shoulder-to-shoulder with Dwalin and Dori who between the three of them – and thanks to some nebulous relation between the Durinsons and the Ri’s he still didn’t quite grasp – made a rather effective wall granting the trio as much privacy as could be had on the trail without disappearing into the night.

Balin, therefore, took the place of Thorin as the next-elder closest-kin – if Bilbo understood the reasoning – to the princes to vouchsafe their proper behavior during this step.

A lot of bother and inconvenience for a bit of hair but he wasn’t a dwarf and couldn’t speak to their traditions with how closely they as a culture held them tight to their collective chests.

Harry had carefully picked out the flowers from Fili during his bath before his wash, glad he had the experience and sense to bring along hard shampoo bars for both him and Bilbo as well as their standard trail-soap that wasn’t as fine-milled as what they used at home but was better at scrubbing away caked on dirt with the fine bits of ground apricot pits he used in the recipe, one of his mother’s fashioning.

Even without the fresh wash and comb-through he’d given it, Harry rather thought he’d still blush at the hotly *intent* looks on the faces of his princes when he lowered himself down onto his bedroll between them as they ate up the sight of his cherry-red mane tumbling down over his shoulders, the lingering damp from his cold bath dragging the curls down to his hips rather than springing up to his elbows.

Bilbo handed him the clean handkerchief wrapped around his own courting tokens and then – rather conspicuously buried his nose in a small volume of Sindarin poetry, Balin puffing on his pipe and blowing smoke rings while angled away from them in a way that allowed him to keep an eye on them but not *focus* on them as it were.

“I,” Harry blushed and stuttered, confidence temporarily fleeing at the *heated* gazes the sight of his loose hair had caused. And explained quite a bit about Dwalin’s fluster when they’d met. “I made you two something, to match a hair tie of mine.”

He fiddled a bit with the handkerchief and set it on his knees before opening it and revealing the trio of slim ribbons – less than a quarter inch in width – that had been strung with small jay feathers in pale blue edged with grey starting half-way down the length of the ribbon and ended with a single longer feather in the deep blue the birds were known for.

Picking up the green ribbon, he held the end behind his ear so they could see how the simple bauble would look, Kili’s bright beaming grin and Fili’s soft smile making it clear that they liked the sight very much – though whether that was from Harry’s gift or that he used Kili’s gift to fashion it he wasn’t quite sure.

A combination of both was most likely, however.

Needing no more encouragement than that, Fili gently took the ribbon from Hadley and set it aside with the others for the moment and picked up his comb, noting that Hadley had brought other ribbons as well as the redhead quickly took them out from a pocket in his waistcoat and set them
on the bedroll as well, a selection in deep blue, green, and brown likely chosen as they would be less likely to stain than the pretty pinks the little beauty had worn the first night at Bag End.

Kíli was quick to follow his brother’s example, his fingers just as quick and clever with braiding hair as they were at his silversmithing or fletching, the pair explaining the significance of what they were doing as they worked.

“In a formal courtship,” Fíli began, taking the top of Hadley’s mane and bringing it straight back off their brow but leaving a bit of softness to the combing rather than pulling it tight and leaving the comb in place to hold it before starting to use the simple length of metal – thicker than a needle and with blunted ends – dwarrow preferred to get crisp parts and lines that was about the length of a dwarrow’s palm to define the two braids that were to be set on the sides of Hadley’s head.

“When – or if – you accepted our First Gifts we would each present you with a bead that would show you were being courted by the line of Durin.”

“Mithril and sapphire.” Kíli added. “For the direct Line of Durin and engraved with our maker’s mark.”

Harry couldn’t help but whistle under his breath at that. If they were heirlooms that would be one thing but new mithril beads for the direct Line? Considering how rare mithril was anymore since Durin’s Bane had chased the dwarrow from Khazad Dûm, only the tiniest of pockets were rumored to have been found in Erebor and even less was known to be – if one was suicidal enough to try and mine it – languishing beneath the waves in the ruins of Belegost, the sheer extravagance of even tiny hair beads couldn’t be overstated if fashioned from the precious metal.

It did rather put into perspective just what he’d gotten himself into with courting his princes.

A tangible – if not currently physical – reminder that while he met and became interested in a pair of good-hearted troublemakers they were princes of the foremost line of dwarrow royalty…and all that came with it.

Aulë’s balls.

It should also be noted that before today when his princes had woven flowers in his hair and now when they worked so deftly with hands and fingers and small tools to weave his mane he hadn’t known he liked his hair played with in quite that way.

And if the gleams in hot eyes were any sign his princes liked playing with his hair just as much.

“Since that’s not possible at the moment,” Fíli continued, finishing his half of Hadley’s head and beginning the weave in the back that would rest overtop of the bottom-half of Hadley’s mane that would be left free to curl, Kee managing the more complex parts of weaving the two sides together as four hands worked a five-strand plait that started at the crown of Hadley’s head and ended at his nape. “We’re giving you two braids on each side across the width of your head: the top a five-strand for the Line of Durin and the bottom a four-strand for Princes of Durin’s Folk and not the King, joined in the back with another five-strand plait.”

Fíli tilted Hadley’s head with a knuckle under their jaw and tied the befeathered ribbon into a loose lock of hair behind their left ear as Kíli finished fussing over the braids that they’d have to fix – not that it would be any imposition – in the morning depending on how much Hadley tossed and turned.

“Done.” Kíli announced, sitting back on his heels and beaming – and struggling desperately to hide what having his hands in that glorious mass of hair, it was so soft, had done to him though at
least Fee was in similar straights if having an easier time of hiding it the poised arse – at the sight Hadley made bedecked with the braids of the Line and Princes of Durin. It made something dark and possessive inside him flare in satisfaction. Especially when he thought of the easy comradery that had developed over the past weeks between his hobbit and Nori. “Our turn now.” He gave his pretty darling a dashing wink, Hadley rolling their bright green eyes and laughing.

“You first then,” Harry sighed as if put upon, as Kíli rushed to arrange himself on his bedroll, Harry rising up onto his knees to get some needed height as the dwarrow was almost a foot taller than him. “Is there a certain braid I’m supposed to use?” He asked as Fíli handed him Kíli’s comb and hair clasp, hovering close enough that Harry almost flushed from the heat at both front and back from the large, muscular bodies of his princes.

“Not as such.” Kíli shrugged. “It’s up to you.”

Harry hummed a bit under his breath then nodded, setting Kíli’s hair clasp aside for the moment and setting to work on his mane of dark brown hair that was coarser and heavier than most hobbit-hair, reminding him a bit of Hermione’s frizzy curls.

Thanks to Amaranth and his other younger dual-natured and female cousins, he knew a thing or two about braiding for all that he didn’t usually bother too much with his own hair on the day-to-day of things.

Fíli made an interested sound in his throat as he watched his sweet hobbit work with quick-and-sure hands through Kee’s mane – though from the heavy blush and breaths on the part of Kee it was likely a good thing they’d gone first in braiding Hadley’s hair as keeping his composure was obviously a struggle for his younger brother at the moment.

A thought that filled Fíli with tantalized dread.

If a simple braid like the one Hadley was making quick work of for Kee’s hair was enough to rattle a Prince of Durin, what would the three Fíli wore in his hair – he’d already set his mustache braids – do to him?

“What kind of braid is that?” Fíli asked, trying to distract himself.

“It’s called a waterfall braid leading into a four-strand ladder braid.” Harry answered absently, studying his work with a critical eye, making sure both sides were even before popping open Kíli’s hair clasp and locking it in place then tying in the dark brown ribbon with its pretty blue feathers under Kíli’s left ear.

So they’d match, even if Balin rolled his eyes a bit when he turned his head to check on them.

“Huh.” Balin commented, snorting. “You actually managed to make the young scamp look halfway respectable. We really are going to have to keep you around, Hadley.”

Snorts and snickers came from beyond the wall of bodies and Kíli glowered at his longtime tutor and mentor as he repositioned to watch as his hobbit worked their magic on Fíli’s hair, holding onto his brother’s clasps until Hadley asked for them and fingering the feathers mingling with his loose hair – which was most of it – thoughtfully.

Five braids: two on each side and one in the back was Fíli’s preference the same as they’d put in Harry’s hair but not nearly as elaborate.

After a moment’s thought that allowed him to get situated, he started with the same waterfall braid as he’d used for Kíli then left it free as he twisted a pair of rope braids on each side of Fíli’s head,
one under the other in a pair of half-loops that rested over the rest of Fíli’s golden hair, bringing it all to join in the back of Fíli’s head in a short four-strand braid. He set Fíli’s beads and clasps in place, if farther up the strands on the side instead of dangling on the ends that were woven into the finishing braid, and added the ribbon last, the gold much like Kíli’s dark brown almost disappearing into the hair and leaving the feathers to gleam in various shades of blue behind.

When their “guards” broke ranks, Thorin coming over to inspect their work with only a knowing arch of a brow at Harry’s unrepentant look over the feathery decoration, then the King nodded with a nearly-silent sigh and motioned them over to the campfire so the others could stare at them in varying states of shock.

After all, who would expect that the three wildest among them would show such patience that those braids clearly took?

With the proof staring them in the face even Glóin and Dori had to – reluctantly – approve of the care the trio at least were taking in their improper informal courtship.

That was the whole point of the braiding.

To show the world the care and honor with which a dwarrow treated their family or partner.

And while it wasn’t the greatest test the three would ever face – good gold was on presenting their relationship to the Lady Dís for that – it was one they’d easily passed without a second’s hesitation.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

This chapter is shorter than last but more in-line with the average chapter length for this fic.

Sons of a Took

Chapter Sixteen: Hearts of Earth

The dwarrow had watched with interest as Bilbo helped Hadley wrap their hair in a large piece of soft fabric, confused as they’d never seen such a thing before in their lives.

However when they woke to the sight of Hadley removing the wrapping and revealing braids that needed only a moment or two to adjust back to precise neatness, they were shocked to their boot-covered toes at the miracle that had occurred as they’d grown accustomed over the preceding weeks to the fact that hobbit hair wasn’t like dwarrow hair with the – as the princes could but wouldn’t attest – soft and silky curls escaping most attempts to tame them.

If the young princes were disappointed that their assistance wasn’t needed to neaten up their love’s braids, they kept it to themselves with the sure knowledge that they’d get their chance to play with Hadley’s hair again that night.

A lack of warg-howls in the night combined with the playfulness of Fíli and Kíli as they jostled good-naturedly for position near Hadley with their hounds who snuggled close after having to share their person with the dwarrow the night before when that was their time for pats and snuggles and brushings, combined to lift a bit of the tension of yesterday’s ride though Thorin and the others were still on high alert and the princes kept closer to the Company than normal as they hunted, leaving the scouting to the dogs for the second day in a row.

As it allowed them time to hunt for wildflowers for their little love as well as for supper to fill Hadley’s belly with more than waybread and dried fruit and meat, they didn’t really mind the change.

Returning to the others with a brace of hares courtesy of Kíli’s skill at the bow and a pair of bouquets in white and yellow – they thought they had it right but the white flowers were, maybe, one of the ones with multiple meanings – flowers they’d found in a glade the Company had bypassed by a dozen yards or so, they took the cleaned and skinned hares to Bombur for the cookpot and turned to find Hadley returning from their own foraging with Gamble and Ash in tow.

Shooting a smile at the princes and darting a quick glance at their flowers, Harry handed over his own contributions to the cookpot in the form of some wild spring onions and sage, he met his suitors over at the edge of camp where they could talk a bit before Dwalin came looking for his cousins to hammer at them – literally – while they practiced their sword work.

Moving faster than the dwarrow, Harry tucked sprigs of sage he’d kept back – for wisdom and because it smelled good – behind their ears as they pressed their mixture of the two new flowers they’d found on their little hobbit.
Harry took them, a bit bemused on the ongoing luck the pair had in picking random flowers.

“White hyacinth for loveliness and daffodils for regard.” He noted, smiling wryly. “Thank you.”

“Can we…?” Kíli asked, shifting a bit from foot to foot and reached to take a flower from the fistful of stems Harry now held.

He shook his head, looking around a moment then sitting with his back against a tree as his princes – a bit depressed at the refusal with Kíli nearly pouting – sat next to him and watched carefully as he took his work knife from his pocket and set about trimming the stems before weaving them together in a circle.

“What the-?” Kíli blinked.

Grinning playfully, Harry – in less than fifteen minutes – lifted the finished flower crown and put it just so on his head before working at weaving the remaining flowers, not that there were many, into a simple posy and tucking it into his waistcoat pocket like a boutonniere.

“Daffodils have a sap that’s a bit sticky.” He explained as the princes studied the flower crown in fascination, Kíli fiddling with the trimmed stem bits and tossing them into the forest to keep his hands busy. “Not the best for hair-flowers but make decent flower-crowns and buttonhole posies.”

“What’s your favorite flower?” Fíli asked, as with everything else going on and the princes almost always riding ahead to scout or hunt they hadn’t had much time to just talk.

“Sunflowers.” Harry smiled, thinking of the massive sunflowers he grew every year at Bag End. “But,” he cautioned at the look his princes exchanged. “They won’t be blooming for months yet. Do either of you have a favorite flower?”

Fíli shrugged, mouth twisting a bit in a not-quite-grimace.

“Dwarrow aren’t really flower-types.” He explained. “But they certainly suit you, Hadley.”

“We like gems.” Kíli offered at the near-pout – adorable, made him want to bite that lower lip – that crossed his hobbit’s face at that despite the blush at Fee’s compliment. “And metals and things of stone and craft.”

Harry thought that over a minute then changed his question.

“Then…” He said slowly. “Do you have favorite gems or metals?”

“To wear or work with?” Fíli arched a brow, teasing, then laughed at the scrunched-nose look that got him. “I’m a Master Armorer, little one.” He explained. “I don’t work with much other than steel and iron but I like the look of copper-gold and amethysts the best. They sing right to me.”

“Silversmith.” Kíli offered freely with a grin. “So silver, naturally, and what could I possibly like better than emeralds?”

Harry blushed and rolled his eyes in unison at the implied compliment to his eyes and was about to ask a question about gems and metals singing to dwarrow when a barked order from Dwalin had his princes scrambling to meet the guardsman at the makeshift practice ring he’d set up (a relatively rock-and-root free space) and had been trading blows with Oakenshield while they spoke.

Dwalin and his timing, Harry shook his head before joining his brother and hounds by the cookpot
to help chop up potatoes to add to the hare stew.

... 

Harry dug his toes into the ground beneath him, focusing on something no one else could see or sense as he absentely ran his hand down the backs of Gamble on his left and Ash on his right while the others enjoyed their nightly pipe after supper, daffodil and hyacinth garland still resting in pride of place upon his brow.

“What is it, Hadi?” Bilbo murmured, a frown creasing his brow.

They’d cleared the Weather Hills and were approaching the Last Bridge in a day or two but still had at least a week or more before reaching the foothills of the Misty Mountains depending on which pass Thorin wished to take over the lawless mountain range.

“When you said amethyst and copper-gold sing.” Harry spoke, flicking his gaze between his princes. They were the least likely to outright lie to him after all, which wasn’t something he as-yet trusted the rest of the dwarrow to refrain from. “What did you mean? Is it stone-sense?”

“What do you know about that, Hadley?” Balin lowered his pipe and leaned forward, taking a closer look at the hobbits as the pair exchanged glances, the elder giving the faintest of nods before the younger turned back to him to answer.

“Hobbits remember our story better than most other peoples.” Harry told them. “Parts of us were based or copied off of others. My dual-nature came from the elves.”

“But our earth-sense,” Bilbo said, blowing out a rather fabulous smoke ring, appearing completely nonchalant. “Was patterned after the stone-sense Aulë gave to His children the dwarrow. From that and what Fíli said to Hadi, it’s easy enough to extrapolate how our own gifts are similar to your own.”

He also thought it might be why Master Oakenshield got so lost in the Shire: very little stone to orient through.

“It’s never an exact match or copy from what we can tell or our histories say.” He finished, tone musing. “But,” he waved his pipe. “Similar enough for us to trust that if we ask you to keep our abilities secret you will do so.”

“It’s long been known that hobbits of all the Free Folk are most gifted with the land.” Balin allowed as the other dwarrow had a muttered conversation – veering close to an argument – in Khuzdûl. “By your manner of speaking this is something more than that.”

“If your hearts and souls are hewn and crafted of stone.” Harry said softly, the argument avoided by simple dint of the others needing to shut up to hear him. “Then ours our formed and fashioned from the earth.”

“We can sense things through stone.” Thorin allowed, watching the hobbits with great care to the point he would catch even the slightest of shift in their faces or bodies. “And can – to varying degree – find ourselves drawn to some gems or metals more than others. The strongest of us can read the stone.”

“Tooks and Baggins have always been strong bloodlines.” Bilbo told them, shifting and sitting up a bit from where he’d been lounging against Ash. “When they join it can create faunts with a deep connection to the earth, who can do more than encourage growth of one or two or even a handful of crops to take root or a particularly deft hand with gardens and crops. Hadi has the strongest earth-
“You’re no slouch yourself, Bo.” Harry knocked his brother’s shoulder with his own, trying to lift a bit of the constant worry over his abilities from Bilbo’s shoulders. “For a staid Baggins.”

“Says the wild Took.” A half-smile tugged at the corner of Bilbo’s face. “Now if our dwarrow will agree to keep our secret,” he trailed off then nodded when Thorin gave a curt nod of his own. “I think it’s time I had an answer from you my darling sibling: what are you sensing?”

“Danger.” Harry leaned over, shifting position to plunge his hands into the soil instead of simply digging in his toes. “What feels like packs of wargs sweeping the land, searching for something, and a,” he wrinkled his nose. “Blot of some kind on the forest ahead but it’s smaller, almost contained to a small area.”

“How far?” Bilbo pressed, and the dwarrow shifted uncomfortably as Hadley’s eyes went blurry and unfocused.

It was eerie but something they at least had a frame of reference for with Bofur, Bifur, and Thorin’s significant stone-sense.

“The closest they’ve come was the other night when we heard a howl,” Harry murmured then shook his head and sat back, eyes clearing as he dusted off his hands. “At least a half-day lead.”

“We’re being hunted.” Thorin cursed under his breath. That complicated things. To say the least.

“We always knew it was a possibility.” Balin pointed out pragmatically. “Though it is ill news.”

“That’s how you’re able to find any path and lead us around ravines and rivers, isn’t it?” Fíli was nothing less than enthralled with this newest facet of his little love. “You can sense it.”

“After a fashion,” Harry’s lips pursed into a moue. “Though it takes practice.”

“A lot of practice.” Bilbo said drily. “What’s dangerous to a tree or a patch of soil might not be dangerous to us and likewise the other way around. A warg can’t exactly do much damage to a mighty oak anymore than we have to worry over lichen taking root under bark.”

“An’ that would be why the other hobbits were interested in havin’ you two take a look at their crops and fields and livestock.” Dwalin snorted, crossing his arms over his chest. “Wanted you to work with them like havin’ a strong stone-reader test for mineral deposits and faults before digging a new mine shaft.”

“That’s…” Harry and Bilbo traded a glance. “Pretty accurate a comparison, actually.” Harry admitted.

“That’s…” Fili sighed, Kili finishing the thought.

“…amazing.” He reached out over his brother and squeezed one of Hadley’s scarred, working hands for their dainty size. “You’re quite the surprise, Hadley Baggins.”

Harry squeezed back, resting his head on Fíli’s shoulder, quite done-in for the biggest extension of trust he’d practiced in longer than he could remember.

“Because dwarrow are open and free with their secrets.” Bilbo muttered to himself, rolling his eyes, just a bit, before flushing at the look he found himself pinned with – one with far too much interest and consideration to be good for his own good – a look from crystal-blue eyes under dark
Harry knew it was possible he’d grow to regret sharing his abilities with the dwarrow of the Company – Gandalf had been absent from the conversation as he wandered off in a snit after fighting with Oakenshield more and more lately – but he never thought it would be this quickly or for this reason.

He swore, the next person – dwarrow, wizard, or otherwise – who bothered him over the warg packs he was tracking through the earth was going to get a bramble in their bedroll that night.

And it was only now coming up on midday.

At the sight of Oakenshield once more heading his way, Harry let out a subvocal growl and whipped around on his pony, thundering back to Bilbo’s side where his brother was talking with Ori and Balin.

“Trade.” He snapped demandingly, getting himself an imperiously arched brow from Bilbo for his efforts. “You lead this lot for a bit.”

“And where will you be?” Bilbo asked, holding in the urge to laugh at his harried-out-of-their-wits sibling. Hadi’d been the one wanting to tell the dwarrow once they’d gotten over their inground caution that their father had drummed into them from the cradle. He’d been watching Hadi get more and more frustrated and snappish as the day progressed, especially since they’d sworn the wargs were far enough away that the princes were once more on scouting duty to go with their hunting and flower-picking.

Rather than answer, Hadi nearly flew from the saddle and tossed Bilbo their reins, trusting the older hobbit with Tulip, and bounded off into the gently rolling hills and speckled wood that
surrounded them already whistling for their hounds to return to their side, calling back over their shoulder: “not here!”

Bilbo waited until his sibling was well and truly out of earshot – for a hobbit, not a dwarf or wizard – before bursting into laughter, bending almost in half as he steered Daisy up towards the front of the Company that had slowed at the abrupt departure of their guide.

Just desserts, he thought, given the givens.

“What by Mahal’s beard has gotten into Master Harry?” Ori asked, puzzled.

“My sibling is not overly fond of people on the best of days, Ori.” Bilbo comforted the lad with a pat to the shoulder as he passed the besweatered dwarf. “That Hadley lets the princes around them enough, often enough, to court is nothing short of an act of the Green Lady or a few too many tankards of cider.” He smirked at a put-out Thorin as he steered Daisy into line beside the King. “One is as likely as the other.”

…

Fíli and Kíli were almost done with their scout and hunt for the day, heading back to meet the Company, when they crossed a path they’d never seen before.

Trading a glance, they turned to follow it, thoughts of orc scouts running through their thoughts as Kíli readied his bow and Fíli a pair of throwing daggers.

Slipping from their saddles, they hobbled their ponies and followed the strange trail.

If Kíli didn’t know better he’d say it was almost as if the plants and trees and brambles had parted before whatever had passed through, creating as clear a path through the sparse woods as they’d ever seen even with Hadley leading them.

It led to a hidden glade surrounded on all sides by towering trees and protected by sheer rock on one side and thick thickets of sharp-thorned brambles on the others.

And at the back of it, red hair coiled and pinned to the top of their head, was the object of their affections sunk down to the tops of their bare shoulders in the steaming hot-springs that likely hadn’t seen a pair of footprints in decades or longer without Hadley to lead the way, the hounds laid out on a large flat rock and standing guard over Hadley’s clothing and weapons, barely lifting their heads in interest at the arrival of the princes, Kíli slinging his bow back across his shoulders and Fíli sheathing his daggers.

For his part Harry just turned amused green eyes on the pair, feeling far too relaxed and languid as the heat of the hot spring – a gift from Yavanna if there ever was one – sunk in bone-deep and lulled away his frustrations and sore muscles alike.

A command in a language the princes didn’t recognize, proof that Hadley was starting to trust them more and more, had Ash rising with a grumble and loping off.

“You’re going to want to fetch your ponies, loves.” Harry warned them, closing his eyes and letting his head fall back to rest against the moss-cushioned rock. Well, it was moss-cushioned after he’d encouraged the mossy growth but still. “The Company is about an hour away.”

Taking in the implication of that – perhaps half that time of having Hadley to themselves, naked, in a hot spring – had the princes sprinting back to where they’d left Saffron and Sunflower, Hadley’s peeling ring of laughter following them as they went.
It was a tense ride – for Thorin and Bilbo – while the rest of the Company either rode along silently or spoke softly in the wake of Hadley’s defection from leading for the moment in preference for a bit of hard-won solitude.

They spoke perhaps five words to each other during the hours following Hadley dumping the Company in Bilbo’s lap, and might have managed six when Ash returned from her person’s side unaccompanied.

Ash loped up to Bilbo, stopping in the path and then looking rather obviously back in the direction she came from.

“Sent you for us, did they?” Bilbo sighed, shaking his head. “Alright then, lead on girl.”

“Master Baggins…” Thorin drawled, frowning in confusion. “What are you doing?”

“Hadi must’ve found a safe place to camp and sent Ash back to guide us.” He shrugged. It wasn’t like it was the first time something like this had happened only usually it was the other way around with the hounds finding a good stopping spot, familiar with what that looked like from rambles with and their connection to Bilbo’s sibling. “And given their snit before they took off on their lonesome I’d rather not deal with their temper if we don’t follow and they have to come fetch us on foot.”

Having borne the brunt of the redhead’s temper, Gandalf on his grey horse was the first to press forward after Bilbo, the rest – grumbling half for show – following thereafter.

If Thorin was the next behind the wizard none dared say a word on the matter…at least where the King could hear them.

…

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!