Mazarbul

by StairwellWit

Summary

So comes to pass that Durin the Deathless, mighty dwarrow of Aulë, Father of the Dwarves, King of Khazad-dûm, the First of the Seven Fathers, King of the Longbeards, finds himself inexplicably bound to a small raw chunk of blue stone pocketed by one Belladonna Took on her journey home from a well accomplished adventure. Years, and multiple adventures later, Belladonna settles and births a son to whom this stone is gifted. A child named Bilbo, the small Hobbit who will turn the tides of the whole of Middle Earth, and the ghostly Durin's ward in this new uncharted world before them.

Or: In which Durin the Deathless does not accept the finality of his lineage and submits his complaints to Mahal and Yavanna. Becoming bound to a stone was not part of his request to save the Dwarrow and this stipulation was not in the fine print. Additionally Hobbits are far too endearing even to ancient semi-immortal monarchs. And it isn't technically breaking any rules if the ghost beside you works as a translator for super secret dwarvish languages.

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Notice: I do work retail and Holiday Season will create a lull in updates but this work Is Not Abandoned
Hey it's me! With this storyline that's been sitting in my phone for well over a year and I just wanted to finally post. For the record I am most familiar with the book of The Hobbit but I will be meshing in the timelines of the movies and also my own twists! So you're getting a bit of everything. I'm also playing fast and loose with Middle Earth lore in some places here and there because it's such a rich fun world to fall into.

Anyway!

I hope you enjoy!

I'm going on very short vacation soon so I'm going to try to post a few chapters before I leave!

this prologue will be very short, and then they'll increase in size from here!

See the end of the work for more notes
Prologue

'My sons are gone'

Durin the Deathless rises in the great echoing halls of Mahal to his first lucid thought in ages. He can feel the truth of it in the shifting of the stone, light and song and stars opening to their souls – the searing pain in his everlasting being at the wrongful death of his last direct descendants, the end of the true line. There are flashes, small jagged fragments dropped from their memories like a broken chandelier cutting their way into his mind as they enter the Halls. The war, the madness, the shame and guilt. Time did not flow here the same as when he lived, how long had Durin been asleep? How had this happened? This was not how his children were meant to fall. Durin the Deathless sits up completely and stands for the first time in a very, very long time. Where there had been nothing of pain, of discontent, no fear or rage for centuries there was a fire growing now within. Something all consuming, searingly oversaturated in its suddenness to fill a void it had not touched for so long. Like the sun bursting into eyes who have forgotten light, straining the iris to prevent it.

His feet find the ground from his low set resting arc of stone and precious metals around him. The world encompassing him quite suddenly, shifting in a coiling movement, curling past him so drastically as he walks from his chamber he is not sure if he truly walks at all or if the world just bends to bring him to where he needs to be within the heart of the mansion, to the court of his creator.

Within the center of Mahal's home the great garden is situated, large and sprawling, chords of light creating webs across the sky, bright and sparkling, stars sewn together over every tree and every plant known and unknown to the whole of Middle Earth.

From somewhere all around him the trees shiver his name in greeting in a voice not that of Mahal; not the sharp striking sound of metal against stone, but that of gossamer whispers. The rustling of dragonfly wings and the delicate shifting of loam under barefoot.

Each trunk, leaf, flower, blade of grass curves at her entrance, bends gently toward the beauty of Yavanna. Her face alight and flowing amber as if made of honey, the gold dripping onto the moss cloaking a swell of shoulders. A bubble of pollen floating about her in sparkling particles creates a shifting yellowed halo, Durin can make out where the fine powder touches her cheeks then settles within the honey and sinks, glinting with sudden star like brightness beneath. Her feet stay buried within the ground, the earthen soil spilling from her ankles, her cloak of moss and grass is not a robe but the ground around her, risen with her in a shawl and falling back into place in her wake seamlessly.

"You are awake, dear child. How good it is to see you."

Her face is too blinding to look upon for too long but Durin does his best to greet her properly, looking to the darker molasses sockets of her eyes, then bowing respectfully. "Durin's Folk are dead, m'lady." His chin rests against his chest beneath his heavy beard. "I do not understand why this has happened or how."

"Shall I say something tedious such as 'All things must end'?" Durin smiles despite himself. As a
young dwarrow some part of him had never understood the courtship of his great Father and the Lady Yavanna but in his few encounters he has been made privy to her sharp humor. He had oft wondered why it was that the most beautiful plants were often the most poisonous and now, in the afterlife, having met the being responsible, he understands this irony is her particular brand of humor.

"I should hope not."

Yavanna smiles, a large hand settling atop Durin's head. He can feel the roughness of tree bark scratch his scalp. "Sweet child. It is true enough though."

"I have felt the madness, the dishonor and betrayal in their death. This is not how it should have come to pass."

Yavanna's great hand lifts leaving a crown of yarrow braided around his head then bends, the ground dipping like feather down bedding beneath her folded legs, "They died reclaiming Erebor. This is but one piece in a great tapestry."

"Thorin died having betrayed someone he loved, his sister sons died for him even in his madness. Perhaps the tapestry is fine from afar but this snag…it is not as small for those who do not live the life of immortals."

The pollen about her falls, dimming in her sympathy. Kementári tilts her head, the great light of Laurelin glinting from the delicate glass like drops of tree sap across her arms, her fingers, the size of maple saplings, curling around each other in her lap.

"And you would have us change this?"

"I would change it myself if I had this power. But I know no one does, m'lady."

She hums with the sound of creaking tree trunks and looks away, out across her husband's court.

"Perhaps. But perhaps not."

Durin did not speak, for he had grown used to the cryptic speech of the Valar with their slow treks through exposition rather than forthright informative messages. Being dead left him with more than a little time to dally.

They stay quiet for quite a long time and nothing but the soft cooing of stone speech and the hushed wind alerts the court of the master of the halls entrance.

The jagged line of Mahal's shoulders, a quartz and amethyst mountain range, sparked bright under the light web above as he comes forth. His great beard creating the sound of rain, the columns of Jasper and volcanic rock knocking together with the sway of his body.

"Durin the Deathless, my son. Yavanna, my sweet wife." The Earth Maiden's halo swells at her husband, pollen powdering his shoulders.

"Durin has seen that his sons have died, their entrance woke him."

"Yes.. many have arrived today. Erebor is once again the Dwarrows-"

"But at what cost!"

Durin should have been very embarrassed, mortified in fact, yelling at not one but two of the Valar.
But truly, at what cost?

"They went to battle, my child, these are the risks." The Green Lady placates.

"Did you tell him all things must end?"

Yavanna sighs, apparently even the Valar felt the occasional exasperation of marriage, "Yes, of course I did tell him that."

A thoughtful sound escapes the Smith's chest, "What would you have us do?"

"I want to fix this. I want them to live, or to die with their honor, not in the betrayal of friends and family! We are stronger than this! Mahal...you made us better than this."

The fires in Mahal's eyes soften, "And you would take this responsibility?"

"They are my children."

Yavanna, still kneeled before the dwarrow cocks her head up to her husband, "We have not meddled for some time."

Her grin is mischievous, "Quite some time indeed."

"Will you let me try?"

Durin is desperate, bowing down into the soft grass, "Allow me to save my children, or let them die with the honor they deserve."

"There is more to play here than you know, Durin the Deathless. There are things you must not change, things that must stay in order for the future to continue."

"I understand."

Yavanna and Mahal give each other a long look even as magic begins to build within the dome of the garden.

"We shall see, my son."

So comes to pass that Durin the Deathless, mighty dwarrow of Aulë, Father of the Dwarves, King of Khazad-dûm, the First of the Seven Fathers, King of the Longbeards, finds himself inexplicably bound to a small raw chunk of blue stone pocketed by one Belladonna Took on her journey home from a well accomplished adventure. Years, and multiple adventures later, Belladonna settles and births a son to whom this stone is gifted.

A child named Bilbo, the small Hobbit who will turn the tides of the whole of Middle Earth, and the ghostly Durin's ward in this new uncharted world before them.
When Bilbo was a child he was stung by a bee on the soft arch of his foot. Belladonna had not coddled him, not nearly as much as his fauntling mind would have liked. The stinger was pulled and his eyes were wiped but the Took maiden was more apologetic to the hefty yellow and black bug half smashed on the ground. Her son, little Bilbo thought, is here in abject pain and yet his mother is petting a bee! A dead one at that!

Decidedly betrayed, and dramatic (as one mixed with both Baggins and Took blood is apt to be. If on opposite sides of the border. For where the Baggins took daring risks in recipe designs, a Took would often take up design with wizards.) Bilbo raised from the ground in a huff; limping (exaggeratedly) to his mother. He hoisted his hands onto his hips like his father was wont to do when Belladonna was being especially Tookish. (Bilbo had yet to see it work but he was still going to try.)

"Mama!" His good foot, still peachfuzzed atop and soft on the bottom stamped like an angry skunk. "I am hurt, Mama, the bee had no right to sting me like that!" The blue stone around his neck lept about with his ministrations.

"And what right did you to stomp him, Bilbo? Hmm?"

Bilbo puffed up, his curls bouncing in his indignation. "It was an accident!"

"Perhaps his sting was an accident. But your foot will be fine, darling. Poor little bee here will not. He cant even apologize or ask how this happened."

Bilbo's lips pouted extensively, in only the way small children can succeed, and tapped his wounded foot against the ground. It wasn't so bad.. he mulled over this for a long moment, his curiosity setting in.

"Did he die because I stepped on him?"

Belladonna dipped her finger into the dirt and drew back a tiny grave to put the bee in. "Not exactly, though I am certain it did not help." She smiled and Bilbo limped to get a better view. Never one to miss his mother's loveliness, he took a moment to look over her face before looking down at the tiny grave she was situating a dandelion over. "Then how come he died, Mama?"

Belladonna Took-Baggins stood and hoisted her fauntling astride her hip. "Bees die when they sting something."

Bilbo squished his nose to her shoulder eyeing her dubiously. "Then why have stingers in the first place?"

Children, universally across all races, are known to fix the world in simple ways adults, and nature,
would be wise to take to mind.

"To protect their home. Bees live in big hives, with small homes within a big bee kingdom and they do everything they can to protect their kingdom and their queen. Bees are small warriors! They bear their swords courageously!" She poked her son's side, "All to protect the golden treasure within!"

Before he could respond the small child was assaulted by a litany of tickling fingers against his soft round Hobbity belly. Sending him into a fit of giggles and return attacks.

The bees and their stingers go forgotten for most of the day after that. For there were meals to be made and eaten, chores to be done, and all other brands of Hobbitly things to be seen to. It wasn't until night fall, after dinner and supper and tea and bedtime snacking that Bilbo blurted what had been on his mind much earlier in the day.

"Like Dwarves!"

Rudely interrupting his mother's bedtime tale, he shouted in triumph. Belladonna for all her confusion kept a respectable level of motherly approval for whatever it was her child seemed to have concluded so victoriously. "What about Dwarves, my darling Bilbo?"

She righted his comforter about his pudgy arm.

"Bees! Bees are like Dwarves…or Dwarves are like bees…” he pondered which must have come first for a moment before deciding it mustn't truly matter, for the comparison was still quite the same.

"How so, baby?"

"They live in great big hives!"

"Mountains, not hives."

"But they are like big giant beehives with caves and have little homes and workplaces and cities. And a big royal person they all protect and gold treasure! Honey is gold." He grinned, tossing his comforter into turmoil again with a whip of his arms.

"I'm sure birds are quite like dragons to bees!"

Belladonna Took-Baggins grinned widely for all she was worth. Dwarves - and dragons - goodness, if Bungo could hear him speaking so excitedly of such things he'd faint in worry. Next Bilbo would be asking Gandalf the Wizard to sweep him off to some dwarrow camp and how would he explain that at Market Day or, Yavanna forbid, Lobelia Sackville-Baggins's birthday party.

Bilbo merely smiled widely back, two fold to his mothers own expression, as she tucked him back into his bed and kissed his errant curls.

"We will make an adventurer of you yet, son."

Bilbo's curious obsession with the Dwarrow did continue to grow and thusly concern his father just as Belladonna predicted. It was odd, the imaginary dwarves and stories Bilbo had conjured up from nowhere. For Belladonna, while having mentioned dwarrow, tended to tell adventures of Elves and
wizards and humans. Familiar creatures with open study-able cultures. But perhaps, she told Bungo, that it was the mystery that excited him.

It was harmless in any case. Even if Bilbo occasionally climbed the smial and jumped off of high branches with stick and canvas made weapons. (Perhaps not entirely harmless, as Bilbo had indeed broken his arm battling, he claimed, a cave troll. Then in an attempt to save young Ham Gamgee from a supposed warg rider Bilbo had instead thumped the gardener's son quite solidly across the noggin'. But….mostly harmless..not entirely dangerous anyhow..)

Belladonna, against Bungo's pleadings, encouraged all of this in great humor; allowed Bilbo her travelling pack to tote his axes, maps, books, and cloaks to fight great drakes and other monsters the Shire had nearly forgotten existed outside of the warm toddy air of the Green Dragon and it's drunken tales. It wasn't long before both parents caught onto the recurring character in Bilbo's stories.

Doolin, Bilbo called him, the great Dwarf King that was his apparent partner in these ventures. A massive dwarf with a beard that he nearly needed to tuck into his big thick metal buckled belt. His shoes were wrapped in wolf fur and gold and jewels hung from his long braids like fruit from a plum tree. His eyes and his shirt both matched his little blue rock he was never without. Doolin was the first dwarf, in fact, and he was quite good friends with Yavanna, he'd announced at supper once, standing quite rudely up in his seat causing Bungo to drop his bite of warm pot pie right back into its bowl. Doolin's well worn presence was just as prevalent at dinners as the whole of the tiny family and would continue to be so with little to no end in sight through Bilbo's youngest years.

(Doolin was not in fact what Bilbo was saying. But a child trying to duplicate a dwarven accent and with the poor attempt to roll their R's with little cooperation from their own tongue, Doolin is in fact what came out. Perhaps this was for the best. Bungo Baggins may not have taken well to the ghost of Durin the Deathless haunting about his homely home all too spectacularly, what with his delicate sensibilities.)

Bilbo's oddness does settle slightly eventually, his mentions of Doolin outside of the family home become naught entirely and the youngster finds small jobs to do around the Shire and acquires a love of writing of all things; riddles, rhymes, how to's and what not to do's. He nags, politely mind you, at fellow Hobbits about their occupations, learning much of herbs and oils, flora and fauna, how to judge the weather and the best places to pick mushrooms. (This last takes by far the most effort of nagging for if there is anything that a Hobbit loves more, and hates to share more, than anything else in the whole world of eatables it is a plump mushroom.) The majority of the Shire accepts him as a curious, well learned, upstanding young Hobbit. One that is honest and fair and many are pleased to have as their future landlord in the wake of his parents.

The wake of which comes much sooner than any had the foreknowledge to predict. Even the most weather smart of the Shire could not have predicted the Fell Winter. The Baggins did fare better than others. Bilbo and Belladonna had spent a summer with the Bounders and a few hunters met in the Green Dragon learning the basics of hunting and tracking, they did manage to ease their larders with what few hares and game that did wander through. Bilbo had felled a wolf one day, he would claim it dumb luck. Never admitting to the tips and whisperings of Durin following after him, scouting ahead and helping his aim. It did help, and was shared between his family and the Gamgees for a decent stew to last them a few days on rations per family.

It was the Fell Winter which would finally bring to the knees Bilbo's mother. A sickness settling in her lungs that stayed put even after the thaw began and would not let her free no matter the home
remedies young Bilbo made for her. At night Durin would speak to him softly of the afterlife, tell him wonderful things of the garden in his own father's home of which Yavanna looked over, and the garden waiting for his mother must be even more glorious than that. When this was not comforting he would sing. Lilting gravelly songs like water churning rough stones into smooth ones, some in Common, some in ancient Khuzdul. Songs of creation and damnation, of his home and his banes. When all else failed Durin's songs would always settle young Bilbo into a worry-less slumber.

Belladonna was strong though, even after the crippling winter she trudged on gallantly for months, nearly to the next winter. Bilbo and Bungo beside her always. Her husband a worried mess, his eyes full of love and resignation.

It was during this time Bella, at the beginning of the end, asked her dear son about Doolin, "What ever became of him?"

They had set her a shadowed patch beside the garden with Bilbo's already famous tomatoes; hydrangeas and sweet potato vines, lavenders and stonecrop and yarrow boxing her gently in under the shade of a canvas umbrella Bilbo had sewn and whittled their names into the staff of.

Her hand had looked older than it should, calloused yet delicate now in ways her son never wanted to see. He had drawn the maps of her veins in his journals in Durin blue ink many nights before this moment, created small landscapes about it; tiny homes of fictional characters cropping up around the creeks of his mother's bloodlines for little fables to tell the tiny kits waddling about and eager for stories at birthdays and parties.

Belladonna's lifeline was stunted but deep against the already worn pads of Bilbo's fingers, "He is well."

"Is?"

The Tookishness was still strong in her glinting toothy grin, "So he is still about?"

Bilbo couldn't have helped his smile if he had tried, his hand not holding Bella's reaching to hold the raw chunk of blue about his neck; the macrame now a bit dingy, more ecru where it had once been white. "Always, he's never left, Momma. We agreed, perhaps, it was best to pretend he was nothing more than a childhood fantasy. To spare the masses." He tapped his nose in the same manner he had picked up from his father.

"I always knew. Or I thought...but now I know." Her eyes, bright and brilliant looked off across the rolling hills of the Shire and their garden then to her son, flickering to his side, pausing for a stilted moment. She had started to see it in the recently darkening days. The jittery shadow beside her son, thick shoulders, heads taller than her baby, hovering protectively always near. It had grown more solid, thicker, darker, a buckle or a jewel glinting in the sun here, a flash of blue or a grey burst of wolf fur there. He was near now, and the Hobbit lass could see him all at once and caught his eyes for the first time, their color matching to the stone around her baby's neck. The great dwarrow did hold himself a King and some part of Belladonna settled so comfortably, so contentedly, that her son was not alone, had never truly been alone ever, and would not be alone soon. Durin bowed low to Belladonna, having realized it was not an accident, or a casual coincidence her eyes looking into his own.

He had noticed her lately, the way she would focus just behind or beside Bilbo where Durin happened to be standing, even eyeing the garden when he would wander about outside while his ward did daily chores inside. At first he had thought it nothing, then had assumed it was to do with her state of wellness slipping. It seemed his second assumption was accurate. Bilbo glanced at the dwarve's movement then to his mother.
"You are something special, Bilbo. You must know that." Bella's eyes came back to her child, a small fit of rough coughing stopping him before he could ask what it was she had seen.

"I'm not, truly, mother."

"Oh, but you are. You will be something grand in the world, I've always known it."

Bilbo smiled sadly, turned her hand back over to follow the dips and ranges of Belladonna's knuckles, "Is this your way of saying goodbye, Mama."

His mother did not respond, did not have to, together they sat under the shade of their umbrella, and watched the sky turn orange, then purple, then the deep blue of night. Belladonna Baggins did not make it to sunrise, Bungo Baggins did not make it to winter.

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That winter was a casual affair, as if an apology for the Fell Winter the year before, but no one saw Bilbo these months. Groceries were delivered, the Gamgees swept the snow and opened the door just enough to slip his mail and rent within the small crack, occasionally they would hear soft mournful singing, often times they heard nothing at all. Some nights a delicate glow would permeate the windows, soft billowing clouds of smoke from the little chimney and the smell of cooking meats or pastries. Once or twice Ham swore he saw his friend's small figure in the distance escaping at night out across the fields but he never told anyone, feeling this was the right thing to do by the mourning young man. By the first signs of spring, and just before the Shire was to plan an intervention, Bilbo Baggins appeared quite suddenly one warm morning at his little mailbox, puffing perfect little rings of smoke up into the blue sky above as if he had never been absent. His curls soft and clean, his eyes bright once more, and the grin he gave the passerbys that of the young Hobbit they had all come to know. It seemed with the thaw came an end to his mourning and the Shire felt a collective relief. That summer Bilbo's garden flourished, his story-telling was more grand than before, and often times the kits of the Shire chased after him as he walked to Bree. He once again took to studying with others, thin volumes of his writings were sold at market day, flowers and their meanings, the best time to plant, the best site seeing for avid walkers. For many years, all was well and right in the Shire, tranquil and happy and oh so predictable.

And then, as had happened so many times in the history of Middle Earth, when things seemed to be at their most calm and most relaxed, there appeared a wizard.
He hadn't thought he would see it coming. The exact moment he had been waiting for: Tharkûn's entrance to his little Hobbit's home.

'His Hobbit,' he could practically hear Mahal and Yavanna laughing at him, thunderous like a rock fall and the twinkling sound of mithril bells. But what was new?

Perhaps his initial annoyance at being left to a halfling had fizzled over fifty some odd years, he was dwarf enough to admit that he had perhaps been a bit aggressive at his initial situation. But truly, of all the things and all the people in all the world a halfling to be left to. The nerve! He had assumed one of the young Durin nephews he had felt, or perhaps the young scribe he'd caught sight of at the very least would be his ward. Then this Shire nonsense! And the rock! The blasted blue thing threaded, knotted, and unrelentingly cemented to his being! He had tested it at first, when he had been dropped just on the edge of the Brandywine, close enough the shallows brushed the stone and left him an odd chill of sensation. He had wandered as far as he could from the little rock before a full force yank stopped him in his tracks, nearly toppling him over entirely. Barely half a mile, which when he took the time to cease being ornery realized was quite a generous distance. One that could be of decent advantage to whomever it was he was to be helping, and these pros he must focus on, this was not meant to be easy and magic, he knew, was a fickle thing and he must work with what he was given. So he waited, days even, and tried not to let his temper flare. (Being nigh immortal he had had much time in learning to control his temper in life, but then having gone so long without a temper at all, being dead as such, he found the niggling agitation was perhaps a little overwhelming. The days of reprieve before his new ward would most undoubtedly be helpful lest he make bad first impressions) But then days turned to weeks, and nearly too many months to count before a young dark haired lass trotted up along the banks to fill a water skin and noticed his little rock. Durin could see it in her face, the tilt of her head, and knew before she touched it that this was another joke. Yavanna and Mahal had not told him he would be with his children directly, and they spoke more of the Hobbit than they did of the dwarrow, and the young lady picked up the stone and smoothed her hands over the ragged edges, warm still even after bathing so long in the shallows, and the motion left a veil like feeling of being touched along Durin's arms. He thought at first perhaps this was Bilbo, for what did he know of Hobbit genders, most dwarrowdams were easily mistaken by others for males, but the green eyed lass shrugged and did not see him even once standing beside her. So this was not Bilbo, and this was not a part of his plan. Had he made a plan? He wasn't so certain anymore. He had stood watching her go, her travel pack waddling on her back, waited for her to disappear over the round hill behind the trees and stubbornly glared at a shrub.

"You two are worse meddlers than Tharkûn." He said and the shrub's berries rattled and a tug yanked his gut, and this time it did topple him, right onto his face, and drag him along it did, with no grace or poise and Durin allowed it. Because no one was there to see it and perhaps a couple of months was not enough time to get his temper under tabs, and perhaps he wanted his Vala to know he was not happy, and perhaps he simply could not find it in himself to care. An unknowing Belladonna Took travelled with the most famous of all Dwarrow kings dragging face down along behind her for nearly two miles before he decided his royal crisis had gone quite far enough.

Durin did endear himself to Belladonna as well eventually. How could he not? He was attached to her home, then to her hip when she took her tiny adventures. She was a sharp thinker with a wily tongue and it was hard not to adore her. Enough so he had found himself deeply judgmental of the stuttering boy who chased her skirtails and loved her so. She never did see Durin, not until her dying day, we know, but so often before this when he would touch her shoulder, or brush her hair
Then came Bilbo.

A squishy round little ball of peachfuzz and curls that Durin feared for immediately. How could something so soft be prepared for what was to come? Some little thing that determinedly refused to open his eyes for the first two weeks of his life, until Bella waggled that little blue stone in his hands, and his tiny fingers grabbed hold and his little eyes popped open right up at Durin the Deathless, and a tiny toothless grin damned the great king immediately. So yes, perhaps he had softened; his overwhelming reentry into the land of the living had settled, and his less than receptive initial feelings toward Hobbits and a certain Baggins had turned to something more possessive and he would blatantly admit loving. A deep friendship had kindled, parental at first but much more than that as Bilbo grew into a sharp witted adult. A caring of which Durin felt so deeply he needed to know that this man of such a soft respectable countenance could survive the glimpses of what Durin had seen had once come to pass. A war of which he knew must come to pass again, in one manner or another. He had seen Bilbo's haggard appearance from the first battle, the sorrow and darkness anchored deep, grappled in behind those eyes as he held the hand of the King Under the Mountain. This image was one of the last and strongest fleeting memories from Thorin Oakenshield's mind as he went to rest.

He knew this must come to pass, that this journey must begin here with the flower box and green round door backdropped behind them. With Gandalf and the promise of an adventure. But he was so suddenly and violently against it that he was forced to remember the feeling of nausea. He wished perhaps they had just a little longer, a year, a day, a few hours, never at all. He was not ready. Durin the Deathless had never felt ill prepared for much in life or in death, war or peace, but the willowy man approaching now left him anxious. He had no heart in his chest left to flutter but it seemed it was not necessary to feel this fearful sensation either.

Durin began to worry, to wonder if he had prepared Bilbo properly, to the true best of his abilities, questioning what he already knew. Bilbo was strong and capable, he had taken swimmingly to everything the great king had given to teach him, from bits of combat to the urging of learning new languages, but Durin was faced with that which he hadn't had to look directly in the face until now. The fact that he himself would be little help for the detailed line of events. He had not woken until his descendants had died. He had been given no miracle future sight or solid map to follow. A very minimal explanation of where to lead this journey ahead or what to, or what not to change. He had been given himself and the name of a little Hobbit with whom Yavanna said was of utmost importance. This gift his father and the Green Lady gave him was a crack in the rules too thin to risk much more than they already were. To tilt the balance but refrain from flipping the table in its entirety. Durin would give his best insight, could interfere to the extent of his spectral abilities, teach Bilbo how to defend himself and survive amongst the dwarrow and the treachery of the world, but he would be nearly as blind as those he was helping outside of the small fragments he had collected from Thorin and his sister-sons in the halls and the few hints Yavanna had felt safe to sneak him. He could not even know the true order of the events he did have stored away for reference.

(He did begin to wonder once for a short time, years back, if this was more of a punishment than a merciful second chance. He also wondered if Eru knew. Mahal was not known for following the One's rules with the utmost care, lest Durin would not have ever have been at all, and all things considered his wife was as sly as the wind through the leaves of her garden.)

But this fine sunny day like any other, nothing out of place or out of sorts, the kind of day a good Hobbit loved to nap in the fields, or tend to his garden, walk to Bree and pick flowers along the
way, was apparently the beginning of this dread awaited journey, whether Durin liked it or not. And he most certainly did not. Beside him Bilbo's teeth clicked against his pipe, he had gotten quite used to Durin's lasting presence; learned early on to feel the twitches in his emotions without needing to ask or wait for verbal explanation. So when the spectre tensed in preparation Bilbo glanced from his post with well placed trepidation.

"Good morning." said Bilbo, and mean it though he did, it had now become a marginally more dubious one than it would have been otherwise. Mr. Baggins squinted up the stalk of the tall grey man in his gray robes with his gray eyebrows and gray hat and thought to himself what kind of storm cloud had fallen upon his little smial this day.

"What do you mean?" The rain cloud said, "Do you wish me a good morning, or mean that it is a good morning whether I want it or not; or that you feel good this morning; or that it is a morning to be good on?"

Bilbo scratched out his earlier observation from 'Marginally' to 'Most Intangibly' and 'Dubious' to 'Plaguy.'

"All of them at once," said Bilbo, because while suspicious he was steadfast in his manners. "And a very fine morning for bringing a pipe of tobacco out of doors into the bargain." He lifted his pipe and puffed out a very fine ring indeed. "If you have a pipe about you, sit down and have a fill of mine. I imagine there is no hurry here, not for me anyway, and you do not seem the sort to move in much haste much often if the situation does not call for it." He blew another ring and the grey cloud grinned broadly, "Very pretty, indeed, Mr. Baggins!" Then he leaned against the knotted curled crooked staff in his hands and allowed the two to study each other for much longer than even Bilbo felt he had ample time for. Durin stayed quiet and watched, it was his little Hobbit who finally spoke first, "Augury," he said in a tone just this edge of accusatory and observatory.

"Gardyloo." The cloud replied.

"Pardon?" Bilbo nearly choked on his next smoke ring and the other grinned slyly, "I'm sorry I thought we were just trading interesting words. Was there something augury afoot?"

"Yes, actually. It is you. I'm concerned at the possibility that gardyloo applies now too though."

"Me? Why, what would possibly be augury about me?"

"I don't suppose Wizards make much use of mirrors?" Bilbo grinned at his joke and the amusement radiating from Durin was refreshing from the prior anxiety.

"Is there something on my face for which a mirror would be helpful?"

"Yes, augur."

Gandalf's great grey head tilted the opposite direction his smile lifted. Belladonna Took's son indeed, Hobbits would never cease to amaze him. "And what of it?"

The master of the house sighed and tapped at his pipe, "Why not just tell me what you would like from me, Master Wizard? For you are a wizard yes? Gandalf, perhaps? I remember your fireworks as a young fauntling, the snapdragons were always my favorite. If the compliment means anything at all such as many years later."

"A compliment is a compliment no matter how late or how soon and I do find myself flattered you remember my name." Gandalf leaned infinitely further on his staff, his long body arcing in one graceful swooping shape and Bilbo found himself infinitely annoyed by it.
"You are most welcome. Now, I have wished you a good day and offered a sufficient amount of neighborly small talk and you have given me riddles and brought a very long shadow upon my walkway. You have said very much but very little at all. You have skipped many a smial to come upon mine and as it is mine I'd like to know what you expect of it." Bilbo tugged down his favorite waistcoat in finality, the buttercups would be glinting brightly in the sunlight were the wizard not in its way.

Gandalf for all of his years was once again pleasantly surprised and near giddy about it.

"An adventure is afoot my dear sir."

"I am not in the business of adventures."

"Ah." Gandalf the Grey held up a finger that curled in much the same way as his staff, "But I am. And because I am, I am very adept at knowing who is to venture them."

"The only place I wish to venture is from the comfort of my step to the comfort of my den. Good morning."

This time he meant it a good farewell and turned his face back to his shaded post. Bilbo squinted his eyes in concentration, trying to ignore the shadow still smudged over his post making his eyes cross to read it.

"Master Gandalf." Bilbo huffed and spun back at the lazily leaned wizard. "I did say good morning."

"You did. A number of times in fact, I've lost count and meaning of what each one was meant to say."

"This very one was a farewell. A goodbye. I am no longer interested in this conversation nor am I interested in adventure." He stamped his foot as he did when he didn't get his way as a child and chided himself immediately. "Now. I do have things to attend to. If you would like to leave adventuring out of it tea is at 4 and you are welcome to a cup and some cake if you ever the time. Why not tomorrow? Come tomorrow! Good morning, Master Wizard. Goodbye!"

Without bothering to check this time Bilbo rushed into his freshly painted little round door and shoved it closed behind him with a sigh.

"Is he always this much trouble?"

Durin snorted, "He is known famously as the meddler of the Maiar." The Hobbit narrowed his eyes at his dear friend and fingered the blue stone at his neck, the chord fairly new, a dark sturdy black hemp he had grown a nasty habit of twirling in thought. "You don't suppose he'll come for tea, do you? Why did I do that?"

"I believe yes he will, and then some." Bilbo's movement stuttered. "Pardon? This isn't..?"

"You best start cooking for 14."

"F-fourteen!? Excuse me! I thought you-" The halfling's face sobered, the hemp wrapped his fingers so tight they turned slightly pale, "So what you said, the Dwarrow, the battles. It's true?"

"Of course. Why would I have lied about that?"

"You've played many tricks on me and you've been saying it for 50 years with no such results!"
"I've never joked of this gravity! And I did tell you I wasn't certain of when it would happen. It is the journey for Erebor that Gandalf is here to ask you for, Bilbo." Durin's hand settled against his Hobbit's shoulder, his touch had always been solid with him, never ghosting through, but true and real and Bilbo halted at his grip looking up at Durin, a wistfulness in his eyes, "The Lonely Mountain…so…the dragon..Smaug"

The King nodded, "The time has come."

"Then why didn't he say that!" Bilbo yelled and kicked a foot out at his umbrella stand in a tiny fit of rage that sent the brass holder rattling and Durin could not help but laugh, he was handling this better than he had hoped at least. "If he weren't so distractingly annoying perhaps I'd have connected the dots-!"

"Wizards are also in the business of vagueness and trifling." Durin rolled his eyes, because when it came to wizards often times rolling ones eyes is the only thing to be done about them at all. "I'll do my best to translate for him as well, but currently unless you want to have your home invaded and your larder desolated by tea tomorrow evening entirely, yeh best start cooking."

Bilbo near screeched in frustration, pulling at his mop of curls as he stomped off to the pantry cursing the rudeness of Dwarrow, living and dead, and Wizards of all sorts alike. Durin stayed at the door, leaning to listen at the delicate scratching of what he could only assume was Gandalf's staff against the wood of the door. Bilbo was sure to be impressed on top of everything else that his freshly painted door was being drawn upon as well.
Of Tea Time and Rudeness (and also Rudeness)

Chapter Notes

Holy Crap Guys!!!!
I leave for few days and come back to all of these comments (which i plan to reply to individually as always!!) and over 1000 views!? Thank you!!!??
I'm now back from my cousin's wedding and my schedule is back to a regular work schedule for a bit. I'm writing on this at like 4 in the morning to be honest so i think i'm going to read it one more time then go over it in the morning and this should be posted on Sunday the 21st!!!
Glad to be back, y'all!
Much Love!
-S

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Durin could honestly say he had never seen such aggressive cooking in all his days. Dare he say, it was nearly war like. He generously considered himself a veteran, not just of battles, but also now of Hobbitish party preparations and next day regrets, but this was strategic warfare at its finest.

Bilbo stamped about the kitchen like a man leading a battalion. Stews stewing, roasts roasting, cobblerers cobblering. Herbs hung from twine ready to be chopped for sauces bubbling from pots each larger than the last. The cooking pit behind Bag End had a small whole pig ready to be buried in a dug out earth oven with sweet fruit and veggies and large thick leaves wrapping it, while the stone oven baked up seed rolls and sweet breads and flat breads for dipping and dredging. Durin stayed out of Bilbo's way for most of the day. Four deliveries had already been made that afternoon, one of meats (fresh and dried), one of dairies (milks, and butters, and creams, and cheeses) and fruits (preserves and whole alike, even little bags of nut mixes), and one of all manner of ales, wines, beers, and most importantly Long Bottom Leaf. By elevensies, and the second delivery, neighbors were already gossiping. A party, they wondered, what possibly for!? For whose birthday in the Shire had they all forgotten about? Was a holiday missed? Was this a surprise party? A surprise for whom!? Confusion set in quickly upon realizing their initial displeasure at having not been invited wasn't personal in the least, because, you see, apparently no one in the Shire was invited at all! And who had ever heard of such a grand party for a single person? Something very askew was afoot in Bag End. It was the only explanation.

A few Shirefolk had indeed mentioned seeing that old gray wizard mulling about in the early morning hours near first breakfast time close to Mr. Baggin's home and some recalled Gandalf had smuggled a Took or two away over the years. Others still remembered him and his firework antics from their youth but they had lost some of their whimsy and now fretted over his reappearance. Very little needed to be said about the possibilities of that particular wizard being back in the rolling hills of their little Shire. (Alas Hobbits are nosy and gossipy by nature, so, very much was said about all of this even without it needing to be said at all. Some very true things and some very quite ridiculous things as well.)

By nine'o'clock in the evening it seemed safe enough to approach and Durin perched in the seat across Bilbo's little table where he had settled for a swell supper. There was a quiet comfortable silence between them while Bilbo halved a lemon and squeezed it over the golden crusty top of the
fat fish on his plate.

"I still have to finish packing everything but I did get Mother's old travel pack out, the oilskin and a couple of my light journals on healings and plants, the travelers coat from the Bounders. I've also packed the two throwing axes and that old kard dagger from Tom Bombadil, just in case." The squeezed lemon was set onto a napkin and as an aside he added, "An odd man, that Old Tom." Durin hummed in agreement. (For anyone who knows anything of Old Tom Bombadil this description is nothing short of understated, underemphasized, trivialized, and downplayed to the greatest of lengths imaginable. They had met him in his territory in the Old Forest near the Barrow Downs on a small camping excursion. He had been merry and boisterous in his blue jacket and yellow boots and much to all of their great surprises had greeted Durin. Durin and Bilbo startled because he could see Durin at all, Tom startled because he hadn't realized Durin was dead, for he was quite plainly right there. This story is much out of our way, but it was a strange one and one for perhaps another day. What is to be known about it now is: Old Bombadil had, with a hop and a jig and a poof!, left Bilbo standing with a cup of tea on a saucer and a neat little dagger in the center of the forest, stolen Bilbo's mushrooms, and left the Hobbit and Dwarf both dreadfully confused.)

Bilbo patted at his lips and took a little sip from that very cup. "We should also make a list of what little we do know. I know it isn't much in the grand scheme of things but you said Yavanna mentioned certain events and what you do know will help with what to expect, yes? Even if I know them most by heart it would still make me feel most comfortable to go over everything again." Durin the Deathless nodded his great head, beads and jewels clinking. "Shall you retrieve the Engagement Tablet." Bilbo's expression was less than amused at this comment. "Will you leave my Engagement Tablet out of it. I think this is quite important enough I won't forget. You don't even know the order of things-

"You forgot the tea two weeks ago with the Gamgees."

"Not relevant-

"And elevensies with Old Took the week before that."

"Are you quite done?" Bilbo tapped his fork against the table smirking.

"There was also that birthday-"

"Durin!"

"Yes, yes I'm done."

The great king grinned so broadly his teeth, more than one of which was gold, were visible beneath the his massive mustache. "A more solid plan is best to be made before the travelling company arrives, I agree. I would say you should be warned of their possible gruff behavior." He trailed off.

"Yes, but I have been dealing with you for many a year." Bilbo nodded and smiled around a bite of his fish. It was proof how serious he was taking this. For it is not a very Hobbitly thing to do to talk business while eating. It is much more practiced to eat the main course, dessert, have a pipe, and perhaps one more cake before anything serious comes about. But things like dragons, and goblins, and great earth wide wars to change history (again) are sometimes allowed slight adjustments to rules. Beside his elbow he had a small stack of thin journals kept from Durin's stories over the years for reference.

"So let us discuss what it is we know."
Bilbo opened a page of a blank book and picked up a sharpened pencil, for he was a very precise Hobbit and even with the occasional mishaps of his Engagement Tablet. (Of which it is very rude to mention, mind you.) He preferred to be organized in even small tedious things, and this was a very large tedious thing.

"Gandalf coming was always the start? There is no mistaking this for just an out of odds visit and a nonsense venture."

Durin agreed to the first half, "Yavanna told me it was his idea to bring you as a supposed burglar. Why a burglar specifically, I am entirely not certain. Other than that I can imagine part of it was there being only thirteen members, and as you quite know thirteen is very bad luck."

"Very bad luck indeed. Right," Bilbo chewed this over with his fish. "What else?"

"The memories are scattered and some more visible than others, as we have discussed. There is the bear skin changer whom you must meet for he will help in the final battle, and the great spiders you must fight. There is an escape from what seemed to be an Elf prison, this escape and the spiders both looked to be of Greenwood but it does not look as well as it once did. I feel the prison and the spiders could have been avoided in one way or another, or handled at least with more finesse." He lifts his hand accepting his lack of honest knowledge. "This would also be fairly near the Lonely Mountain, mayhaps the dragon Smaug's terror reached further than just Erebor, and this is what is causing the ailment in Greenwood. Perhaps this is something to ask Gandalf, for surely he would know. Then of course the wargs, and the orcs, the war." Durin motioned behind him toward the maps Bilbo kept in the main hall. Two right beside each other, one of the surrounding county and his favorite walking paths lined in red. The second of Middle Earth whole and colors coded of where he had ventured, where he wanted to venture, and where venturing was most dedicatedly to be ignored. Small sketchings had been added over the years. Friends and travelers trees he had found, interesting caves and mushroom picking places.

"There were also Goblins?"

"Ah. Yes, goblins, yes, Yavanna said it was of grave importance that that go unchanged."

"That we fight Goblins?"

"Yes. It was specifically mentioned within the Misty Mountains the Goblin City must occur."

"Well that's encouraging. So Goblins, Skin Changers, Spiders, Elves, Orcs, and Wargs. Is that all?"

"The dragon."

"Oh, him." Bilbo scribbled something down and sounded most put out. "Why is he the least of my worries?"

Pride swelled in Durin's chest for a moment, then he slouched very unkinglike and laced his fingers over his tummy. He was current in a tunic and pants he had favored for sleeping ages ago. No shoes, his feet crossed, toes flexing. Being dead there wasn't much need for comfort but he had begun to shift his wardrobe to match Bilbo as a child and it had become some sort of a normal thing to do now. An odd innocuous comfort he took and enjoyed in feeling somewhat more alive to dress to occasions.

"One very stark memory of Thorin's is your standing before him between himself and a pale orc, but it is but a flash and I believe he was wounded for it cuts short quite quickly, but he is not maddened so I believe this must take place before Erebor is reached." Bilbo's head bobbed as he
wrote in short hand his little notes, as if he would have time to double check his list before leaping in front of orc and swords.

(Imagine, calling for a moment to check your notes in the midst of things. 'One moment, please!' Durin could hear Bilbo saying, 'I must double check if I am to be a hero or flee this particular time!')

"Everything else of dangerous intent I have is from the time of the battle. The fragments are hazy with gold madness and this is something we must prevent if at all possible. There is a presumably important stone you steal. It is from after my time so why it is so important I am not one to say, but it is what turns your friendship into hatred from Thorin. Thorin died apologizing to you for what he had done. He died leaving the grip of his insanity but it was too late to mend what had occurred. Even with your acceptance he was not put to rest gently."

"How do we cure it? The gold sickness I mean." For he did not know Thorin yet but he did not like the idea of any persons losing their mind. The prospect of forgetting one's self and loves and life a horrifying thing; worse than all the dragons and orcs in the world. He did not wish to see someone's soul and goodness leave their eyes, whether he knew them or not. He could not imagine something so gripping that he could no longer see beyond it to any love or righteousness any longer. It left a cold chill down his spine and a hollowness in his bones.

"I'm not certain..." Durin's voice was whisper soft in apology. Bilbo nodded sagely, chewed his last bite slowly, allowing this long known problem to roll about in his mind once more.

"So." He folded up his napkin from his lap and placed it atop his empty plate with a finality, "knock him out and lock him up in a trunk until the battle is over and go from there?"

A great startled guffaw rattled Bilbo's brain and it was by far the sound that made him happiest in the world, "If all else should fail I will personally aid your arm in the strength it would need to knock out my grandson's thick skull."

The next day was quite an early start. Bilbo had allowed everything to stew or marinate overnight and began his morning with opening all of the windows to air his little Hobbit hole out. Sheets were hung outside and Ham Gamgee with, bless him, few questions helped to beat them out and remake the beds with small twigs of lavender for freshness atop each pillow. The earth oven was smoldering and the pig was cooking up well along with the breaded beef Bilbo had started inside. The chickens he had roasting were crisping nicely and he had nearly finished the chilled meats and cheese plates for between meal snacking. Three different soup options were also simmering away inside with homemade pickles in jars nearby and a few shepherd's pies with golden mashed potatoes ready to be warmed up. Sweets of all sorts were line along the windowsills for cooling and attracting young kits from around the hills; apple tarts, blackberry cobbler, rhubarb pie, and a jar of jam cookies. (It had gotten so bad with the children Bilbo had sacrificed a whole jar of gingersnaps just to bribe them away.)

By four'o'clock tea time much of dinner and supper was quite ready for whatever the wizard could bring and Bilbo had freshened himself up. All slipped into his finest dinner jacket and waistcoat combination he fluffed his curls (head and feet) with some lovely smelling geranium oils, eagerly awaiting this start of his new adventure. Durin had wandered away for the early part of the day, presumably to scout around and see what it was he could see and had come back with half an hour to spare before the first dwarf would come to Bilbo's little home. One quarter after four a tring-a-ling-ding rang from his front door and Bilbo Baggins found himself quite frozen for a few very stiff moments, for often times when you have waited many years for a very moment and it is finally
there your whole person suddenly forgets how to person at all.

Durin nudged him gently into action before he could scare himself any further and neglect to receive his guest properly at all. The front door seemed heavier than ever before as it revealed the first of his new partners.

"I did not mean to keep you waiting, Master Dwarrow." Bilbo bowed low and Durin narrowed his eyes, inspecting the dwarf over his little Hobbit's shoulder. He was tall, near his own height, and a warrior, perhaps a guard of some sort by occupation. His bald head tattooed and ears cuffed in metal, his beard surprisingly short, shoulders built and covered in fur under a traveler's cloak, layered even in the middle of April as it was. "Dwalin." The gruff male's accent rolled similarly to Durin's and his bow matched Bilbo's, "Son of Fundin, at your service."

"Bilbo Baggins, at yours and your family's."

This seemed enough introduction for Dwalin who used his massive body to go about nudging his way into the home and shrugging his cloak off, "Where is it, laddie?"

"Beg pardon?" Bilbo and Durin raised the same brow at the sudden loss of any politeness from the new guest. Bilbo could practically hear Durin's beard bristling. "I was told there'd be food, and lots of it. Is it this way?" Dwalin stamped a few feet into the front hall then back and tossed his cloak right at Bilbo who caught it with no hidden annoyance, ignoring the distressed noise from the king beside him.

"I do have tea ready, and cakes. You will be most welcome to them," Bilbo walked up and shoved the cloak back at the dwarf as forcefully as he could, "if you would kindly reevaluate your manners. The coat hooks are there," he pointed toward the door, "and I have placed two tables out for you and your fellows to place their weapons upon." Bilbo frowned at the other's hands, "This includes those knuckle dusters please, I'd rather they not chip my cookie jars, your hands seem quite destructive without any help."

To his credit, Dwalin had the good grace to look mildly cowed and did as he was told, hanging his cloak on the first peg of the line and depositing his weapons neatly on the table obviously drug out for such an occasion all while sending curious glances to the bouncing Hobbit nearby. It had obviously been a time and a half since someone had had the gall to order the warrior around. Durin could only hope the rest were not so frightfully rude or he wouldn't be hearing the end of it any time soon from Bilbo.

Once he met Bilbo's standards, Dwalin was lead to the dining area where the selection of pastries and sweeties were lined out waiting to be feasted.

"I must admit, this was not what I was expecting." The dwarf narrowed his eyes down at the little creature beside him, "Is this normal for you?"

"I tried to make a large selection, I'm not quite sure what it is Dwarrow like best. But we Hobbits are quite the entertainers if that is what you mean." Bilbo rolled up on the tips of his toes then back onto his heels, "A large dinner party is not unknown on a semi-regular basis. We are fond of them in fact."

This seemed to appease the other male enough that he stopped caring much more about it and went for the muffins near the head of the table as the door began to ring again. Beside him Durin was mumbling something and sighing as if he expected only worse to come.

The next dwarf behind his door was shorter and older, his white beard was large and curled. His
nose fit both of these descriptors as well, though the curl was in the opposite direction, in instead of out and so long its tip sat almost neatly atop the bow in his upper lip.

"Balin, Son of Fundin, at your service." His arms spread wide as he dipped forward in a movement that defied his seemingly advanced age.

"Ah!" Bilbo exclaimed in a small fit of giddiness at the relation, "Bilbo Baggins, at yours and your family's. Some of which is already here. Dwalin is already attending tea. If you would like to hang your cloak and your pack I may take you to him. A good evening is it not?" He offered as the door clicked back into place.

"Yes, yes it is." Balin traveled much lighter than Dwalin and upon his entry Bilbo realized they were nearly on eye level with one another. "Though I think it may rain later, there are clouds hanging about." His smile was warm with age and the patience that came with it and Bilbo decided he liked him immensely already, "I know we are here for tea but may I have beer instead, my new friend."

"Yes, of course!"

"And I'm not too late, am I?"

"Not at all, in fact you are only the second to arrive! Dwalin is this way." Bilbo motioned for Balin to follow him into the dining area where Dwalin had apparently realized who had arrived and was standing with a grin, "Oh, ho. Brother, by my beard. You look shorter and wider than last we met."

"Wider, not shorter, and sharp enough for both of us." Both laughed and grabbed the other's shoulders and Bilbo tried not to cringe at the great crack of their skulls whacking each other. It was something Durin had told him about, but hearing it and seeing were two very different things and it gave his own head quite a sympathy ache.

"Are you certain we can knock out Thorin if your skulls can take that level of whacking?" He whispered to his left.

"What was that laddie?" Both dwarves turned to look at him curiously and he plastered on a quite host smile, "I was asking if Dwalin would also appreciate some beer as well."

"Oh, aye, I didn't realize that was an option."

The Hobbit chirped some happy agreeing sound and made for the walk in coughing his laughter into his sleeve as Durin fell in beside him, "It's all about getting whacking angle right that's the trick, Bilbo."

By the time he had arrived back with the beer from the barrels the door was ring-a-linging again over the already noisy conversation at the table. This time when he opened the door there was no time for introductions first as two dwarves of twin height and opposite color to each other hopped in and bowed in tandem, "Fili-" "And Kili!" "At your service." They both bounced back up, blonde and brown hair flying, and Bilbo nodded, "Very impressive. Did you practice that?"

"Not at all." Said Kili.

"Not once." Said Fili.

"Never before." They both said.

And Bilbo did not believe either of them for even half an instant.
"Well. I am Bilbo Baggins. At the service of yours and your family's." (He was already getting quite tired of saying this but manners were manners and if he was going to be Tookish about everything else from here on out he could still keep his father's politeness.) "If you don't mind to hang your cloaks," he turned for half a moment and Kili was already beginning to wipe his feet on Belladonna's glory box. In hindsight Bilbo wasn't sure which of them, Durin or himself, made the horrified sound first but Bilbo reached out and whacked Kili firmly on the thigh at the same time as Durin, effectively quadrupling the forcefulness of the Hobbit's smack. "That is not a boot cleaner! You may remove your shoes if they are dirty and as I was saying hang your cloaks and packs. You are young and your eyes are fit, you can surely see where it is the others have done so."

The blonde was trying to figure out if he wanted to be impressed, mad, or laugh his head off as he unslung his swords. Kili just squawked and rubbed at his thigh uncertain of where the strength from such a small thing had come from, he would surely bruise and he mumbled as much to his brother who rolled his eyes and called him an infant.

"Are we of an understanding, boys?"

"Yes, Master Boggins."

"Baggins."

Bilbo didn't need to hear the long suffering sigh from Durin to know the King was scrubbing his hands over his face in defeat. In the time it took the two brothers, of whom Bilbo actually did know from Durin's memories were Thorin's sister-sons, to get settled and joined with the other two for tea and beer the door had already started up again. One of the younger rather unhelpfully shouted "Someone is at the door!" As if Bilbo weren't already opening it and lurching back at the pile of dwarf cascading into his foyer. Sighing he looked up at the great grey figure standing behind the pile, and thought, yes Balin was quite correct about the rain clouds.

"Gandalf." Bilbo began helping dwarrow up from the floor, untangling them and pointing to were they should store their things then to where the food was after each introduction. (Dori, Nori, Ori, Oin, Gloin, Bifur, Bofur, and Bombur respectively)

"Well, Mr. Baggins," Gandalf hung his hat on it's own peg and leaned against his staff, "You seem oddly prepared, I don't remember saying I would bring guests."

"So you did plan to purposefully be rude then? I was wondering." The wizard didn't even try to look chastised, "Rudeness was, of course, never my plan, Bilbo. Mischief, perhaps, but never to be rude.

For that would just be...rude."

"Mischief is often synonymous with rudeness, I do think wizards forget that sometimes."

"And how was it my mischief slash rudeness was foiled then?" His eyes narrowed, his suspicion was trying to hide behind soft crows feet and smile but the Hobbit was not to be fooled. Bilbo merely shrugged, "The Shire is a gossipy place, Gandalf. A wizard shows up, dwarves are wandering about. It isn't so hard to put two and two together. Mischief works best in places where news does not spread quickly, or best, not hardly at all. I knew well before luncheon." He tilted his head back and lifted his chin, daring Gandalf to challenge him. He knew the wizard wanted to but they both knew now was not the time, so rather Gandalf asked for red wine instead of tea and followed the others into the dining area where Bofur had already tugged out a little flute and a jaunty tune. Everything for the moment seemed fairly smoothed over.
"This is not what I expected." Durin paced the drawing room floor, his hands clasped behind his back while Bilbo lounged back in his chair watching. The dwarrow were sufficiently taken care of and seemed happy enough to catch up on each other's lives before supper and Thorin's arrival. They also seemed to have very little interest in their host which left ample time for Durin the Deathless to have a mid-life (mid-death?) crisis. "They're ridiculous. How is this supposed to work. I know these faces are correct but perhaps something is different. Like their brains were misplaced." Great ringed hands scratched through his mane of hair, properly unbinding a few braids.

"People change, Durin, perhaps just let them have their folly while it lasts. They seem an honest bunch and they've no reason to not be joyful as of yet. This is just the beginning."

"Mahal, they're going to get you killed." Bilbo closed his eyes, "You've no place to ever talk about Hobbits being dramatic ever again. For all we know this is exactly as it was the first time round. And I am well off, I can take care of myself. You made sure of that."

The great king knew this but it did not curb his fear. Bilbo beside his dwarrow was different than looking at him on his own among the Shire folk. In the Shire, Bilbo was obviously capable in ways the others were not. He looked like he could weather a storm compared to Ham Gamgee and Old Took. His wild silky curls, and soft jaw, compact frame and undefined muscles compared to the stone carved children of Mahal, the ones shouting and playing charades in the living room, cracking their skulls just to say hello. Well, it was nothing short of disconcerting. The Hobbit was correct of course, technically he had done this before, without Durin's help, and survived that time just as well. Why did it seem less likely this time around? Because Durin's extra help meant that perhaps the dangers would meet them in equal measure? There was more to this than Bilbo, he needed to remember. He had meant for Bilbo to be a means to an end, back when that little Hobbit lass had picked up his stone all those years ago.

The deal had always been to bring honor back to his children. To save his line or let them die to rest peacefully instead of in turmoil.

Looking across the desk at his little Bilbo blowing smoke rings out the open window, the sweet smells of the grass and tobacco, listening to the dwarrow laughing and singing a few rooms over, Durin wasn't sure anymore what was most important to him or when that change had taken place.

Perhaps now was not the time for introspection as the door was being knocked again and silence fell over the little smial. Somewhere in the home Gandalf was saying somehow softly but for all to hear,

"He is here."

The great Thorin Oakenshield had gotten lost twice before he was finally knocking on the door with the inscribed rune Burglar wants a good job, plenty of Excitement and Reasonable Reward upon it's lovely green paint. In a very timely manner a small male swung the door open, wiping his hands down his dinner coat, "Bilbo Baggins at your service." He bowed and Thorin could see his company crowding about in the background, honing in on Gandalf sprouting out above them like a stalk of corn. He ignored the Hobbit's introduction and unclasped his cloak as he waltzed in, "If it hadn't been for the mark on the door I wouldn't have found this place at all. I thought you said it would be easy, Gandalf."
"Mark?" Bilbo glared at his door then at the wizard, "Rudeness also includes scribbling on people's freshly painted doors without permission. And you." Bilbo turned to Thorin, "Walking into a home without a proper introduction or the grace to thank your host is also rude. I'm up to my ears in rudeness tonight and near dizzy from it. I did introduce myself, usually you should follow suit, before entering the home." He sniffed, his nose and mouth side twitching like a rabbit, "And after all the time I spent cooking your lot a party sized tea and dinner and supper. All together you've been worst kind of guests."

There was a very interesting combination of choking sounds from the throng gathered in the living room doorway and Thorin had tilted his head in such that way royalty does when they have forgotten that perhaps not everyone cares that they are of the utmost importance in places other than their own home. Gandalf nearly tripped over himself to cut Bilbo off, tugging the door closed and standing between the master of the house and the wall.

"Bilbo Baggins, allow me to introduce the leader of our company, Thorin Oakenshield."

Thorin did not offer a bow or the shake of a hand, just crossed his arms under his now folded cloak and studied Bilbo. Durin was standing so near Bilbo's back in front of Gandalf that the wizard caught a curious whiff of something ancient and warm radiating from the small male and made sure to tack that beside Bilbo's curious foresight of their coming, assuming he made it out of this introduction alive. "So," Thorin said in his self important manner, "This is the Hobbit."

Bilbo said nothing for this wasn't a question and the statement was redundant as he was a hobbit and therefore, in this one instance, probably the hobbit. Thorin didn't seem to be looking for a response anyway as he circled him, "Tell me, have you done much fighting?"

Durin had warned him of this possible interrogation and Bilbo could not hold back the annoyed, tired slouch to his body, he had given many a grand party but this was taxing in the worst of ways, "Not much in use but I do know enough to get out of a decent bar brawl. Otherwise I'm quite quick on my feet and know my limits and when to pick my battles."

Somewhere in the crowd Balin and Bifur seemed particularly pleased with this answer, though no one else saw it.

"Axe or sword, what's your weapon of choice?"

"Throwing axes, preferably. I've never quite gotten the foot work down for sword play if we are being honest. I'm quite good at conkers as well, if you must know." He could not see it but he wondered what Gandalf's reaction was behind him while he rotated to follow Thorin's circling, unwilling to give him his back, even if the spectral Durin was there.

Thorin finished his circle and set his shoulders as if he had come to his conclusion and not heard a single thing Bilbo had said, "He looks more like a grocer than a burglar."

The previously silent dwarf company laughed and Thorin looked so self satisfied by this that Bilbo audibly scoffed and the sound of laughter seemed to suck right out of the room and off into the night to find somewhere else less stressful to be. Durin chortled, perhaps he had glanced over royal courtesy in his teachings because Bilbo didn't hold his tongue one ounce in the face of Durin's Sons, and arguably the most important dwarrow currently alive, but he couldn't say Thorin didn't deserve a bit of lashing. Thorin did not seem to agree if the way his brows lowered and darkened the shadows over his eyes was to be of any tell.

"Of course I don't look like a burglar. I've never heard a more ignorant ridiculous thing in all my days."
"Pardon." This was more a growl than an actual word.

Durin could recognize his famous temper had managed to keep itself healthy this far down the bloodline. Thorin's jaw muscles visibly leapt as Bilbo kept speaking.

"Should I wear a sign that says 'Burglar'? I'd hardly be able to burgle at all then, would I? Imagine, everyone would hide their good silver before I made it in the door. Isn't the best burglar one you would not think twice to invite into that place which you keep the things you least want burgled? Being rough and tumbled looking isn't good for business."

He tugged at his dinner waistcoat and primped one out of place curl. Thorin opened his mouth to say something, then snapped it shut with a click, having nothing truly to reply with to that. His nephews were gape mouthed, the others were a mixture of impressed and horrified, Nori was blatantly trying to hide laughter from Dwalin who looked ready to fight anything in the room. Durin laughed loudly enough that Bilbo had to consciously school his expression from joining in with the invisible king's mirth. Even Gandalf looked over Bilbo as if he had never seen a Hobbit once until this very moment. Overall to the dwarves it was apparently a very monumental affair and Bilbo was quite done with it and quite hungry, so rather than argue anymore he announced, "I'll be serving dinner now. If Fili and Kili wouldn't mind to help. We can get to business sooner rather than later."

Bilbo pointed to Thorin and told him where to put his things then spun on one large foot, "And Gandalf please kindly fix my door before allowing yourself anymore of my wine."

Their apparent new burglar walked silently past the group toward the back door without so much of a pat-pat from his feet and it took a solid thirty-five seconds before anyone gathered their wits again.

Overall, as the young scribe Ori recorded it, it was the most worst most perfect first impression ever made in the whole of Dwarrow history, and possibly of any history ever to follow.

Chapter End Notes

Onward to dinner, shenanigans, contracts, music and more!
"Confusticate and bebother these dwarves."

Bilbo stamped out into the backyard, "and that includes you too, don't think for one moment it does not." He glared fiercely at his oldest dearest friend who was still laughing and of absolutely no help whatsoever. Thusly, Bilbo was left having a quiet internal monologue on whether that had been the healthiest move in hindsight. He'd grown so used to telling off The Literal First Dwarrow Ever he hadn't thought twice about giving this current king, displaced from his throne or otherwise, a piece of his mind. But bither and bother it was done now and dinner was to be seen to, food always being more important than any royal thing in the world. Besides, when it was all said and done, he quite didn't care one bit what Thorin Oakenshield thought or didn't think of him and that was that.

He nodded his head firmly in finality as a perky, "Mr. Baggins?" sounded behind him. He had near forgotten he'd ordered the two princes to follow after him, he hoped they had missed his seemingly talking to no one.

The way they stood straight backed behind him with a new sort of awe in their eyes he figured all was well there at least and they weren't going to kill him for insulting their king-uncle. (In all actuality: No one, save Balin, their mother, and occasionally Dwalin had ever gotten to talk to Thorin like that; even those three picked their scoldings for when Thorin wasn't playing at being particularly kingly. But this halfling! He'd done it outright! And right in front of Thorin's company no less! Neither brother needed to ask the other their opinion on the Hobbit and waited for any command to be given. They were ready to listen to any orders Master Baggins had to say. Their eager loyalties had never come so quickly won.)

Said halfling obviously knew nothing of this and just began dolling out kind but firm instructions on how to lift and move the pig from the earth oven onto a large serving plank while he piled the fruits and vegetables along the side. The two boys did as they were told, concentrated and with no joking and Bilbo wondered, watching them with soft eyes, how young they honestly were. Durin had apparently wandered back inside and Bilbo looked out over the Shire at the tiny pinpricks of lights of the other hills. He nudged his stone about his neck from where it had been tucked into his under tunic wondering if he would come back after this night. If any of them would, Fili and Kili were not supposed to...

"-aggins?"

The Hobbit twitched a little and turned, apparently they'd been saying his name for a moment or two without his noticing.
"Yes, Kili?"

Bilbo scooped the last bits onto the serving plank. "What is it you do for a living, this seems a large hill compared to others we passed along the way here. It can't be all burglaring."

There was a slight pause as Bilbo lifted from his knees and patted the dust from them and thought: what did he do for a living?

He couldn't very well say he had been waiting for this night for 50 years, whether he actually thought Durin was joking at times or not. That would surely crop up some kind of trouble he wanted nothing to do with this early in their adventure (if ever). But that was nearly the whole truth of it, wasn't it? It was never even a thing he'd ever thought about, but was now fretfully, blindingly thinking about. It was so sharp a thought Durin must have felt it for he appeared in the back door with a curious expression, Bilbo needed to get himself under control, it was just different this adventure existing outside of the tiny world he and Durin had been living in together since before Bilbo's parents had died. Instead of saying of all of this with a large side helping of panic attack Bilbo said something still completely true and not at all magical or concerning: "I write. Little things, fables and stories, recipe books and botany, maps and healings. But mostly my money comes from old family roots and renters." He motioned for the two boys to lift the plank and set a hand on Fili's shoulder to help lead him as he was the one walking backward toward the door.

"Renters?" This was Fili.

"Yes, I own the nearby land around here and I have renters who rent that land to live on it, you see?"

The two brothers looked at each other and their heads swiveled in mirroring ways but didn't say anything more and that was a mite bit concerning. He had waited for the argument he had had with Durin for many a year, about the political setting of the Shire. (Yes, in some places owning land and renting it made you a lord. Yes, in some places the person who ran things was considered a king. No, this was not how it worked in the Shire. Bilbo was a landlord, the Thain was a judge and adviser at best and please stop talking, Durin, and leave it be, you're exhausting.) In any case this seemed to go avoided, hopefully indefinitely, but Bilbo had little faith in that.

Upon entering the dining room apparently everyone had picked their seats but in his haste Bilbo had forgotten to change the table from tea time to dinner and sighed, still holding Fili's shoulder for a moment to support himself in his exasperation.

"Perhaps some help could be had to clear the remainder of tea and set the table?" Bifur and Bofur both jumped up and Nori followed closely behind, the others began tapping up a tune with the knives and forks already on the table. "And please don't blunt the knives." he absently added, innocently enough without any heat, as he gathered a few plates of his own which were quickly snatched and run off with.

"You hear that lads? He thinks well blunt the knives." Bofur's voice called out a little too coyly. The short little tapping they had started shifted into a pounding beat and Bilbo looked around as plates started flying, "I've started something."

*Chip the glasses and crack the plates!\nBlunt the knives and bend the forks!\nThat's what Bilbo Baggins hates-\nSmash the bottles and burn the corks!*

He looked up at Durin who was standing close behind his shoulder, enough so it could be mistaken
he was speaking to Fili, "I've started something haven't I?"

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

He ducked under a plate then reached out to grab Tom Bombadils cup as it went sailing past. "Nice catch Mr. Baggins!" Kili grinned and kept hold of the serving plank while still managing to headbutt and elbow plates where they seemingly needed to be.

*Dump the crocks in a boiling bowl;*  
*Pour them up with a thumping pole;*  
*And when you've finished, if any are whole,*  
*Send them down the hall to roll!*

All twelve dwarves, save Thorin who was speaking to Gandalf at the head of the table in hushed voices, had some cup or saucer or plate or bowl bouncing from their body as they sang of awful things and tossed everything over to Bifur who was stacking it all into the sink tub. The old plates were replaced by Dwalin who tossed dinner plates to Balin, Bombur, Gloin and Oin at the table.

Quite quickly the table was cleared of sweets and tea cups and with the last thump and a shout of *"That's what Bilbo Baggins hates!"* was reset for dinner and all the dwarrow, once again save Thorin, laughed uproariously. Even Gandalf looked up from his talking to grin happily to the Hobbit.

Bilbo shook his head, his little cup clutched to his chest along with his good serving tongs.

"Yes. Well. Thank you very much. Now if everyone is ready for dinner. Fili, Kili." He motioned and allowed them to slide the pig to the center of the table and smacked Noris's hands with the tongs,  

"Please wait while I grab everything else."

He headed toward the kitchen and the two princes rushed after him at his elbows. Balin puffed at his pipe as Thorin glared at their retreating backs, "He was quick to put you in your place and steal your nephews, ey?"

The King Under the Mountain did not appreciate the observation.

When it was all said and done on either side of and surrounding the pig there were the soups and stews, fried potatoes, biscuits, cornbread, ocra and aubergine, fresh butter, and dipping sauces of all sorts. So much food was before them the dwarrow were quiet for a long moment and Bilbo began to wonder if something was wrong until the princes settled on either side of him after distributing ales and wines whispering, “We haven't seen a meal like this in a long time. Since Erebor we haven't been the richest of dwarves.” And Bilbo understood, remembered the Fell Winter and didn't press the matter. “Well, I believe that's all I have for dinner so, please, tuck in.”

This seemed to break the spell and any calm that had been was scared away the moment the dwarves jumped back into action. A pig hoof flew that way, a potato this way, Bilbo wasn't certain where that walnut had came from but it bounced off his plate and off under his curio cabinet to be found at some later unconfirmed date. It was all quite hectic but Bilbo found he actually quite didn't mind it and once the initial toss about had happened was truly amused. A few times he even had snatched something from midair away from Fili or Kili's awaiting plate. This all seemed to be
in good cheer, and he suspected was just the dwarvish way of making their plates and passing the food. He should have invited the Sackville-Baggins for dinner, it would have scared them away for life.

As dinner wore on everyone seemed to fall into their own little pockets of conversation and Durin took the opportunity to inspect everyone in detail, which made it very difficult for Bilbo to concentrate on much, his eyes darting to follow Durin's stocky form stalking the table.

At the end of the group Dori, who had produced a tea set at some point that was not Bilbo's was sipping chamomile tea and had teamed up with Nori to nitpick over the young Ori, Balin's scribe and protege it would seem, who was looking very much frazzled and harassed. Ori and Dori seemed an odd fit for the journey but Nori had a sneaky sharpness and survival instinct about him that Durin accepted at the moment. Further up at the near top of the table Gloin was regaling grand tales of his wife and son to Balin who was very good at feigning interest. The fiery haired dwarf was much like Dwalin. Radiating the feeling of a fighter, though Durin was sure he had heard that he was the treasurer of the group in an earlier conversation. Beside him, in the middle of the table, were the two dark haired brothers, Bifur with his axed forehead speaking animatedly in a combination of Khudzul and Iglishmek to Bofur, who Durin guessed to be a miner, and had a softness to his eyes that the Old King couldn't help but appreciate because it mirrored his Bilbo. Bombur's great body was sat beside the other two 'Ur siblings and was listened quietly, too busy munching on a bit of everything to have much to say to anyone, he seemed a hair more quiet than either of his brothers, even the one who couldn't speak anything modern. Oin, their half deaf healer, had entirely hidden away his hearing horn to apparently ignore everyone and everything as much as possible and seemed content in his spot beside Kili on the opposite side of the table.

Much to Bilbo's own surprise, as at tea time he had gone wholly ignored, Fili and Kili began regaling the master of the house with their latest hunting trip before they had left the Blue Mountains. Even Dwalin took the time to cut into their stories to chop back some of their more exaggerated details. Apparently the royal guard was also their training master as well, which did fair well for their fighting abilities. At the end of his tour Durin hovered the longest near Thorin and kept his distance from Gandalf. The two Kings' frowns were near mirrors. The resemblance was somewhat uncanny and hard to miss when Durin was looking as snotty and uptight as Thorin. Bilbo hadn't noticed it earlier because the current king was substantially slighter and younger than Durin the Deathless, but the familial similarities were certainly there.

Dinner on a whole was a success and everything was cleared away and placed in the kitchen while Bilbo explained it could be divided up into lunch packs and also eaten again for supper at nine. That was assuming the dwarrow were still there at nine'o'clock or after. This concept stumped everyone and Bilbo was forced to explain the seven meals of Hobbits. (This tradition went over extremely well and Fili and Kili both rushed Thorin, almost toppling him in his chair, demanding seven meals be the first declaration of New Erebor. Bilbo wouldn't swear he saw a smile on the king's lips...but maybe.)

Everyone once again took their spots at the table and Ori pulled out a quill and parchment to begin recording. Bilbo fetched a few candles better lighting now that there was room and settled back in his seat waiting.

It was Balin who began, packing his pipe, "So, what news comes from Ered Luin? Did they all come?"

Bilbo nibbled a biscuit and watched a heaviness on Thorin's shoulders he saw at times on Durin, he wondered if it was genetic for kings to come with already tired souls, "Aye, convoys from all seven kingdoms."
There was a quiet rousing sound from everyone of hope that Bilbo knew was misplaced, for they took the journey alone. "And what did the dwarves of the Iron Hills say? Is Dain with us?"

He is not.

Thorin shook his head, "They will not come," the small joyful sounds died out immediately, "They say this quest is our own." A few bowed their heads in resignation and others started to object loudly until Gandalf lifted his hand, "Hush! Let Thorin speak!" The King Under the Mountain nodded a thanks and began in a manner more true to that of a diplomatic meeting, "We are met here, friends, new and old, in the home of our most gracious host," Bilbo was certain he added that just for effect, "and possible conspirator, Mr. Baggins, to discuss our plans for the long awaited journey to reclaim Erebor. All of us well know what it is that we are to be reclaiming, some of us were there for its taking and well remember the horror of it." Thorin of course being one of them. "For our youngest few and Mr. Baggins I believe perhaps there may need be a bit of an explanation?"

There was a long drawn out silence and Bilbo looked up, his biscuit held to his lips, eyes a little round, for he had honestly stopped listening and had to take a moment to replay the last comment to know what it was he was to be responding to. Coughing a little, he tried to cover his blunder, "Ah...yes. Do tell. What are we after?"

A few gave him odd looks, Gandalf and Thorin most intensely but no one called him out on it and Gloin's voice boomed, "Our home! The great Erebor! Our riches and our kingdom and Thorin's rightful throne! Oin has read the portents and the portents say: It Is Time."

Oin agreed, his hearing horn pulled up to his head, "Ravens have been seen flying back to the mountain as it was foretold. When the birds of the old return to Erebor, the reign of the beast will end."

Again everyone looked at Bilbo who was sitting calmly and not quite certain what it was he was to be saying this time so he guessed, "...What beast?" This seemed to be the correct question as Bofur jumped into a very unnecessary explanation and Durin was surely looking skyward as he puffed ghostly smoke rings from somewhere near the fireplace fender.

"Well that would be a reference to Smaug the terrible, chiepest and greatest calamity of our age. Airborne fire breather, teeth like razors, claws like meat hooks, extremely fond of precious metals." Bofur wagged his pipe in the air, Bilbo made a popping sound with his lips and twitched his nose, "I believe 'dragon' would have sufficed but thank you for that colorful explanation-" "I'm not afraid!" Little Ori popped up with his quill, yelling his readiness to send some Dwarvish Iron up Dragon Jacksy before Dori could yank him back into place and rile the group further.

"The task would be difficult enough with an army behind us, but we number just thirteen, and not thirteen of the best, nor brightest." Balin ignored his protege's faux pas and continued on even at Ori's pout at being called dim. Oin conveniently didn't hear that over the rambling annoyance of the party. It was Fili who was quick to add his opinion this time, his voice making everyone go quiet. Bilbo could see a future king in him, the way he carefully and proudly came to his people's defense with a calm strong smile about his lips, "We may be few in number. But we're fighters, all of us! To the last dwarf!"

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Kili jumped in beside his brother, knocking Bilbo's shoulder a bit, "And you forget we have a wizard in our company, Gandalf will have killed hundreds of dragons in his time." His excitement was, honestly, adorable and Bilbo tried to hide his laughter between the prince and Gandalf's well deserved stuttering as everyone rejoiced. Dori began shouting for an exact number and Gandalf started to panic, choking on his pipe smoke and everything dissolved into complete turmoil from
there. Bilbo sat staring at the table, shoulders hunched up to make himself as small as possible, scooting back silently and easing himself toward the door behind Thorin, assuming it was the safest place to be as the dwarves yelled in three different languages at each other, and seemingly the world, and Gandalf, and the dragon, and anything else that had possibly inconvenienced or had wronged them in the slightest since the days of their births.

This went on for a few moments too long, until Thorin stood and yelled for silence, the Khudzul making his demand sound much harsher than it would have in the Common he switched back into, "If we have read these signs, do you not think others will have read them too? Rumors have begun to spread. The dragon Smaug has not been seen for sixty years. Eyes look East to the mountain, assessing, wondering, weighing the risk. Perhaps the vast wealth of our people now lies unprotected. Do we sit back while others claim what is rightfully ours?" A respectful silence fell over the group, something longing and wistful. Thorin let it be for a moment before his fist lifted into the air, "Or do we seize this chance to take back Erebor?" Cheering broke out, and Bilbo had to smile a bit over at Durin, something hopeful in both of their expressions. The brightest, perhaps not, warriors they may not all be, but they were here, willing, wanting, loyal, and they were passionate and this had to count for something. Once again it was Balin who brought some weighted logic to the conversation as Thorin collapsed back into his seat, "You forget, the Front Gate is sealed. There is no way into the mountain."

"That, my dear Balin, is not entirely true."

Gandalf shifted to pull an old folded parchment from his robes and spread the thick paper over the table.

"Far to the East, over ranges and rivers, beyond woodlands and wastelands, lies a single solitary peak."

Even knowing what he was looking at Bilbo peered closer, for he did love maps and anything to do with them, and a true dwarvish map was not something he'd had chance to see yet in his life. Not to mention this particular map he had been waiting to see for a very, very long time. "The Lonely Mountain," he sighed it reverently and Thorin jumped, having no idea that Bilbo had ever moved behind him, the princes at the end of the table looked between them as they also had not noticed Bilbo making it to the opposite side of the room at all. The current King gave him a harsh confused look then turned back to the wizard, "How came you by this?"

"This was made by Thror, your grandfather, and passed to your father Thrain who gave it to me for safe keeping and for later giving. And now it has been kept and it is safe and it is to you I am giving it. Just as I was told."

Thorin's eyes read over the parchment quickly, "I don't see how this is much help, I was born in the mountain, most of us lived there. We will remember the plan of it easily." He pointed to the dragon inked in red, "And it will be difficult to miss the dragon, I would think. I do not see how this is helpful." It was just in Thorin's nature to be difficult.

With his pipe in hand Gandalf motioned to the side of the map, "What you are missing, Thorin, is this here." he blew a smoke ring to circle where he wanted the king to focus, the pipe smoke turning an eerie green color, "This rune here and the hand beside are pointing to a secret passage, one that leads into the Lower Halls of the mountain. One too small for even a very young Smaug to enter. 'Five feet high and three may walk abreast' is what it says and there is no way, even if he did know of it, that he would pay it any mind." Bilbo leaned closer, brushing the soft fur of Thorin's wrap to look closer at the map, "Seems a large enough hole to me." He was smiling a bit, slightly excited again. He truly did love maps and with all the talking and plotting was forgetting to keep
himself shut up,

"What makes it secret? Is it hidden in some way? I hear dwarves are very good at making invisible
doors, would this be one of those?"

"Yes, they are, Bilbo, very good." Gandalf nodded to him and Bilbo shifted on his furry feet, "So
how is it this one is hidden?"

"There are many ways to hide a door, especially in the dwarvish way of things, but this one we will
not know without going to see for ourselves. From the hints here," His smoke ring dispersed over
the runes of the map, "I would guess that it would be made to look just like the rest of the
mountain, seamlessly so. That's the usual way isn't it?"

Thorin's head bobbed once, "Quite right."

"There are more hints, but they are beyond my ability to read, but there are others in Middle Earth
that may still know the old ways to do so. Also." The wizard handed his pipe over Thorin's head to
Bilbo for safe holding while he began again to dig within his robes, "I do have a key that goes with
the map!" He rummaged and dug and hemmed and hawed for a moment before producing the
oddest key Bilbo had ever seen in his life and held it out in front of Thorin's nose. "Be sure you
keep it safe, for it is the only key we have for the door." The king took it carefully and attached it
to a thick safe chain about his neck and tucked it away under his layers. This seemed to appease
the wizard who reached back over for his pipe from Bilbo, "Once we have the door open, we will
need someone to go in. And as we all know going into this door and into a dragon's lair will take
no small act of courage and stealth. Which is why of all the things I could have chosen from,
warriors and heroes, both of which are in slim pickings in this side of the world (I did check), I
have come to the conclusion of burglary." He motioned to Bilbo who thinned his lips in something
like a smile, which wasn't so much that as just something to do with his face at the moment, "And
here he is, Bilbo Baggins, our most esteemed and chosen fourteenth member and burglar. Who also
has the advantage of being a Hobbit."

"I don't see how this is much of an advantage. And we have a thief." Dwalin shot a look across the
table to Nori who gave him a toothy grin. "Smaug has been living in a mountain of dwarvish make
for years now, do you not think he knows exactly what a dwarf smells like? An alive one would
smell especially like lunch. But dragons have not seen these lands for as long as anyone can
remember, he wouldn't know the smell of a Hobbit or care about it in the least."

The dwarves all nodded as if this was sound logic. Bilbo wondered shortly if it truly was, because
personally he was more likely to notice something he'd never smelled than something he smelled
everyday but who was he to argue, especially when he was already doing this regardless of who
smelled like what anyway. The gray wizard shifted to Thorin and looked at him very seriously,
"You asked me to find the fourteenth member of this company and I have chosen Mr. Baggins.
There's a lot more to him than appearances suggest. And he's got a great deal more to offer than
any of you know. You must trust me on this..

Thorin's eyes flicked over Gandalf's face, then to that of his company, then to the little Hobbit who
was oddly calm and watching everything in apt interest.

"Very well then..We shall do this your way. Give him the contract, then we shall talk further."

Balin stood and handed a folded sheaf of paper to Thorin who shoved it behind him against Bilbo's
little chest, "It's just the usual summary of out-of-pocket expenses, time required, remuneration,
funeral arrangements, so forth." Bilbo oofed and frowned at the king, ignoring the distressing urge
to shove the side of his head back aggressively and instead walked off with the contract rolling out
along side him.
Durin stayed and watched the others, watched the way Thorin looked after his little Hobbit with distaste and distrust then leaned into Gandalf's space, "I cannot guarantee his safety."

"Understood."

"Nor will I be responsible for his fate."

"Agreed."

Durin crossed his arms and leaned back against the warmth of the dimming fireplace, how little Thorin knew of fate.

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Outside the door Bilbo made a great show of reading the contract, putting on his business face, the one he used when the Sackville-Baggins or equally annoying neighbors tried to borrow money from him or claimed ownership of odd bits of silver and heirlooms. He was barely skimming it though, mumbling things he found amusing to himself as he went along; he also wasn't privy to the fourteenth share, which came as a nice little surprise. Durin hadn't mentioned that, more like he hadn't even known of the contract in the least though it wasn't that surprising. (Dwarves have always had a mildly extreme addiction to the art of contract making.) In the end he signed it with very little fussing, other than to ask if he was allowed to pick out his own treasure or if it was to be picked out for him. Thorin waved him off saying, 'yes yes whatever you like you can pick,' and after that he had no further questions, refolded the signed contract, returned it to Balin then drug a stool up to Thorin's right and sat atop it, "Now, I should like to know a bit more about everything."

"Bless it," Thorin grumbled, "Have we not been speaking of this for over an hour?"

"You have, and you've said there is a mountain, and gold, and bird portents and a dragon and not much else, really. That's hardly enough to go on an adventure with, before I joined I understand dwarves are a secretive lot but I have effectively signed on to be one of you, at least in a temporary sense of the meaning and therefore I have questions. Why did the dragon go to you, why is the dragon still there, who is Thror, and where did this map come from? Why haven't you gone back before now? What is so special about Erebor other than gold? Do you not like the new mountains you have claimed? Why did Gandalf have all of these things and you did not?"

His feet tapped against the rungs of his stool and his thumbs twiddled in his lap, for he did so want to know all of these things, and so much more that Durin could not ever tell him that his curiosity was once again getting the best of him, much like when he was a child.

Thorin rubbed his brows firmly and Bilbo thought it was quite a shame he was such a moribund personality for his face had the chance to be quite handsome if it wasn't so sour, "Very well," He obviously wasn't a very good story teller, Bilbo could tell already and wished Gandalf would take over already, "Long ago in the time of my grandfather Thror's our people were driven from the far north by the cold drakes and split into two groups: those of us who were to belong to Erebor, which had been founded originally by Thrain the Old long long ago," Bilbo wondered exactly how many years made up the difference between long ago and long long ago but kept his mouth shut, "and then the others who ended up in the Iron Hills of which we have earlier mentioned." Thorin motioned his hands low above the table over the map still there. "Erebor became rich and Thror was King Under the Mountain and the city of Dale was thriving just outside the walls of Erebor as well. Kings from all over would pay for our smith work and to take their kin as apprentices, most often our payments came in food stuffs, as gold and jewels were plentiful." He glanced at the kitchen and Bilbo wondered if he was getting hungry again, "We never bothered to grow our own food."
"You can't grow your own food?"

"Uncle is especially horrid at it." Fili yelled down the table and Kili agreed, "It goes in the ground dead then dies again once it comes up!" Balin hid his smile behind his grog and Thorin scowled at all three of them, "Yes, well, as I was saying-"

"Perhaps this time you should learn to garden a bit? I can help with that, you know? We always have extra seeds, they don't go bad, so long as you keep them in cool dry places, which I imagine a mountain would be. We Shirefolk don't mind to share." He had momentarily lost interest in the history lesson, because truly Thorin was an awful story teller, and was trying to think of mountain appropriate vegetables until the King cleared his throat, "As I was saying. Back in those days everything was leisurely, even for the least rich of the dwarrow in the mountain. It isn't difficult to imagine that the dragons followed eventually and as The Lonely Mountain was the most wealthy we were taken under by the aforementioned Smaug. It was something horrifying," his voice lowered with the smallest crack, "the sound of the pine trees flattening and the wind whipping before he was even seen. The river turned to steam under his flames and Dale fell in fog and fire."

"How did you make it out?"

"I was adventurous in those days," Thorin's eyes flickered to his nephews, to Fili who looked so much like his brother, "I was outside the mountain and was met by both my father and my grandfather, singed though they were but alive. They never did tell me how they escaped." He looked back down at the map and ran the pads of his fingers over the inked pointing hand, "When I asked they told me to hold my tongue and that was the end of the conversation, not that we had much time for it anyhow. Though now I suppose I know." He tapped the map's claim of the secret door," Since then we have been making our living as we can, smithing and coal mining. Where we are now, it is not safe and the mountain is dying. There is nothing for us there but sinking ground and poverty." He rubbed his brow again, "As for your last question, I too would like to know how Gandalf came about these items. For I hadn't even an inkling of their existence."

Fourteen heads turned to the wizard who huffed a bit loathsomely at being put on the spot. (Which is quite an odd thing to see because most wizards, especially Gandalf, quite enjoy being the center of any attention at almost any given time.)

"I did not just 'come about' these things. As I told you they were given to me for safe keeping. After Thror was killed by Azog I don't need to tell you your father disappeared for a very long time. By the time I happened upon him he did not remember his own name, but he did remember the map and the key of which he had on his person. Both of these things he gave to me to give to his son. And since I was not given his name or your name the fact I have figured it all out and got it to you at all in what is obviously a timely manner I think I deserve a bit more praise and a few more thank yous."

His beard curled a bit at the tip when no one said either of the sort, "You're welcome."

At the same time both Thorin and Bilbo shot Gandalf a very unimpressed look and in mostly the same tone said, "I don't understand." They glanced at each other and seemed to find some comfort that that explanation was nonsense to apparently everyone involved then looked back at Gandalf who uncrossed his arms. "The best I could make of it was that after the failure of Moria your father took the map and went back to try to take the mountain for himself but the obsession, and what was left of his gold sickness, drove him to complete insanity. I do not know what all he saw or what he experienced but it seems he never did get near the mountain. I did try to help him but one's mind can only travel so far from his body before it is entirely lost even to magic like my own. But he gave me the map and he gave me the key and here we now be. And I think that's enough to be said.
of it. Now, I believe that answers everything, or at least all that needs to be answered right now, and if I'm not mistaken it is near nine'o'clock and perhaps some music would do everyone some good."

The rest of the Company quickly agreed and started pulling instruments from their sleeves and pockets, Dwalin and Balin both left, apparently having stowed theirs on the front step, and came back in with viols and something wrapped in green silk which turned out to be a beautiful harp handed over to Thorin. Everyone was shifting about again and into the living room so Bilbo set to begin washing the cutlery and plates while a haunting deep tune he recognized began filling his little hobbit hole. He wondered how much of the Shire could hear it now through the open windows, he wondered if Smaug could hear it in the Lonely Mountain, if Yavanna and Mahal could listen from their halls and garden.

Thorin's deep voice came in over the low humming of the other dwarrow and Bilbo's mind was freed from the smial and all the world around him.

*Far over the Misty Mountains cold,*
*To dungeons deep and caverns old,*
*We must away, ere break of day,*
*To seek our pale enchanted gold.*

*The dwarves of yore made mighty spells,*
*While hammers fell like ringing bells,*
*In places deep, where dark things sleep,*
*In hollow halls beneath the fells.*

*For ancient king and elvish lord*
*There many a gleaming golden hoard*
*They shaped and wrought, and light they caught,*
*To hide in gems on hilt of sword.*

*On silver necklaces they strung*
*The flowering stars, on crowns they hung*
*The dragon-fire, on twisted wire*
*They meshed the light of moon and sun...*

Bilbo hummed along as he began washing the last of the dishes. Durin had said this song had dropped into his mind from one of the dwarves. He had sang it many times to Bilbo over the years, as child and adult. It had gotten him through that winter after his mother and father had returned to Yavanna's garden. It wasn't long before his humming became very soft singing, following along with the dwarves deep basses in his own tinny voice, word for word, grieving with them. Durin's stone was warm through his waistcoat, and his heart was scared but happy in his chest. For the first time in his existence, Bilbo felt he was right where he was meant to be, doing finally what he was meant to be doing. That the pieces had fallen into place and he was ready to live for the first time in his whole entire life. Somewhere outside Durin's voice carried the lyrics like smoke into the kitchen window and he knew he was out under Belladonna's umbrella where he often went to sit and think about things only the dead who are no longer completely dead can have to think about. Bilbo knew this would not be easy, it was never meant to be. Durin had even warned him that perhaps it would be even harder than the time before. But the time before he didn't remember, and now this time he had fallen in love long ago with the wind in his hair, the rain in his face, songs from deeper under the earth than any Hobbit hole and the idea of a lonely mountain that blotted out the sun.

When their singing was done everything was much more solemn after that, none of them so much
up to joking or story telling. Bilbo helped everyone get a plate to take to their rooms if they wanted and made sure each was content with their lodgings then set about to making small packs of breakfast and lunch, as well as snacks of the fruit and nut mixes, for each member of the Company for the first day of their journey. Last but not least he began writing notes for the Gamgees and the Thain on how to handle his affairs in his extended absence (he gave himself a three year allowance to come back alive) and what to do in the unfortunate event of his death.

He did not get to sleep in his bed that last night before his adventure began, and it would be a good while before he saw another again. Durin had joined him in the drawing room half ten and the two of them sang softly together of Erebor some more, though to anyone it would have been Bilbo's voice alone. A sad sound, soft a like little metal bells in the wind.

\[
\text{Farewell we call to hearth and hall}
\]

\[
\text{Though wind may blow and rain may fall,}
\]

\[
\text{We must away, ere break of day}
\]

\[
\text{Far over the wood and mountain tall.}
\]

\[
\text{To Rivendell, where Elves yet dwell}
\]

\[
\text{In glades beneath the misty fell.}
\]

\[
\text{Through moor and waste we ride in haste,}
\]

\[
\text{And whither then we cannot tell.}
\]

\[
\text{With foes ahead, behind us dread,}
\]

\[
\text{Beneath the sky shall be our bed,}
\]

\[
\text{Until at last our toil be passed,}
\]

\[
\text{Our journey done, our errand sped.}
\]

\[
\text{We must away, We must away}
\]

\[
\text{We ride before the break of day.}
\]

He sang and sang and sang. Sang until he collapsed entirely under the weight of the excitement of it all, his cheek pressed into the velvet of his dinner jacket, weighing heavily upon his crossed arms, Durin's hand brushing gently at his golden curls. In the room across the hall, the best guest room Bag End had to give, Thorin sat up long after the little Hobbit had gone silent and did what it was he did best in the world: he worried and wondered. He worried about this quest, and his company and their numbers, what troubles they would meet along the way, the safety of his nephews, and if the wizard was telling everything he had to tell, if any of this would matter or all be for naught. But most pressingly of all at this moment he wondered how it was this little halfling knew the words to such a song as he had no way of hearing before this very night. Why had he sighed over the image of the Lonely Mountain like it was his very own to lament? Why did he sing with such the same soul deep mournfulness as Thorin had only heard from himself on lonely nights when he could look no where but toward the empty home he longed for like nothing else in the whole of Middle Earth?
Hello! I came back from vacation and immediately got a sinus infection lmao. The joys of living in a valley in the midwest. But here we are. This is a small little aside, I was going to put it in with the next chapter but after reading it a few times. I wanted their goodbyes to have it's own small chapter. It seemed like the right thing to do.

love always

-S

Durin nudged Bilbo awake well before sunrise. He had dreamt of bees and golden things, a garden deep in a cave with blue stone walls where the wind through the cracks and crevices sang sad lonely songs. For a long bleary moment he thought that the Night of Dwarves hadn't been at all. It was something he had fallen asleep writing at his desk, a new story for the May festival in a few weeks and Durin was waking him for a late April camping trip. Alas, the parchment he was asleep upon, their ink slightly smeared by the velvet of his sleeves, were not magical stories but notes about wills and funerary options and not at all the stuff of fun loving fables.

"Thought you might want to get one more use of the plumbing before the others woke." The old king smiled and what he truly meant was he knew Bilbo may want to look at the whole of Bag End before he may never look at it again. The little Hobbit patted the king's hand adoringly, "Thank you, Durin."

"Of course, Bilbo."

Though his spine wished he had gotten one last sleep in his little cozy bed it wasn't too much of a loss. Many a night he had fallen asleep singing with Durin in the drawing room, and it seemed almost all the more appropriate that it was to be his send off to his little smial.

He did make one last use of the bath and plumbing, the chance for a little primping with the nice oils for his curls and his feet too good to miss, then he got to work around the house. Dust covers were tossed onto furniture and the dwarves' instruments, the last of the dishes cleaned and everything he needed packed neatly in his mother's travel pack to be placed near the little round front door. His mother's glory box still had a smidge of mud caked on it from Kili's boot and he bowed to brush it off gently.

"You'd be so impressed, Mama." A little smile graced his lips, "I'm sure you've already heard for Papa is surely fussing up a storm in the garden beside you."

Outside he continued his busy little chores while touring the grounds slowly. Last and most importantly of all he folded down and stored Belladonna's umbrella so it wouldn't get damaged. Durin followed silently, their arms brushing elbow to shoulder once in a while. There was nothing to be said right then, nothing that hadn't been, or that their link didn't pulse with emotively already.

If he didn't know better he thought maybe Durin felt this separation from the Shire more deeply than even Bilbo himself. But he did not want to wonder why that was, for the implications of Durin's return, or lack of, was not something Bilbo could fathom to think about at this moment in time.
Together they watched the first edge of color bleed from the cut of the Shire's horizon as they had many times before, the crowing of roosters and stirrings of the hills waking.

It was a perfect morning to do anything in the world at all.

Including begin an adventure.

❧❧❧

By the time the sun was truly up yet still low enough everything held that perfect golden hue all of the dwarrow were moving about. Every last one grumbling but awake and thankful for the coffee, teas, and cakes Bilbo had placed out to help them get their wits about them.

After it all was said and done it was a very leisurely start to the morning. (The only hiccup that barely warrants being pointed out in the least, really, as it was hardly upsetting at all, honestly. Was the fact Thorin had tucked himself into a corner with Tom Bombadil's cup and saucer both and Bilbo didn't stop glaring at him over his great grandmother's coffee mug about it until the King Under the Mountain looked up under the force of his stare. Thorin hadn't been sure why the halfling was glowering with such passion at him but he imagined it wouldn't be the last time of the trip and let the morning roll on as it was.)

By second breakfast, nine'o'clock, they were all well about their way to traipse into Bywater to get rest of the Company's luggage from the Inn and retrieve their travel ponies.

The latter act was much more time consuming than it had any right to be but had been amusing enough to let go. Specifically to Bilbo who got to watch dwarven haggling at its finest. Balin had apparently already agreed to the price and payment with the owner of the ponies but Gloin was having absolutely precisely None Of It. He demanded that as the treasurer of the Company it was his job to set cost and expenses and since no contract had been drawn up the deal was effectively non-existent.

It took another half hour before the salesman just gave up and let Gloin have it the way he wanted just to shut the whole affair down and get on with his life.

Gloin near radiated with pleasantries after everything was signed (Ori was prodded into contract writing) and Bilbo leaned into Bofur, "Not-dwarrow don't find haggling a sport so much as an insult. I think he thinks Gloin is right mad now that he's suddenly friendly."

"Is he really wrong though, about him being right mad?"

They both grinned and said their thanks at the reins to their ponies being handed over, Dwalin giving their whispering a suspicious look. Gandalf had already retrieved his own horse from… possibly his robes, he thought, as he seems to keep everything else in the world there. The Hobbit was just finishing adjusting his pack on the pony, who he had already named Myrtle, as the wizard approached Bilbo with an apologetic expression. "I know Hobbits are not fond of riding, my friend. But it is the quickest way-"

Bilbo hopped up into the saddle and wiggled a bit. "I assure you, I'm fine, Gandalf, but thank you." His smile was polite and he clicked expertly for the pony to join Bofur who was laughing happily, "Oh." he paused and turned Myrtle back toward Gandalf, "And good morning, Master Wizard. I don't believe I said." Gandalf laughed going to join Thorin at the head of their line shouting, "All of them at once, Master Hobbit!"
"Hobbits don't ride?" Bofur leaned and offered over an apple he had nabbed from Bombur's pack as the group set out.

"Thank you. We like to keep our feet firmly on the ground for the most part. But I've done my fair share. I even spent a summer working in the stables in Bree." His nose was already starting to tickle a bit so he pulled out his travel handkerchief, a thick piece of soft worn flannel. "I've never quite gotten over the hair allergy completely though. But when I was a child it was so bad I'd sneeze for hours without stopping. So long I'd often just resign myself to sneezing being my life from then on out."

The miner laughed loudly and patted Bilbo on the shoulder and even Bifur was grinning on his other side. Their smiles were comforting for at least, between them and the princes, he was beginning to feel he wouldn't be left completely alone among the Company. He turned one last time to look toward home and peer at Durin's small shape following slowly. Since they had left home and as they moved toward Bree-land Durin kept his distance. He scraped the edge of his full allowance so tightly Bilbo could feel the stretch and tug of it in his chest. He worried, deeply so, but it was not his place to ask. They were each deserved their own goodbye in the their own way. Bilbo had said his, and he supposed the King had his to give now.

The Father of Dwarves, the Great Durin the Deathless, had lived hundreds of years, seen battles again and again, watched family and friends come and go, had carried it all in grace and honor. He who had lived and died then walked in the halls of his father, basked in the garden of the Green Lady, watched every last bit of Bag End, Hobbiton, the Shire, the last 60 years, disappear and felt true tears come to his eyes.

Even half a mile away he could hear Gandalf speaking in that curious way that wizards can which makes their voices heard everywhere and all around on the wind, "Home is now behind you. The world is ahead."
The first couple of weeks were fairly uneventful and Bilbo was generally able to keep from tripping over his own mouth. It had been wearing him a bit thin to not be able to speak to Durin as openly as he normally would, but Durin still spoke to him and Bilbo was just happy to have him there, he couldn't ask for anything more. Besides, between their connection and their own languages of motions and expressions from years together they had gotten quite good at talking without verbalizing. (It was quite necessary for public events. For imagine if a grown Hobbit went about speaking to himself at the market about the outrageous price of apricots. Not acceptable, not at all!) Camping had been easy, the weather fair and forgiving, as nice as spring can possibly be, allowing them to stop and go as they pleased in relative comfort. Bilbo had had the chance to travel the Great East Road to a certain extent and was pleased to be able to give them the finest traveler's trees and stopping points along the way. He even shared a mushroom patch or two. (The grand importance of this last gesture went wholly unnoticed and unknown to everyone but the wizard. Gandalf at least seemed decidedly humbled by the notion. Dwarves aren't very one way the other when it comes to mushrooms. Not as bad as lettuce but not a steak either.)

It also seemed everyone in the Company got on fairly well. Dwalin and Nori were maybe the worst of it. Mostly because Nori wouldn't stop pilfering everything possible off the royal guard. Bilbo thought it quite funny, even Thorin seemed his own brand of amused. Dwalin and Dori apparently did not share the sentiment. Dori because he tried to keep an air of respectability worthy of the old dwarvish culture and Nori's antics were not becoming of his proposed 'Ri family values. Dwalin because he was being robbed blind. (No one seemed to care about Dwalin or Dori's opinion in this case.)

For the most part, during this early time, Bilbo had taken to turns riding between the prince brothers or Bofur and Bifur. With each set came their own dangers, as Durin translated everything Bifur said, which was usually equal parts lewd and hilarious and threatened Bilbo's resolve. Fili and Kili were just generally themselves, which was a destructive thing needing no help from any outside sources.

Bilbo did try twice to ride up near Thorin, because Durin claimed unendingly they had become good friends the last time. But the young king seemed to want very little to do with him even on a polite basis. He knocked the little Hobbit's questions and comments aside with an expertly royal cold shoulder and some very impressive impersonations of dead eyed stone statues. Both tries ended with Bilbo and Durin collectively so incensed that after barely a few minutes he was back to his preferred riding partners.

The most excitement for a bit was when Kili actually had ended up bruising from where Bilbo (and Durin) had swatted his thigh over the glory box. This started a whole round of everyone trying to get Bilbo to hit them to prove they were tougher than Kili who was crying out in desperation to defend his own honor.

In the end no one was hit (though Durin did offer to help), other than Bofur who unexpectedly tackled little Bilbo then dropped dramatically at the frantic smacks he earned on the arm claiming,
“My every last bone is been broken!”

“Your head is broken,” Bifur had said and luckily the following wrestling match had covered Bilbo's understanding laughter at the comment and also allowed Bilbo to steal Bofur's hat as payment for the prior surprise attack. He proudly wore it for three more days until he forced Bofur to pay him in apples to get it back.

Overall, though, very little was said about Erebor or their quest or anything decidedly dwarven for a good while. If this was just more superstition or they were truly yet to be comfortable discussing it all in front of an outsider this early Bilbo couldn't be sure. In any case it was well into the earlier bit of May when he finally got his first lesson on Thorin Oakenshield.

This came about because Bombur, as it turned out, was a frightful snorer. Much worse than any of the others combined and on this particular night it was enough to keep Bilbo so fitfully awake he actually missed his bed for the first time the whole trip. When he finally gave up the ghost and rolled up to his feet it was Fili and Kili's watch, but it seemed Thorin and Gandalf were up as well. The crotchety king had taken an uncomfortable spot within short distance of his nephews and was doing a poor job of feigning actual sleep, it was apparently his goal to be as uncomfortable in every aspect possible for the entirety of this trip. The wizard on the other hand had found a little pocilum of tree roots to settle himself into and Bilbo was actually quite jealous of his discovery. Logically their being awake was probably their own inability to sleep or a distrust at the boys' ability to hold down their responsibility. But Bilbo had his own theory it was just a new high level brooding that kept the wizard and dwarf king from needing sleep entirely. (Bilbo couldn't be certain. But, he had been keeping track of their habits as best he could for scientific reasons. There was a whole page dedicated to his findings in his travel journal and he was progressively more and more sure it was the brooding.) Regardless, he waved to the princes as he crackled his back then went to check the ponies and to sneak his beloved Myrtle an apple.

This particular night they had camped near the edge of a cliff face and about the time Myrtle was on her second apple a frightful shrieking started up down below. Something high and shrill that yanked at Bilbo's memory - the sound that wounded wolf had made that winter of his youth. This, as it turned out, was also the first time the whole trip he had felt any form of anxiety kick within his chest.

Carefully stepping over dwarrow he made his way back to the royal trio and the fire where he was among the true warriors again at least.

"What was that?"

Bilbo leaned to look at the low valley that was eaten entirely by fog and darkness.

"Orcs."

To his right Thorin's body shifted, a twitch and change to defensive that Bilbo did not miss even if he wasn't looking right at him.

"Orcs? This far out?" He glanced to Durin who was passing on a watch round and had paused at the comment. "Isn't this a bit out of their stomping grounds?"

"There'll be dozens of them out there more than likely." Fili tapped his front teeth with his pipe. Kili agreed, his tone serious, "The Lone-lands are crawling with them. They strike in the wee small hours when everyone's asleep. Quick and quiet, no screams. Just lots of blood."

Bilbo had learned to tell when they were just trying to rile him and that's where this was heading. It had it's own effect of calming him this time at least, for if the boys weren't worried then he
shouldn't be either. The Hobbit's nose twitched, "Great," he said with no little amount sarcasm. The two boys chuckled quietly but Thorin moved again, standing quickly, his body tense with anger that always seemed buzzing just under his skin.

"You think that's funny? You think a night raid by Orcs is a joke?" He glared at his nephews and Bilbo too.

"We didn't mean anything by it, uncle-"

"No. You didn't. You know nothing of the world."

Bilbo puffed out one cheek and watched Thorin pace off toward the ponies.

"Is he ever not throwing a tantrum?" He looked at the young members of the Company, "Ignore him, I'm sure he's just being dramatic. And here I was beginning to wonder where you two got it from. Surely not Thorin, I've been saying to myself."

The two princes shifted in their spots at the gentle prodding still embarrassed by their uncle's outburst as Balin came to join them in the light of the fire. It seemed sleep was avid to avoid and evade everyone this night.

"Master Baggins is right about not minding him, laddie. Thorin just has more reason than most to hate orcs."

Bilbo cocked his head and dipped a step closer, crossing his arms behind his back innocently. Balin was a substantially better storyteller than Thorin and all of what he had learned so far were just little things about mining life or what he could tug out of shy Ori about his scribening. (As we said, nothing decidedly adventurous or drastically dwarvish.)

"Is this because of Khazad-dum?" He asked taking one more step into their circle. The old dwarf narrowed his wise eyes, soft but curious, "Where have you heard the name Khazad-dum?"

Bilbo shrugged his narrow little shoulders under his sleeping tunic, "Is that wrong? Hobbits are nosy by nature, I believe I've mentioned before, and perhaps I've dug around a bit on dwarves before now." He flicked his hand against his nose and sniffed. "Is that one of those secret things I shouldn't know? That is rightful name for Moria isn't it?" His hairy feet shuffled and he added: "Back when Durin the Deathless named it?"

Hands grasped at the warmth of his necklace, he so wanted someone to talk about this all with. So wanted everything inside his head to be on the outside of it for once in his life. Balin leaned back, resting heavier on the archway of rock, "Where have you been digging, lad?"

Bilbo fumbled with his stone and rolled up on his fuzzy toes, "Where indeed?"

The three watched him and he wondered if Thorin was listening and watching too, he knew Gandalf was. Gandalf always was. There was more shrieking somewhere in the distance but Durin was near and he was safe for the time being so Bilbo nudged at the edge of the fire, sooting up his toe tips and began to hum, slightly self-conscious for he did not have the deep voices of Durin and his kin. He often worried if he ruined the dwarvish songs with his light voice, so to start he was quiet, too quiet. Barely loud enough for the others to pick up what he was leading into until the ancient king joined in with him, blanketing him, soothing him enough to him strengthen his voice until the words would come to him.

When he willed himself a glance, one eye peeking up, Fili and Kili watched him with a curious fascination and a little wonder, they seemed filled with those looks and Bilbo wasn't certain how it
made him feel. Equal parts proud and unworthy mostly. Around him he could also see a few bodies shifting, Bombur's snoring had halted, all at the sound of the old song no Hobbit should have known,

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

In his anxiety he only sang the last verse, his skin prickling at the feeling of too many eyes cast his way. It was too quiet after that and he cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“That is how it goes...?”

“It is.” Balin's head nodded slowly, “It is indeed.” Even Thorin had turned, staring past the camp straight to the Hobbit's slight form almost absorbed completely by the shadows of the small campfire. He thought of Bilbo singing of Erebor back in his little hole in the Shire. He would not admit it out loud but there was something almost entrancing hearing those songs sang in such a way. A delicate weaving of mithril string instead of heavy anvils, the thunder of his kin's voices. He wanted with a sudden longing he didn't recognize to know if Bilbo knew any other of their songs. The want itself enough to overcome and make him forget any rage he should feel at this halfling knowing the secrets of his people with no explanation. He nearly asked until Gandalf coughing broke the charm over the camp, bringing each dwarf from their reverie, "You were telling the boys a story, Balin, of Moria.” Everyone turned Gandalf's way, but Balin and he shared a distinct look of understanding, one that agreed now was not the time for interrogating the Hobbit who so very obviously meant them no harm. Instead the white haired dwarf hung one hand against his hip and propped his other above his head, "Yes. Of Thorin Oakenshield and Khazad-dum.” Thorin turned away from the story and the hobbit, Bilbo leaned in.

“After Smaug took Erebor King Thror 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 most vile of all their race: Azog the Defiler. The giant Gundabad Orc had sworn to wipe out the line of Durin.” Bilbo tightened his hand around the warm blue stone at his chest protectively, wrapping the chord around his fingers anxiously and tried to concentrate on it and the reassurance of Durin nearby. “He began by beheading King Thror. Thrain's madness increased in the wake of Thror's death, leaving us leaderless. Defeat and death were upon us.” Balin watched Thorin's back, replaying the battle in his mind's eye, remembering how like the two princes beside him Thorin had been before all of this. How very young. But unlike Fili and Kili he had already been cracked and strained by much already, by Erebor, by madness. But that battle and the loss of his father and grandfather had seeped like water through a cave wall. Eroding him, wearing parts of him thin and other painful parts thicker, but none of it ever stopping him.

“That is when I saw him,” Balin continued. “A young Dwarf prince facing down the pale Orc. He stood alone against this terrible foe. His armor 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.” Bilbo closed his eyes at this for a moment and imagined it. He had seen scenes of other wars in his dreams. Durin had told him stories and his dreams had always been vivid but often times he wondered if little things had come through from Durin's own memories to him with how easily he
could dream it, how he would feel the strain of his muscles, the weight of axes and blades, how his ears rung with the sounds of metal and bodies clashing. With no effort he could picture Thorin's sweat riddled face, determination and blood soaking his body.

“Our forces rallied and we drove the Orcs back. When our enemy had been defeated there was no feast nor song that night for our dead were beyond the count of grief. We few had survived.” When Bilbo opened his eyes the other dwarrow were standing now, having already woken at Bilbo's song and now listening in rapt attention to the tale of Thorin Oakenshield, “I thought to myself then...” Balin's voice was strong, a finality in it, “there is one who I could follow. There is one I could call king.”

The air went quiet, the shrieking of the supposed Orcs had died completely, and Thorin turned to give his old friend a look that had Bilbo wondering if all of that rage was to to hide the fact he did not have someone to ease his fears, the fact that he felt alone in this – there was no one to hum along when Thorin Oakenshield could not find the will to sing. As he returned something else radiated from his being as he walked among the Company as well. Bilbo saw in him finally, in that moment, a True King, not just a royal blooded leader. Bilbo saw in him Durin.

When he settled back in his spot the others followed suit, taking back to their blankets quietly, an understanding seemed to have passed through them all at once. A loyalty to Thorin Oakenshield solidified, not to gold or a mountain but to a dwarf, to their king. When all was just the sounds of night once more, the fire popping and bugs buzzing, Bilbo felt comfortable enough to speak again.

"I was wondering where that name came from. Oakenshield. Do you often give nicknames like that?"

Balin had taken a seat and pulled out his tobacco, "When they are appropriate to be given. Do hobbits give nicknames?"

"Sometimes. When they are appropriate to be given."

Balin grinned as he went about packing, Fili pulled his own oddly horizontal pipe from his lips, "Do you have one, Mr. Baggins? A nickname in the Shire?"

"No," Bilbo's lips curled in a private thoughtful smile at the cloudy sky. "But I imagine if I come back from this I will earn one and it will be something a hair psychotic."

The few stayed quiet until Bilbo beamed, the idea of it obviously tickling him, and got them all pleasantly laughing again. Even with the sounds of slumber returning, Bombur's quite honestly concerning snoring included, Bilbo had yet to sit or go lie back down. Something still nagged at him from Balin's story.

He knew that the pale orc Azog was to be faced again. That was a fact he knew beyond reason because Durin knew it beyond reason. But the way it had been told... His heart froze at the realization, at the calmness of everyone about him, how easily they had told the story and not given any dismal warning after.

_They do not know...they have to._

How could they not know, how had that gone unseen. He spun slowly once, looking at the whole camp as if one of them would pop up and prove him wrong. Tell him of course they knew better.

No one did. Even Thorin had relaxed after the tale of what would be his nemisis, what would be, in his ignorance, his death, the death of his nephews. Bilbo's heart began to beat in his ears.
"About the story, Balin..?"

"Yes, Master Baggins?"

“What of Azog? What of the Pale Orc?"

Thorin grunted viciously, as if the very name agitated his well being. Perhaps it did and perhaps it should.

"He slunk back into the hole whence he came. That filth died of his wounds long ago." Balin said nothing and there was an undying, blinding pride in Fili and Kili's eyes.

They love him so much they will die for him...

Bilbo watched them all, an ache had started in his stomach, something very nauseous and deeply unsettled.

They truly don't know.

His face must have betrayed him because when he turned his head to look at Thorin again there was a severe expression hard set over what had, for a few moments, been a contentedness on the throneless king's face at the end of the story. Bilbo couldn't hold his tongue against the vile taste of his understanding rising in it. The words themselves rotten and thick on his tongue.

"Are you sure?"

Thorin's heart skipped at the gentle way the Hobbit said it. How his voice had barely changed in pitch or volume but had an undercurrent of pleading for Thorin to understand. Understand what? Bilbo's eyes did not waver from Thorin's, half of his face flickering orange from the fire.

There was something dangerously corrosive in those words mixed with the softness at the edges of the halfling's eyes. It wasn't fear for himself, it was fear for Thorin. It was the same look the wizard had given him many times before this. A look that had the same texture of a well worn book, the edges foxed and feathery because it was a story those eyes knew well and had read many times before but Thorin had not heard the tale. He felt at a distinct disadvantage suddenly and it was not a feeling he had ever liked to have. He had felt it far too often in his life; Smaug, his brother's death, his father's sickness, Khazad-dum.

Before he could open his mouth the princes cut in, cheering on their uncle's victory loud enough some of the company stirred again and a pebble was tossed their way.

Of course he was dead, Thorin leaned back against the rock face, having not realized he had curled forward toward Bilbo at all. Azog was dead, and had been for decades. His name would not haunt this quest. He would not let it.

Thorin was so caught up in this he did not see the way the Hobbit cast a worried gaze to the empty edge of camp, back out across the low valley of the Lone-lands then to an odd spot to the side, as if he were ready to speak to someone who most certainly was not there..

Gandalf, and now Balin, saw though and pondered, not for the first or last time, what type of Hobbit had the wizard had picked for this venture.

Chapter End Notes
Durin's Song:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxfoa23skHg
A week later, it began to rain.

And rain.

And rain.

The first couple of days Bofur had tried to up their moods with his flute but even that started to fill with water. Little geysers began to pop up from the finger holes when he tried to play which was amusing for a few moments, then just quite depressing, and after that they were left with nothing but their miserable groaning and the miserable sound of downpour and their miserable ponies sloshing through mud, which was also most miserable.

After a third day, when their oilskins had even started to soak through, Dori called up from the middle of the group for Gandalf to stop the deluge. Bilbo thought if he could do anything about the rain he would have already, for what did Gandalf have to gain from thirteen pulpy, squashy, over-moist dwarves? The wizard had also been distinctly put out at being swamped and wasn't enjoying himself in the least. (And isn't there something comforting in the fact a Maiar can be equally disenchanted by such mortal things as rain? Or perhaps that was just Bilbo's thinking.) Nonetheless when Dori yelled up in his prim (for a dwarf) voice Gandalf called back, “It is raining, master dwarf. And it will continue to rain until the rain is done! If you wish to change the weather of the world, you should find yourself another wizard.”

Kili grabbed onto the chance for distraction like a cat pouncing the tail of a mouse, his voice just behind Bilbo.

“Are there others?”

“Other what?” Gandalf's voice was even pouting.

“I believe he means wizards, Gandalf.” Bilbo had tucked himself beside the much larger wizard early into the watery onslaught. He found he could take advantage of the horse and Gandalf's body to block some of the more angled rain from completely drowning him and Myrtle.

“Oh, yes, Kili. There are five us. The greatest of our order is Saruman, The White. Then there are the two blue wizards.” There was a momentary pause and a thoughtful sound, “Do you know, I’ve quite forgotten their names.”

Bilbo shivered, murmuring to himself, “Morinehtar and Rómestámo.”

The brim of his wide hat created a curtain of rain over Gandalf's face when he looked down, “What was that, Master Bilbo?”

Bilbo squinted into the shower created by his own hood and sniffed, even with Durin wrapped
behind him on the pony he was chilled and in poor spirits, “Morinehtar and Rómestámo...I think perhaps they also went by Alatar and Pallando for a time?... If I remember right...but please don't quote me on that.”

Gandalf's staff reached between them to lift the edge of Bilbo's hood to get a better look at him.

“You are full of knowledge beyond your grasp, aren't you, Bilbo Baggins?”

Bilbo gave him the same challenging look he had given him what seemed so long ago in Bag-End, when he had foreseen the Night of Dwarves. “It is not too far if I've managed, now is it?”

“Perhaps not...”

“Who is the fifth?” Fili and Kili rushed them, pulling up on either side of Bilbo, Fili knocking Gandalf's staff aside nearly causing it to poke the halfling in the eye on it's arc out.

“Always afraid you're missing something, aren't you?” Gandalf smiled, his suspicious expression replaced with something patient for the younger two. “That would be Radagast the Brown.”

“Is he a great wizard or is he...” Bilbo tilted around the pale prince to look Gandalf up and down, “...more like you?” The prince-brothers cackled at Gandalf's pettish mumbling. (Bilbo felt he was getting very good at taking wizards off guard, he thought it may turn out to be a good skill to have some day.)

“He is a very great wizard in his own gentle way. He prefers his animals to the company of people and keeps a close eye on the forest lands to the East.”

Durin pinched Bilbo's leg and he understood immediately, notched up the sound of nonchalance in his voice.

“Like Greenwood?”

“Yes. Greenwood is under his watchful eye.”

“I've been meaning to ask you, Gandalf. About Greenwood, I mean.”

Fili and Kili both made an unimpressed sound and let their ponies fall back, uninterested in conversation now that it was leaving the realm of wizardry. Even the wizard's bushy eyebrows, much like the clouds above, seemed heavy and swollen with rainwater, and their weight had to be an effort to lift that high on his face.

“What could a little Hobbit of the Shire have to wonder about a place like Greenwood?”

“I've heard it is sick, is that true?”

Behind the veil of rain Gandalf's eyes managed to be stormier than the sky, a new concern alight within them and Bilbo wondered, does anyone know anything going on in the world at all?

“What was that?”

“Something ails it? I've heard news of it, that it's dying even. Why is that? What could cause something like that to happen?”

His throat clicked as he swallowed, somehow dry even with his whole body soaked through. He was worried that Gandalf had seemed honestly to have no idea of the sickness, he wasn't faking, Gandalf was a horrible liar. Had he said something wrong? Gone too far? Perhaps he and Durin
had the wrong forest entirely, but it seemed unlikely. The silence stretched between them, distancing them in the deafening roar of the deluge until Gandalf told Bilbo, in a false happy voice, that it was nothing to worry on, Greenwood was quite well.

Bilbo did not believe him and it was not mentioned further.

The rain carried on.

By the 25th of May (Bilbo knew it was the 25th of May for he had been marking the days down in his little notebook that was now soggy around the edges) the rain had stopped but the ground was still mucky and left it difficult to make fires, even for Oin and Gloin who claimed to be the best fire starters in the kingdoms. Bilbo told them in the Shire being a fire starter wasn't really a compliment but they blew off the Shire, as was usual, for any of its beliefs not relevant to additional meals. On this day they passed over an ancient stone bridge high over a river in low valley, its tides angry and quick with the week of rain and Bilbo was quite thankful that whoever had built the wicked looking thing had done so for no one could cross that river and live to tell the tale.

Finally, before the end of day with the light of the sun still very much up, they happened upon an old farmhouse, half collapsed but the parts of it still standing sturdy enough that they could find a dry place to set up camp at last.

Thorin turned on his pony at the head of their line and announced they break for camp and started to divy up jobs. Everyone seemed pleased as punch by this, hopping right off their ponies and going about unpacking with no concerns, all but Gandalf, Durin, and Bilbo who eyed the area with uncertainty. Bilbo handed Myrtle off to Bofur and fell in beside Balin who was brushing the nose of his little steed, the white of their hair near blending into one another, “Everything alright Master Bilbo?” Since Bilbo had sang the song that night Balin had taken to watching him carefully. He was always their look out man and it seemed that did not change in this case. Bilbo acted like he did not notice, but he did notice, quite a bit.

Durin moved to one of the smaller dilapidated buildings and Bilbo looked from him to Gandalf, “Not as such, Master Balin.” He patted the pony's snout then Balin's forearm and jogged to catch up with the only rain cloud he wanted anything to do with at the moment.

Gandalf picked along the edge of the house foundation, touching pillars and old brick, the look on his face was dark and displeased, “A farmer and his family used to live here..”

Bilbo ducked in through one of the missing walls, “What happened to them?”

“Nothing good, my dear Mr. Baggins.”

Thorin called for Oin and Gloin to get a fire started to let Bombur begin dinner and Gandalf raised his voice to reach Thorin's ears, “We should not camp here. It would be wiser if we were to move on.”

Bilbo peeked around the wizard's side, “I agree with Gandalf on this, Thorin. Perhaps we should move along, at least scout more thoroughly before just settling in.”

“We could move onward,” Gandalf placed a hand on top of Bilbo's curly mop of hair that was becoming decidedly unruly in the humidity, “make it to the hidden valley.”

“Rivendell?” Bilbo looked up, he hadn't realized they were that close to the last homely house, he
hadn't seen a map for a good while much to his chagrin, and they had long since exhausted his own range of exploration.

“I've already told you, I will not go near that place.”

“The elves could help, Thorin. The company could rest, fresh food, beds, the chance for advice.”

“I do not need the elves and I do not want their advice.”

Bilbo came around and stood closer to Thorin, placing himself between the king and the wizard, staring up at him, “What is your avoidance to the elves? If they can help then let them do so.”

“Help? A dragon attacks Erebor. What help came from the elves? Orcs plunder Moria, desecrate our sacred halls, the elves looked on and did nothing! You ask me to seek out the very people who betrayed my grandfather, who betrayed my father.” His gravelly voice rose at the two standing before him, as if it were either of their fault.

Bilbo just blinked at him blandly, “Firstly, it's nothing I did so you don't need to yell at me about it. Secondly, I understand that dwarves live four times longer than Hobbits, but that does not mean your grudges should be held four times longer as well. Seems very much a waste of a long life if you ask me.”

“Master Baggins is correct, Thorin. You are neither Thror nor Thrain. I did not give you that map and key for you to hold on to the past.”

“I did not realize they were yours to keep.”

“Perhaps I should have, you would not have known the difference.”

Bilbo groaned and tossed his head back, dragging his hands down his face as Thorin's expression practically willed the wizard to catch fire. The others were wisely staying out of the way, going about their business but still trying to listen in. “Fili, Kili.” The two boys jumped a few feet in the air at their names being shouted, “Go watch the ponies.” They both nodded and scurried off, quick to run from their uncle's ire. Gandalf seemed to know this was a lost cause and huffed. The way he spun on his heel kicked his robes up and left him looking very much like an angry tornado taking back toward the overgrown trail behind them. The situation was unwinding quickly.

Bilbo cursed so colorfully he was sure he felt at least three generations of Baggins gasp from Yavanna's Garden, “Gandalf, where are you going!”

“To seek the company of the only one around here who’s got any sense.”

“Who is that!” The little hobbit called after him, desperately wishing him to come back, taking a few steps to what used to be the door of the house. “Myself, Mister Baggins! I've had enough of dwarves for one day.”

Bilbo felt a shriek build up inside of him and he yanked at his hair in Thorin's direction, “By the Vala, go get him, we need him.”

“Why don't you go get him, halfling, since you are so keen on taking his side and ignoring me at every turn.”

“You are a hardheaded, thick skulled, dull brained-!” Bilbo's foot stomped hard against the floor of the house, his hands went to his hips, and he felt decidedly like Bungo Baggins facing down Belladonna Took for a very severe moment.
“We need to go to Rivendell—”

“You need to watch your tone—”

“I need to watch my tone? You may be King Under the Mountain, Thorin. But Bilbo Baggins of Bag-End Underhill has no King. You would do well to remember that.”

Thorin did not budge and the camp had gone quiet, little fiddling sounds as if they were any of them truly doing their chores any longer. (Dwarves are not the most subtle of creatures even on their best of days.) The two of them just stared at each other and eventually, very much like his father, Bilbo finally let out a very high deflating sound at the dwarf king then walked off with a new appreciation for why Bungo had been a regularly high strung individual. Thorin watched the little male grab up a small mushroom picking bag from his pack and start off in the opposite direction of the wizard for the line of forest beyond the farmhouse.

"And where are you going now!"

"I've had enough dwarf today as well!"

"I can't guarantee your safety if you wander off into the wilderness on your own, halfling!"

"If I wore boots I am certain I would be quaking in them, your Highness!" He twirled to give a walking bow and salute as he went.

Balin and Dwalin gave twin snort like laughs and Thorin's hands fisted and released a few times trying to depressurize his anger. "Do you think Gandalf would believe me if I said he fell off into the river?"

By nightfall Bilbo had calmed substantially. He and Durin had been given a chance to speak, to do more than just sign or nudge each other and it had a very helpful effect on Bilbo's person as a whole. They had decided to create a thorough search grid and thusly had wandered a decent little ways away from the Company Camp in the passing hours, far enough he could no longer hear them or see any proof of their existence at all. It was refreshing to say the least, and he started to tell Durin as much when he noticed the warm light through a break in the treeline. It was nice to be able to move freely again he thought, dwarves made such a ruckus moving about Bilbo had forgotten what it was like to not have to worry if the whole of Middle Earth heard you coming from miles away. Alone he was quite comfortable sneaking right up next to the camp though when he got there he wished he hadn't.

*Trolls.*

Bilbo's nose curled in annoyance. Even having never seen one in real life it was quite obvious to anyone that's what he was looking at. Their wide set eyes and bumbling bodies, awful manners and decidedly poor fashion sense. Definitely trolls.

They had their camp set in a tight little semi circle, their fire made up of what smelled like beech wood with a cauldron atop it and cooked mutton on a spit beside that. Even from his spot Bilbo could smell it was under seasoned and overcooked. Each was licking their fingers and waving a jug of something or other over their heads.

(“Do trolls drink grog?” Durin had shrugged, “I shiver to think how they make it or what of.” Bilbo groaned, disgusting.)
“Mutton today, mutton yesterday, and oh! What's this Tom? It looks like we'll be havin' mutton against t'morro!” The ugly one punched the ugly one who choked on his drink, “Yea, wot was you thinkin' bringin' us down here, William?” The other ugly one named William shouted in defiance. “Wot! You think people just gonna come waltzin' into camp to be ate? You should be sayin 'Thank ya, Billy, for bringin' us this nice valley mutton here'! I don' see either of you two bringin' nothing to dinner. Bert.” William took a sloppy bite of a badly cooked sheep's leg and wiped his mouth on his arm, slobbering all over everything as one of them sneezed in the stew and started a whole new verbal row.

Bilbo sighed and kept walking. Silver lining: trolls meant caves and caves with trolls meant hoards and he had found a few very interesting things over the years in caves without trolls so intuition would say this would be fruitful in some manner. Dawn was still a few hours away so there was ample time to hunt it and they were busy with their mutton, so even if Bilbo were to make a racket they were not the most observant creatures.

"Do you remember anything about trolls?" Bilbo tugged out his little notebook with his shorthand notes, tilting it into the moonlight, knowing full well there wasn't anything in it about trolls but feeling the need to check anyhow.

"Not a thing. Perhaps they don't bother them. The trolls didn't seem to be aware of the Company in their territory, and if they have already eaten the farmer and his family they shouldn't be concerned in that way of things. Should you go back and warn the others?"

Bilbo made a very noncommittal sound jotting a note and scribbling Trollshaws beside the date and general understanding of their location, "I'm sure they'll be fine. Maybe a little scuffle will put that grandson king of yours in a better mood."

"You're suppose to be helping." Durin tucked his chin down to his chest watching Bilbo put away his journal and begin dragging his hand along the rock faces looking for any opening he may miss otherwise.

“I am helping. I'm burglaring. If they get into a troll fight that's on their own persons. Thorin said he didn't want to scout the area.”

It was definitely inappropriate to support the possible inconvenient troll battle between his dwarves just because their king was, he could admit it, being a twat, but...

"I can feel you smiling.”

"I'd never." Durin managed to sound some kind of scandalized.

"Of course not."

Bilbo's hand had curled around the edge of an opening and the smell was good enough proof of hoard as anything. From his mushroom pack, which was long empty of mushrooms, he tugged a little bundle out and a flint box. "You'd never laugh at the plight of your poor kin." A little flame sparked up and caught onto the sticks.

"I never would and I don't appreciate your tone about it Bilbo Baggins." Durin straightend his back and lowered his voice to a gravelly tone that sounded too much like Thorin and it was not at all on purpose. They both seemed to realize this at once.

“Did you just use your King Voice at me?”

Bilbo had dubbed that specific level of bossiness as such as a child and it didn't sway him much.
then either, now it only left the small male laughing loudly and the ancient king trying to hide his amused expression behind his lowered brows and thick beard.

“Mahal, no wonder you are so immune to Thorin's authority, I've created a true monster.”

Bilbo just shrugged at him in the maw of the troll's home, “Too late now.”

The cave itself was fairly deep, easily fitting the three troll party with enough room to keep them well away from even the slantiest of sunbeam. As far as caves went it was nice, very cool and dry probably any time of the year if it had survived the recent rain with no leaking obvious, impressive really for it had a fairly steep sloping entrance.

Also, it smelled most horrendous.

Bilbo gagged more than a couple of times, placing his flannel over his nose and mouth, edging around with the little faggot of twigs burning for light until he found a small metal cresset, still containing a little grease, to place it within.

Most of everything hoarded seemed to have been shiny at one time and was all very old. Bilbo had to agree with Bert and Tom, it did seem that being down this way hadn't been the most lucrative move for the trolls if he was going by the layer of spiderwebs and dirt caked on everything. Even the newest coin was dingy.

He did happen upon what he could only assume to be the remains of the farmers as well, or some unlucky travelers at least, grimy picked bones and three skulls, one depressingly child sized, tucked beside each other in one corner. He gave them a moment of silence and said a prayer for them and their safe journey to wherever they were meant to be, then tugged a moth eaten quilt nearby over the pile of bones.

Moving along everything was much of the same. The occasional box of gold or gems, some armor and helmets from far away lands, very little to interest a humble Hobbit like himself. He did find, at last, a pile of swords though and out of everything this seemed the most promising. He began tugging them apart thinking weapons would be the most useful thing in the long run, and untangled dry rotted belts and dented hilts until he found one that seemed quite nice above the rest.

He inspected it carefully, certain before even unsheathing it that it had to be old, far older than anything else in the cave save maybe Durin outside. He tilted the bright blade into the light of his little fire to see the inscription near the hilt, “Nagol e-lyg,” he read to himself and hmm'ed, it was far too large for him but it seemed similar a fit to Thorin. Not that he deserved it at the moment but-

"There is trouble, Bilbo."

Durin called down the mouth of the cave and Bilbo made a very loud dramatically frustrated sound back. He slung the sword over his shoulder, careful of the weight and length so as to not upend himself. "What now?"

"From what I can tell, it seems the princes allowed the ponies to be captured. And also the dwarves...all of them."

Tiny hands rubbed the hoard grime firmly off onto his pants after snuffing his fire and having pawed his way back up the steep entrance. "They are why we can't have nice things, Durin. And they are Yours."

"I am grossly aware."
"So long as you know." Bilbo walked by and dodged the hand meant to cuff his ear, "Let's go ruin dinner, I suppose."

Sure enough, when they arrived, having wiggled up under the brush from earlier, all the dwarves were bagged and bound or already spinning on a spit above the troll fire in their skivvies, each cursing worst than the last. Bilbo frowned, he knew they hadn't cleaned that of the reeking mutton before putting the dwarves there, and now he was going to be smelling that and smoky sweaty dwarrow for days.

Bert, William, and Tom were arguing again, this time about how best to cook dwarves rather than mutton. Everything from a nice roast with sage, squashing them to jelly and just saving them for later or eating them whole as they sat.

First thing first, Bilbo decided, the ponies were to be seen to, because the trolls were going to argue long enough no squashing was going to be done and maybe he was still a little petty at Thorin. He hoped Bombur had landed on him when they tossed them in the corner. (Truly he did feel sympathetic for the others despite what you may think.)

Bilbo left the elvish sword nearby under the shrub, not willing to risk the trolls realizing what he'd been doing in their things, and pulled his little kard dagger out to cut through the rope bindings of the pony hold. They were a combination of Bree and Shire ponies and well trained, especially with a familiar Hobbitly face to lead their way and calm their panic, so when he clicked they all began filing out. Durin nudged them in the correct direction once past the gate, back in the way of camp and their food source.

Bilbo watched everything for a moment, eyeing the sky to determine just how long they had until sunrise, hoping he could distract them long enough for that. Otherwise this was going to be much more difficult than he wanted it to be. If only they had a wizard on this quest. Could you imagine the convenience?

With a sigh, because nothing would ever be convenient outside of the Shire it seemed, Bilbo popped his suspenders with his thumbs and walked right up into the Troll camp.

He made a great noise of clearing his throat, "Good evening!" He called and gave a little wave when everyone turned to look at him. There were a few shouts of his name but he could only hope the trolls dimly ignored that.

"What's this now??"

"I'm a burglobbit." He said matter-of-factly. None of the trolls quite stopped what they were doing entirely but their attention had full shifted to Bilbo's little form.

"A burglobbit you said?"

"Yes, indeed!" He bounced on his toes in that way he did quite often.

"I just wanted to let you all know a little thing then I can be on my way! I've been tracking these dwarrow for days now, see, and I wanted to eat them myself for the first few days until I discovered they're quite disgusting." Thirteen shouts of rage filled the camp, "No hygiene whatsoever. I wouldn't eat them. Not as they are anyhow!" Bilbo shouted over the dwarrow who were being not at all supportive in his rescue of them.

"Wot do we care bout hygienics?" Not much at all, Bilbo thought to himself. "I say we eat the lot with their boots and all. I dun it before."
Bilbo made a disgusted sound and stuck out his tongue. "Not the boots. Please. I've seen their feet and please wash them first at least. I know a lot about feet! I've been traveling for weeks and look how nice mine are."

Bert lowered onto his hands and knees while Bilbo lifted a foot up between his eyes for inspection.

"Thems are some tidy feet. William, looks at them feets."

"Quite nice!" William said.

“Well!” Tom added.

"Yes, thank you!” Bilbo agreed.

He placed his foot back down and crossed his hands behind his back almost feeling bad about tricking them. The dwarves never complimented his feet.

"If I may also say that seasoning you have is very all wrong if you are dedicated to eating them. Which I once again advise you don't. Because they are quite grimy and dwarf grease is the worst kind of all for digestion, as I'm sure you well know. On top of all of this..." Durin had suddenly appeared in Bilbo's peripheral motioning to the dawn light and glimpse of wizard moving about above them.

"Wot, wot??" Bert called. “Ontop of all wot?”

"Yes, sorry, on top of all this: they have parasites. In their tubes! I've seen them."

"You've seen their tubes?" Tom cried.

The whole dwarf company, still entirely unhelpful, loudly denied their tube bugs.

"I'm not happy about it either, truly, but yes I have. And just infested, they are. Just crawling with parasites. Especially that sneering one there." Bilbo pointed at Thorin who was seven layers of betrayed by now. "He has the worst of it. That's why he looks so angry all the time."

William looked at Thorin and nodded his head with such understanding it was comical.

"I was wonderin' wot he was so haughty 'bout."

"He's always like that, in my spying experience. Quite haughty. Must be the tubes, it's the only conclusion I can come to for anyone to be like that."

Durin leaned into Bilbo's ear and whispered, "He's going to kill you.” The Hobbit just swatted like a bug had flown too close, knocking Durin right in the nose.

"So what bout you. Can we eat you burgloribbit?"

“May you eat me you mean?”

“Yeh,” Bert knocked Tom's arm, “May we eat you, bunglofibbit?”

“Thank you for asking so politely but I'm afraid no you may not.”

“Oi! And why's that? We asked real nice!” Bert sounded so very dejected.
"You did! But you can't because, silly fellows, you see, I'm not real!"

For the first time the spit stopped turning, leaving Dwalin face down to the fire and puffing to keep the flames away, the ends of his beard sizzling.

"Wot you on about, burloribit?"

"I'm just a distraction! It's embarrassing to explain to you, truly. I'm sorry. But this whole time I've been in three places at once! I'm here with you, plainly so, but I've released your ponies and also if you'll observe where I am now. I'm afraid to say you'll find this last the most inconvenient for you." He pointed to where Gandalf had stopped moving behind a boulder. When everyone looked Bilbo scrambled into the bushes with the sword from the cave and by the time the trolls looked back in a panic he was gone and the ponies were long loose and Gandalf was yelling "MAY THE DAWN TAKE YOU!"

And take them it did.

Now, if you've never seen trolls turn to stone it's a quite uncomfortable looking event and judging by their faces they were all just as surprised by it as all the dwarves in combination and then some. But it was all over in a few seconds and Bilbo was able to come back out with the sword swung again over his back to help with freeing the Company. Gandalf made quick work of the fire and helped everyone down from the spit, which meant he snapped the rope and let them all tumble right into the wood pile below, dirtying them further.

Bilbo went for the bags, gently starting to undo Balin's ties first, "You were right, Bilbo."

"Whatever do you mean, Master Balin?"

“When we came here you said all was not well. You were right.” He looked at Bilbo as if he had seen the future, which in this case he very much had not. For neither he nor Durin had known of this particular outcome.

“Paranoia is hardly a prerequisite to such praise. Don't go complimenting me too much, you old dwarf. I may let it go to my head.” He finished the knot, settling for cutting it with Bombadil's knife and patted Balin on the forearm just as he had earlier that day.

Gloin was next and thanked Bilbo for the help, apologizing for maybe calling him a knob head earlier, then went to help Oin who had begun to roll away in his bag.

Bofur, still in his underthings, had Bombur covered so Bilbo shifted again and moved onto the two princes, who by now barely needed help, wriggling so excitedly their bags had made it partly down their shoulders already.

“Will you hold still?” Bilbo tried to sound firm but failed entirely as the two boys yelled, their eyes bright, any prior fear dissipated entirely. “That was brilliant!” Kili, one hand free now threw it around Bilbo's neck, “You're not making freeing you easy.”

“Did you see him, Fili!” Gloin had managed to let the blond out and he was now helping Bilbo let his brother go.

“You strutted, strutted! right into the camp, Bilbo!” Fili was nearly as loud as Kili, "Do you know how brave that was! And to walk right up to him! The one was right in your face! You nearly put your foot on his nose!"
Both free now they grabbed him together and nearly swung Bilbo off into the air as they picked him up, Kili twirling him then tossing him to Fili for his own round. He was tossed again and yelped,

“Please put me down! We hobbits like to be on the ground remember!”

The younger brother sat him down firmly and each prince took one of his shoulders in hand.

"How did you know Gandalf was there!"

“Well I didn't really, not at first. I'm not sure really when he showed up, I was just stalling for dawn.”

“Brilliant! Uncle, isn't he brilliant!”

Thorin had gotten someone to open his bag, Balin or Gandalf most like, and was watching his nephews assault the hobbit a few steps away.

"You don't really think we're disgusting do you?"

"No I don't think you're disgusting, Kili." Bilbo guffawed at how heartfelt the young dwarf sounded and managed to get loose of them just to back into Thorin's chest.

"And where have you been?”

Bilbo tilted his head back, his nose brushing Thorin's trim beard, going crosseyed trying to focus his vision.

"The troll hoard. Trolls mean a cave and that means a hoard, yes?"

"You knew about the trolls and didn't tell us?"

Thorin's blurry face threatened to turn angry and Bilbo couldn't find it in himself to care, stepping forward so he could face him proper.

"Oh, do stop taking everything as a double crossing. They weren't bothering anything and I wanted to check it was worth anything before you went swooping in.” He motioned around, “By the results of your swooping, it was good on my judgment. Besides, you hired me to do this quite literally. Burglar,” he pointed to his own chest, “remember? And even ignoring all of those things, I figured you could handle it." He pulled the sword off of his back and shoved it out to Thorin, forcing him to take it.

"Here. A truce? This looked about your size, thought you might find it useful. Seems nicer than the one you had.” Bilbo wrapped Thorin's hands in his own on the sword and used them to slide the blade out of its sheath a few inches for the inscription, “It says 'tooth of the snake' though I guess it could mean dragon too, if you wanted to be particularly poetic about it.”

He pushed it back into place, leaving Thorin to stare down at the cobwebbed sword and his suddenly cold hands as Oin and Bofur yelled for their hobbit to show them to the hoard. (Oin, Bilbo would like to point out to someone, claimed to be deaf but certainly heard Bilbo saying he had worms and managed to hone in on 'troll hoard' across an entire camp.)

Thorin looked forward as Bilbo began walking backward lifting his little arms in a shrugging motion, "Honestly, about not mentioning the trolls…being how you've all bragged your battle prowess for days now…" He grinned and tapped the side of his nose, "But this just proves it
doesn't it? What would a burglobbit know about anything in the wilderness at all?"

His smile was blinding for a quick moment and Thorin found he didn't know what to say. Bilbo jogged to the other dwarves pointing the direction to the cave, basking in their shouts of praise and excitement, their noisiness didn't matter now and maybe he had missed it a bit. "Also," golden brown curls caught the light when Bilbo slowed in a ray of sun and yelled over his shoulder, "I believe the correct response is thank you when someone saves you from being a meal for one or more trolls!"

Thorin didn't move, didn't say anything, thrown completely for a loop. Unknown to him Durin was haunting his shadow, glancing between them, wondering if that look in Thorin's eyes was another joke from Yavanna and Mahal. A dwarf and a hobbit, it shouldn't make perfect sense, and it wouldn't have before Durin had died. In a sudden wave of sympathy he patted his poor grandson on the shoulder, his hand causing a quick draft that made the king shiver and look around.

A monster was an understatement, Durin decided, for what he had created in Bilbo Baggins.
Of the Weak and the Wise

Chapter Notes

This turned into more of a history lesson and a couple of heart to hearts I didn't plan on getting in BEFORE Rivendell but here we are and I think they fit in fine here! Hopefully I'll have another chapter up before the end of the week, I wrote this all out and then am managing to slice it into two or three chapters instead of a single gigantic one.

I can't wait to respond to everyone's amazing comments!!! i seriously check my inbox so much because the comments mean so much to me and thank you thank you thankyouforthem!!!
always much love!!!
-S

Bilbo's ancestor, his great-great-great-great-uncle Bandabras Took, better known as Bullroarer, had been quite a large Hobbit. Even as the Fallohide breed of Hobbits went, back when that still meant a little something of anything, Bullroarer was sturdy and tall, all pale skin and bright hair and a whopping four feet five inches in height. Adventure was wild in his soul, bravery strong within his breast.

It was in the War of Greenfields that Bullroarer found his fame and whacked Golfimbul the Goblin King's head clean off his neck and shoulders in one swipe of his club from atop his horse (horse! mind you, read that again, not a pony) . There was such force behind this thwack! that the head flew and flew for a reported one hundred yards unstopped and landed straight down a rabbit hole. In one swoop Bullroarer put an end to the Goblin invasion of 2747 and subsequently invented the game of golf, named cleverly, and mayhaps a bit morbidly, for Golfimbul himself. So it was because of this particular Took that Bilbo blamed his own unwanted talent of finding rabbit holes even when he wasn't in the market for them.

Once as a child, while reenacting the discovery of Moria, a seven flower crown atop his head, Bilbo tumbled down one head first while skipping across a field (Durin insisted he had not skipped once during any of his time on Middle Earth but Bilbo very much didn't care). In hindsight perhaps it wasn't truly a rabbit hole, more of a sinkhole or even a groundhog hole, but it was large enough yet for a very small Bilbo to tumble right in. He remembered it vividly when he thought of it. The pressing weight around him, his arms pinned and dirt in his lashes and the way his screaming became something like a solid thing circling him, squeezing and clogging his ears. He wriggled and fought, desperately fought, against this unknown something he had fallen into. This dark trap of where he did not ask to be. But when he fought he only became more trapped, more frightened, more frenzied. He battled harder then, thrashed and spun, yelled and cried. The whole time Durin could have helped.

He did not.

He was there, just outside the hole where Bilbo shrieked at him, pleading for help; for Durin, his mother, his father, Yavanna, Mahal. The old king could have easily tugged him up enough to have righted him somewhat, to ease the pressure.
He did not.

Instead, Durin spoke. Between Bilbo's shrieks Durin's deep voice calmly told him to stop. To relax. To breathe. Only when the little fauntling had exhausted himself entirely, dizzy from panic and hyperventilating, claustrophobic but too tired to do much else than go limp did Bilbo begin to listen. For what other choice did he have at that point. His nose was filled with dirt, his eyes itched, his lungs burned, his elbows ached and he could smell the coppery edge of blood. Still Durin did not help. The dwarrow king's voice told him still to be calm, to think. To know when to fight and when to scream and when to see.

"Understand your surroundings, Bilbo," He said. "Take the time to see, not every struggle, not every fight for your life, is a call to arms."

Once Bilbo had stopped everything, stopped battling the ground, the earth, the large obvious enemy he could not beat into submission he slowly began to realize the best plan of attack was in fact to breathe easily, softly, the same way his mother taught him when firing a bow and arrow. He could see the light now streaming in, that comfort which had been lost in the hail storm of his flailing limbs.

Now that he wasn't screaming he could focus on the easy sounds of spring so near by, the echoing sounds of Durin's voice, the breeze that was so close it kissed the pads of the still soft parts of his feet. Once he had calmed it was nothing at all to ease his way back, get his bearings about him, and get himself out with no other help.

Durin steadied him as his little rump popped from the rabbit (or what have you) hole, helped him back up on his feet and inspected his scrapes and scratches.

"What did we learn?" He said, as he often did when a more difficult lesson was to be had in less than conventional ways.

"Watch where I'm skipping." Durin cackled, caught off guard, "Other than this."

"Not all fights are call to arms." Bilbo repeated.

"Sometimes you've got to fight with words and...?" Bilbo puffed one cheek out, thinking, "Patience?"

"Sometimes you must use words, and cunning, and mercy, and understanding to end fights, or stop them before they begin at all."

"So..." his little round face looked very serious. The way it did when his youthful mind sifted through things Durin said to make sense of them, "Just because something is dangerous and scary doesn't mean it has to be violent?"

Durin the Deathless smiled softly, "Yes."
The little Hobbit child grinned and grabbed up for Durin to lean down nearer so Bilbo's pudgy hands could come up to hold the old king's cheeks and gently, so gently, on the tips of his toes, the little Hobbit bumped their foreheads together.

That night Bilbo did not cry once when his wounds were rubbed with ointment and plastered by the Shire's medic. Bungo, however, did have to take a few breathers and nearly needed medical attention himself over seeing his son "Bleeding profusely all over the front mat, Bella!" (It was times like these that were perhaps Bilbo's favorite moments, a little selfishly because of his father's fear, to see such blatant proof of his parents' love. For when the doctor tending to their son looked so very done and annoyed and enraged with everything that was Bungo's excitable nerves, Belladonna never looked more besotted and in love.)

The fight with the trolls had been subduing to say the least. While Bilbo had no illusions that they were truly at any grand advantage between himself and Durin, the event this early in the journey, one which had left the whole of the Company bagged and bound, was slightly disconcerting. Durin had not known of this. Not even an inking. So had it happened the first time around? They'd never know for sure. There were many things they would never know and this was no news to them but this was the first truly dangerous thing to back up their knowledge of their lack of knowledge. So even with the dwarves being supremely jolly now, their seeming immunity to the whole ordeal, it was all very sobering to Bilbo on a level he did not appreciate.

"Reason would say something similar happened the first time." Durin said, pacing slowly in his royal blue tunic, all of his jeweled braids tapping quietly. Bilbo had chosen to stay outside the hoard for the moment being, letting the others roll through the muck and webs.

"We can't be certain."

"Reason would also say if it went similarly last time that this would truly be the least concerning of things to happen and far from the forefront of any memories. In which case, there is little concern to be had about this."

"Trolls haven't been down this way in an age or more." Bilbo pointed out, his little red pencil pressed against his lower lip. Durin had to resign himself to agreeing, "And if they weren't last time, they are now. Which means perhaps things are truly worse this time round." The ancient dwarf tugged his beard, something he hadn't done since he was Fili's age, a habit he thought he had broken over a thousand years ago.

"Bert, Tom, and William are of no trouble now, as they are as good as lawn decorations henceforth but I still wonder-"

"Who are you talking to Bilbo?"

"if it happened the first time round." He finished low under his breath quickly then looked up from his journal he had open in his hand, patting his pencil against it. "Just to the only person that has any sense around here, Master Gandalf, as you would put it." His lips lifted, snapping the book shut, "Myself."

"I am inclined to agree with you enthusiastically. Thank you for saving the Company, Bilbo. If no one has said it yet."

"A couple of times." The journal found its way back into his mushroom pack. "Did you need something Master Wizard?"
“Yes. Would you mind so very much to show me where you found that sword? The one you gave to Thorin?”

"Of course, I didn't get to check the rest of them before..." He flapped a hand, "All of...that..."

Back into the hoard it took Bilbo moment to find the piles of swords again. The moment it took was not a very long one, for, as we well know, Hobbits live underground and are nearly as good as dwarves at finding their way about even without the bright lights of fire or wizard staffs.

"Right here." He said finally and nudged his discarded pile away from the stack he had left unchecked.

The wizard thanked him and handed him his staff to hold the glowing blue light steady while he started digging himself, "Do you think there are others?" Bilbo leaned on the crozier, listening to the magic coursing through it. He also nearly asked if wizards were in the habit of handing their things over so often or if it was a quirk of Gandalf to he alone. Bilbo hadn't seen the wizard hand anything of his own to any of the dwarves.

"Often with most things, as I'm sure you know, where there is one there is more. That sword you found was forged in Gondolin, by the High-Elves. A very special find."

"Gondolin!" Bilbo said excitedly.

"Indeed."

After a few minutes of digging Gandalf made a successful sound and stood up swiftly with a very handsome sword clutched in his grasp. The long sword he held was thinner than Thorin's, straight edged where the other had been gently curving, it was beautiful, shining through the webs and dust and it's blue leather belt still attached looked as supple as if it had been made yesterday. It fit the tall stalk of Gandalf's body perfectly and once there the wizard rested his hand on the pommel with such familiarity, as if it had always been at his side and was never meant to be elsewhere. Elf magic is a lively thing and Bilbo would not put it past the sword to know quite well who it was to belong and at what time. They dug a while longer but found nothing else of interest in that spot and Bilbo returned the staff and excused himself, his flannel plastered firmly over his mouth and nose. There was nothing here he wanted. Toward the entrance Gloin was orchestrating a supposed long term deposit and Dwalin looked at Bilbo with a heavy dose of what his mother would call babysitter face.

"Idjits." Dwalin said to the hobbit, making Bilbo stifle a laugh as he passed. The royal guard was humorous in his own gruff way.

Easing up the incline to the outside Bilbo let his mind wander back to the situation at hand. Perhaps he was allowing himself too much stress over the trolls, at least at the moment, before he had more information to add. He couldn't force the matter to make sense, he had a very small piece of the information and he would just have to wait and see if the piece he had was even part of the puzzle or completely unrelated to the picture at all.

Emerging from the cavern he was allowed a full three seconds to feel lighter and less anxious before he nearly jumped back into the hollow again when Thorin's voice was speaking just beside his ear.

The king was leaned against the wall outside the cave mouth looking very expectantly at Bilbo, as if he hadn't just tried to give the hobbit heart failure.
"I'm sorry, what? It's impolite to ambush people like that, Thorin, I nearly died. I also did not hear what it was you said." There was no heat to his words, though he held his hand over his pounding heart. He also did notice the Gondolin sword was strapped to Thorin's back where his other had been before. It was such a stunning fit as well that Bilbo nearly missed Thorin repeating himself, "I said thank you."

The king pulled one hand from behind his back and in it sat a plump chanterelle mushroom, bright golden yellow in the sunlight, so thick and lovely it engulfed even the dwarf’s large hand and Bilbo nearly went cross eyed from the beauty of it.

"Oh," Bilbo said, quite taken aback and gently took the morsel. "I..you're welcome. Thank you."

"I'm afraid I know nothing of mushrooms. In this case, as my sister would say, perhaps it is the thought that counts here." He would not look at him, and Bilbo felt a small tug of sympathy, for all of his royal glory he was truly endearingly awkward when the kingly self-importance was set aside.

"This is very good. I'm frankly a little jealous, I walked all night and didn't find anything like this. It's a chanterelle." He gave the king a gentle smile, one he would give a true friend.

Thorin glanced at him, at his smile, then made a soft coughing sound, "Yes well, I also did want to ask how you knew we were..." the smaller male could see his inner conflict to admit they were in trouble. He settled for "..inconvenienced."

"I heard you, of course." Bilbo gently touched the gills of the chanterelle.

"You heard us?"

"You're not exactly a quiet lot, and neither are trolls for that matter, and the two together." He shrugged. "Also, I have good hearing."

"From almost a quarter of a mile away, in a cave, you heard us?"

"I have very good hearing."

Thorin eyed Bilbo's leaf shaped ears parting his frizzy curls obviously not entirely certain but having no other explanation of his own.

"In fact," Bilbo tried to sell his claim, "did you know some people think perhaps there is a bit of elf blood in hobbits. More specifically in the Took family. Of which I am half directly on my mother's side."

Bilbo's eyes arched in amusement and he cradled his mushroom close to his sternum just beside Durin's stone. "I hope that doesn't sully your opinion of me further."

"Not as such...is the Took side the difficult half that doesn't listen?"

"Yes," Bilbo was determined to only be amused by Thorin Oakenshield today, not annoyed, "The Tooks are quite renowned for their oddities and less than...Hobbity habits. After all if I wasn't a Took I don't think I'd be here with you all now. They also hold the Thainship, and have for hundreds of years, so maybe there is something most positive to being Tookish, no matter how much everyone pretends it's ridiculous."

"And a Thainship is?" Thorin looked like he didn't approve of his own curiosity but couldn't not ask.
"Thain translates to chief in our tongue. For a long time we were part of the North Kingdom, until King Arvedui's death long ago, then we were quite on our own for a while until everyone decided a leader should be chosen. We're very practical, it seemed only the right thing to do. So we picked a Thain."

"You just picked a king?"

"A chief, nothing so severe as a king. Anyway, after the death of Arvedui, Bucca the Marish came about as the Thain and his family, the Oldbucks held Thainship for nearly...twelve generations." Bilbo counted on his fingers. He was rambling, he knew but it was so rare anyone asked anything about Shire history and he was quite excited to tell. "The Oldbucks, as his family was called back then, stayed in charge until they moved over the Brandywine and founded Buckland and changed their names to Brandybuck. After that the first Took was recorded as Isambras Took and he became the thirteenth Thain. It's stayed in the Took family ever sense, passed down to the line of first sons. Often times people say The Took and The Thain interchangeably they are so synonymous now."

Thorin rubbed his father's key through his layers of clothing, "The Old Bucks just allowed the Toosks to take over their kingdom? It was not a battle or invasion."

"No. No! We aren't really the invading type, I'm sure that's difficult to believe." Thorin snorted, that rare smile tilting the edges of his lips. "I suppose they figured they were well off enough with Buckland and Hobbits, as I said, are nothing if not practical. It was the most logical thing to transfer the title to another family who lived in the Shire proper."

"So what does a Thain do?"

"Well. He is in charge of calling on the Hobbit-moot, and the Hobbit-muster, and if we were to need it the Hobbitry-At-Arms. But seeing as we do not fight amongst ourselves, or really with anyone at all, it's not been since the Goblin battle of Greenfield almost three hundred years ago that our militia has been called together. For the most part The Rangers keep our borders safe now. Anyway, Old Took is the Thain now and very well respected and I've quite forgotten what we were talking about before this and how we got here."

Bilbo hummed and watched as Fili and Kili became visible down wind, all fourteen ponies and Gandalf's one horse in tow.

"Did you not say your mother was a Took?"

Thorin said as the boys came within earshot.

"Yes. Old Took is Thain currently, he is my mother's father."

Thorin expression became unreadable for a moment and the boys laughed at it as they corralled the little string of ponies.

"What is that look, Uncle?"

"You look like when Balin gives Kili a particularly difficult math problem."

Kili punched his brother's arm.

"Master Bilbo was just explaining Shire politics to me."

"Oh?" Fili started tying the feed bags to the ponies, "Did he tell you he's a Lord?"
The King's eyes slowly turned on Bilbo, "He did not."

Kili piped in, obviously pleased to have some bit of gossip over on their uncle, "Yes! Bilbo is a Lord, didn't you know! We knew."

"There is no peace for me here. Not among dwarves, not among wizards, not among the whole of Middle Earth." Bilbo said, his eyes going unfocused.

"A Lord?" Thorin asked.

"I'm not a Lord. I'm a landlord-" he huffed, put his hands out in a halting motion with a 'ha' and a head tilt, one pointer finger lifting to the air, "Mm-mm, Nope. Not like that. I rent. I am an owner of land and others rent the land to use it. Because it is far too much for me to handle alone. I am but a single gentlehobbit. So I let others take care of it."

"And your grandfather is king?"

Fili and Kili bounded over now realizing there was more gossip to be had, something bigger than lordship afoot.

At this moment Balin stepped up from the troll cave with the wizard not far behind, the latter quick to join in, for he and the Thain were very old friends, "Are we speaking of Old Took?"

"What is a Took?" Balin wiggled a handkerchief between his upper lip and the severe curve of his nose. Thorin responded, "Apparently a King." Bilbo could feel he was losing all semblance of control of the conversation at all. Could nearly watch it soaring off without him.

"What is he king of, I've never heard of a King Took?" Balin asked, for he was a scholar and if there was a King of Anything he should certainly be privy to it.

"The Shire!" Kili called. "He is Old King Took of the Shire!" As if he were the forefront figure of all the knowledge about it.

"He is a good King, his name is Gerontius Took and he is Bilbo's grandfather," Gandalf said, "in fact," he added because Mithrandir was entirely incapable of not meddling at any given moment, "some outside of the Shire may consider our Bilbo Baggins a prince. You see, for Old King Took is his mother's father."

"A prince! Master Baggins is a prince!" Someone, possibly Dori, shouted from down in the cave and Bilbo scowled.

"I do not believe anyone outside of the Shire asked your opinion, Master Gandalf. And I am not a prince, nor a lord, nor anything but a gentlehobbit with apparently very poor choice in friends!"

The little Hobbit held his mushroom closer and thrust his chin into the air, it was Durin who mumbled, "Told you." Which was the last straw and sent Bilbo into a fit. Marching off to his Myrtle, thrusting one fist toward the ground he shouted, "I've had enough of dwarf and wizard already today! For good this time! I am leaving again! Perhaps if I find more trolls this time I shall let them smash you into jelly! It would be an improvement on all of your personalities, I think!"

It was hard to be mad for long at the pure joyful laughter left behind him.

That night they camped in the troll's camp. Bombur was able to salvage what of the troll food that
was edible and everyone took to singing nonsense songs cooking over the beech trees the company had nearly been dinner on the night before. What had been Bert, Tom, and William were still frozen and served as cloak racks while Gandalf entertained everyone by turning their smoke rings different colors and stacking them by size, crown like, above the trolls' heads in a sort of competition, the colors keeping track of who had created the largest ring so far. Everyone took part, except the dismal king whose earlier enjoyable mood seemed to have soured again. Bilbo played for a bit then went to cook his chanterelle in some butter and herbs, simple but delicious, and went to join Thorin where he had ostracized himself from the group as was becoming his usual habit.

"You know."

Bilbo sat down beside him and bumped his shoulder. "The best cure for tube worms is to talk about it."

The dark haired dwarf pursed his lips to the side and Bilbo chuckled. "Truly, what I came to say was: I think royalty are allowed to have friends. Especially going-off-into-the-possible-gates-of-death friends, as is the case. You're not as awful as you pretend, Thorin Oakenshield, I don't understand why you insist on acting this way."

"And what way is that, pray tell."

"Distant, brooding, waspish, pouty, prickly, peevish, grumpy, grouchy, crotchety, irascible-"

"Yes, thank you that is enough."

There was a short silence

"...dyspeptic."

"Bilbo."

Bilbo beamed and vibrated with amusement, "That's the first time you've called me by just my first name."

Thorin said nothing, but he did not leave and he did not make Bilbo go either, so the halfling let him have a bit of peace before he started talking again.

"You know," Bilbo parroted himself from earlier as he cut up one end of the mushroom on his little travel plate, "I don't think anyone else in the Shire is more respected than Old Took. And fine, if all of Middle Earth outside of the Shire wanted to call him our King, it wouldn't matter. Because we see he cares about the people around him. We go to him with our problems, usually not even because he is chief but because he is kind and wise. He is there for us not because his obligated to be as Thain, or King, but because he loves us as people. Even the most annoying of us. Of which there are many."

A lightning bug landed on Bilbo's big toe and he wiggled it a little. "The Company wants to love you as a person, not an untouchable symbol. Not as a legend that hovers on their borders. The best king is a king who is one of his people as well. The warriors know that, they have fought with you, seen you dirty and injured as the rest of them. But the others, as you have said, are not soldiers. They are common folk. Common folk who will probably return to common folk after all of this is done, and tell them of the king they traveled with. As it is...they don't have much to tell."

Thorin didn't look directly at the halfling, but a spared a small keek that way. Among the miners, and cooks, toy tinkers, and warriors Fili had his fiddle out poking shy Ori with every slide across of
the bow. The scribe was trying hard not to laugh, to keep his attention on his writing in his lap. Kili was singing a bawdy song, dancing elbow in elbow in a circle with Bofur and Bifur until he managed to grab and fling Bofur's hat onto Tom the troll's head.

The princes did not see their own royalty, not truly. They had not grown as Thorin had, in turmoil and war wrapped for display constantly in treasures and gold. Gold which still weighed on him so heavily, its greed sunk so deep, always singing with a lovers song. The tune left him, in words he swore he would never say out loud, feeling fearfully similar to Smaug. For some nights he dreamed of Erebor, not of it's bustling life restored, but of himself alone, drowning with a smile in a sea of gold and gems. It was these dreams that he feared the most, more than every nightmare of Azog, every memory he dreamed of his grandfather's beheading. He feared the warmth of the melted golden sea because it felt right, it felt like love, it felt like home and a vicious part of him did not want anyone to be a part of it, not his sister, not his nephews, not the Company. Not another soul in the whole of the seven kingdoms of dwarves. Thorin watched his boys, the way they connected and loved with such ease the people who they would rule. That was a loyalty that would not die, even long after this quest. The song shifted to an old one, in ancient Khuzdul that Bifur began and the others knew the words, the sounds, but perhaps not the meaning. Bilbo was nudging him again, that look of understanding he wore too often on his features.

"Here. I know how dwarrow are about anything not red meat but try." Bilbo held his fork to the side, a speared piece of the mushroom on the prongs, for Thorin to accept. Which he did, eventually, eyeing it a bit before taking the fork and putting it in his mouth. He chewed slowly, eyes distant, contemplative with all the seriousness of testing the plated menu for a banquet.

"Peppery…" He said finally, "But not as awful as I thought."

Bilbo tossed his head back and laughed, the tension broken. He knew, of course, he and Thorin would likely soon be at each other's throats again, but he would be lying if he said he didn't want to bask in this ease between them this evening.

They split the rest of the mushroom between them and the rest of the night was quite enjoyable and not at all eventful.

The day of next would see their setting off to the Ford. It seemed the excitement of the trolls had taken more out of everyone than they thought, for dwarves were still deep in slumber when Bilbo roused. Even Thorin was wrapped in in his blanket sound asleep and curiously nearby, his breathing soft and slow. It didn't take long to locate Gandalf, who Bilbo was certain now didn't need sleep, where he had perched himself on one half of the split rock from the night before. Durin's stone bounced about as the Hobbit climbed up the way and then onto the other half of the boulder, his legs dangling down on the smooth sliced center. Gandalf turned, mirroring Bilbo's posture, "Good morning, Bilbo."

"A good morning to be good on, whether we like it or not."

"Much of life is whether we like it or not."

Gandalf's beard wagged in the wind, his hat was off beside him. He was looking and sounding decidedly morose this morning.

"Do all the other wizards often look more weary than magical? Or does it come with the meddling part of your occupation?"
The old grey man smiled, "There is something in you, Bilbo Baggins. I have not deciphered it yet, but I will."

"I believe you."

"I forgot yesterday, but I did find you something within the cave."

There was a moment of digging in his robes, half of which Bilbo thought may be for show, that let the sun rise a bit more and their shadows grew spindly and long as the camp came to life. From a fold in his sleeve a small short sword came to view. "A third sword of Gondolin. One more your size, my friend."

Bilbo watched Gandalf unsheathe it, searching where he could see and not finding any engravings. "You should give it to one of the boys."

"It will glow blue when orcs or goblins are nearby. I would feel better knowing you have it."

"I'm so very poor at swords." He disagreed with the decision but reached across the divide the same, their hands brushing over the bridged gap. Here the wizard held them, his eyes nearly blue instead of gray in the light, "I hope you never have to use this. But if you do, remember this: true courage is about knowing not when to take a life, but when to spare one. These are strange times ahead. There is always evil searching to dig its claws in wherever it can, Bilbo, it is gentlefolk who remember to be gentle and forgiving through it all and after which will save the wisest and the weakest of us."

Bilbo reached further forward, his other hand layering Gandalf's knuckles, their bones and angles like tree knobs and ancient roots. The magic shifting just under so very much like touching Durin. Bilbo wondered what Gandalf felt in his hands, under his skin.

"Many are the strange chances of the world, Gandalf, and help often shall come from the hands of the weak when the wise falter." Durin had said that to him once, quoted it from the Green Lady or the Smith, he wasn't sure. But this seemed an appropriate moment for it to have come to mind. At this the wizard's hands loosened, almost startled, and allowed the Hobbit to take the blade at last and lean back. The sun once again sliced the air now free of their bodies damming it, the dustlight glinting between them. "I fear the wisest may - falter that is. I fear this in my heart, Gandalf, though I do not know why I should feel this way. Nor what I truly mean even as I say it. Except that even the very wise can not see all ends, but it is the ends the wisest may crave I fear the most."

Saying he did not know why he felt this way was a half truth, for it was all from something vague that Yavanna had warned Durin of in passing. For him to be weary of the wisest with magic and too much pride, she had not explained further, and he had felt it was something maybe she wasn't entirely supposed to have said. For Durin had seen the look Mahal had given her as she said it, but it was never discussed, and he did not press for more than what they willingly handed him.

Gandalf, though, seemed visibly shaken. Whether it was what Bilbo said, or the multitude of other things Maiar must have on their minds, nothing more was spoken until the wizard excused himself for a strong cup of coffee. Down below Thorin was watching him, face untelling of how much the exiled King had heard. Bilbo allowed himself the rest of the sunrise then hopped down and unsheathed his Gondolin sword. He shifted his weight, giving the streamline blade a twirl and a jab then slid it into it's new home at his hip.

"I'm so very bad at swords." He said, not for the last time, then he went to join the others for breakfast and preparations for the next bout of their journey.
The road to the Misty Mountains.
okay so basically any chapter that's an 'aside' will almost always be miniature compared to the rest. it's my way of keeping everything moving with important information without bogging down another chapter that has the larger story at hand. i feel breaking off a small aside here and there helps? it helps me. lol! much love! welcome new friends and old ones~
-S

The path to the Ford was easy going and took only just the early half of the morning to reach its edge. It was here they stopped for lunch and Bilbo disappeared, forcing Thorin to go find him, insisting the rest of the Company rest. A few looked surprised, but pleasantly so, at the Kings willingness to take on a small silly chore. Usually he'd have sighed or puffed up at the Hobbit skipping off then sent another of the group to go fetch him. Instead he thanked Bofur for taking his pony and off he went on his own. (Not even looking angry! As it seemed was Thorin's usual way.) As it turned out Bilbo had only wandered a short distance, barely out of immediate eyesight, perched on the tall smooth respite of a bundle of granite. His face was bright in the afternoon light, little ghosts of shadows kissing his cheeks where the bits of clouds passed before the sun. But it was his eyes that struck the king, even angled slightly away, they were radiant, with no help if the sunlight, and something in them Thorin could only describe as love. It was the visual of what he had heard Bilbo singing that night in the campsite of would be orcs and over-told war tales. His little hand was gripped around that necklace, the dark hemp coiling his pale fingers, and there may have been a sound of humming on the breeze.

At first attempt Thorin called up but when he got no answer in return he decided to climb to join him. Hoisting himself with a grunt, his weapons clanking and extra certain not to startle him he made sure his boots thunked heavily up the way and found just barely enough room to stand arm to arm with the Hobbit once there.

“What are you doing, Master Baggins?”

“Are we back to formalities?”

His head tilted but his eyes did not look from the nucleus of their focus. The chain of peaks in the distance, great swashes of tawny browns climbing like a great choppy wave to the skies, mist billowing the snowy peaks.

“What are you doing, Bilbo?” He tripped on it a bit, his nose curling just a hair. Did he truly know so few friends that familiarity tasted so astringent on his tongue.

“The Misty Mountains.” Bilbo's voice distracted him and his eyes got brighter, the dark circle around the iris making the light aurum flecks in the amber of his eyes spark. Thorin raised a thick regal brow, “Aye, we shall be crossing them soon. Under or over or between. In any way we can really. They're nothing compared to Erebor, you should hold your awe.”
Bilbo gasped and elbowed him, which Thorin barely felt beneath his leathers. (This small thing had bruised Kili?) “This is the body of Moria, Thorin. Moria!! Khazad-dum! Durin's Halls!” That longing sigh came out with such passion Thorin did not know what to say back, the Hobbit was disturbingly good at halting his voice with little such things. “I never thought I would see them.” His whole body relaxed and leaned into king's side in the small space they had. Thorin swallowed, a little uncertain, not used to such casual touching. Dwarves were affectionate, more than any of the other creatures of the land knew or saw, for they were quite private beings. But it was among kin, fellow warriors, dearest friends. Were they, the two of them, any of these? Did the Hobbit think so? Or did he care at all in such way of things. Thorin had seen the Hobbits about and around the Shire and Bree. They seemed a very touch based persons, friendly gestures and gentle hands-

“They haven't changed...” Bilbo starting speaking again, his hair had attached itself to the metal embellishments of his sleeve, hooking the scalemail. The deep humming was back on the wind as well, but Thorin realized it was not him, and it was not Bilbo.

"Not since the Eldar days. Not since Durin saw them first. How do they do it? Anything else in the world you leave and everything is torn down, rebuilt, grown up. Even the forests often forget. But the mountains stay much the same, their memory always holds, they remember you even if you may not them."

Blue eyes tilted down, eyeing the top of Bilbo's head, the little curls of aureate dancing in the tailwind. The comments conflicted each other and Thorin was curious if Bilbo knew how often he did that.

Spoke of never seeing something, of not knowing anything at all of anything, then the sweet nostalgic voice that would follow, the sweet simple comfortableness, he would praise the same topics with in the same breath.

“Do you think?” He had began to shift away, leaving an absence of pleasant pressure from Thorin's side, “Do you think I could look into Kheled-zaram some day? I wish to see the crown again...” Thorin opened his mouth to speak, to ask how he knew that word, knew that lake, what he meant by 'again', why he spoke of it all as such as if he knew. But the company began calling for their return, and

Thorin instead coaxed Bilbo down with promises of lunch and their soon to be entrance into the Misty Mountains.

At first glance, the Ford and the mountains seemed to be touching just before their faces. A short trek, perhaps until mid evening across the vast slope marching up to the Mountains edge and they would be there at the roots of them. But the afternoon began to pass and everything seemed in much the same place as when they left at the start.

Bilbo noticed as they went, once in a while, there would be a curiously white stone. Polished looking even, some very visible, some very not. Some large enough to be sat upon, others the size of his Hobbit's foot and cuddled up into patches of soft looking clover. He did not think the others noticed or cared for that matter. But few he could see in the distance, continuing on like markers in a vague serpentine road, and he could see the way Gandalf would squint and search the land, always then tugging them in the direction of those bleached mounds.

“The Road to Rivendell.” Durin responded when Bilbo motioned at one of the nearing rocks. Durin tapped it as they passed disrupting the wards like dust from an old piece of furniture, a little furor of magic sparkling around his hand, Gandalf however gave it no second glance, and therefore
brought no attention to it to any of the company. “Can you feel the magic building?”

The Hobbit nodded to Durin, signing an affirmative then shook his head at Gandalf's back, not quite able to contain his smile, whispering, “Such a gobermouch of a wizard.”

“What was that Master Hobbit?”

“Ah! Nothing, just a bit of augur on your hat there, my friend! Just there above your right ear! I see it! And I see you!”

“Gardyloo, Bilbo!” He shouted back, “I don't even know the meaning of the word!” But Gandalf turned on his saddle and gave him a look, squinting at Bilbo in much the same way he was doing in his hunt for the white stones beyond.

Kili called up from the back, “What is the meaning of the word, Master Baggins?”

Bilbo smirked, his body swaying gently with the round belly of is little pony, “Gandalf is the definition of both of those and all of the above, Kili. His very picture would be there on the page if you were to take the time to check any book of definitions.”

Kili frowned in confusion and did not ask for further language lessons for some time.

Onward they continued.

Riding for a few hours with the courtesy of Bofur's flute and the princes' voices until even that grew tedious, and annoying, and Dwalin put a stop to it. For they had reached a point it did not seem to be helping pass the time so much as proving how much time had passed and how little they had done. Between them and the Mountains the open land kept stretching but nothing looked closer or further than before. Then, as if this were not enough, the further into the field they ventured the more optical illusions began to appear every which way. Too many times a pony, or even once Gandalf’s mount, stumbled on the edge of a crevice, well hidden until ones shoe was near stepped completely off the fringe. Some of these crevices were thin, easily jumped or stepped over, but black at the bottom, going on forever and ever. Into places not a single one of them wished to picture. Others were wide and filled with small forests, the occasional elk seen skipping down below, so large whole other peoples could live there and never be bothered and none the wiser. Bilbo found it beautiful, the majority of the dwarves were just getting grumpy (though Bifur, Bofur, and Ori seemed to get little glints in their eyes. Glimmers of passion there found unmistakably in soft souls and story tellers).

As they were going Bilbo knew it couldn't be too much longer before someone protested. As it turned out he was only about five minutes off his guess mark, but still won his bet with Dwalin.

“Are you certain you know the way, Gandalf?”

“Could you do better, your majesty?”

Thorin opened his mouth no doubt to agree, that yes, most definitely, he could do better until Bilbo cut him off, “Just let the wizard have his way, Thorin.” He yawned into the back of his hand, “It's truly exhausting otherwise and I'd rather like not falling into an invisible trench before I get to see the mountains up close.”

The king's argument seemed to turn along with the motion of his body, an arrow knocked and ready for firing. Bilbo's curls bounced and his brows raised, a hint of bemusement there in the angle of his whole body, “Not every situation is a call to arms, your majesty.”
“Aye,” Balin sidled up on Thorin's other side, “You are letting your anger get the best of you, son”
The king sighed heavily, but between the two of them seemed to acquiesce.

Again, onward they went for a short time. Quiet and grouchy, and most aggressively bored until
the ponies and Bilbo all tensed at once. The nags stamping their feet and refusing to move no
matter who said what, confusing the dwarves to no end until Bilbo, head cocked, pushing his curly
hair back heard a strange yelling and swift thumping approaching. He raised his voice, calling up
to Gandalf, who was trying to whisper to his own horse to right itself, "Gandalf! Something is
coming!"

The dwarves quickly went into battle formation, yanking their ponies around the hobbit and the
youngest as best they could, when up from a gully they hadn't even saw flew a line of...rabbits..?
Rabbits.

Over their heads the hares flew, their legs kicking on thin air in an arc tugging on their corded
wake a crooked sled woven of tree branches tied together with magic. The rabbits landed and
sprinted, curled around them, the sled nearly knocking Ori in the head if Dwalin hadn't had the
reflexes to yank him back by his scarf and tugged his pony along with.

"Witchcraft! Fire! Thieves!" The brown furry mass shrieked from the sled. More yelling continued
and the ponies stamped, Gandalf jumped from his horse at the same time Durin relaxed, a hand on
Bilbo's thigh, and muttered, "It is Radagast the Brown."

The little male's face did an odd confusing expression at Durin, "Huh..really?"

Around him the dwarves still were combat ready, the brown wizard was still shrieking and the sled
slowing but still running circles around their little caravan. Thorin had pulled the Gondolindrim
sword drawn and Dwalin's battle axes were whipped out at his sides, Bifur's spear in hand, even
Bofur's mattock out and ready.

"Would you call this a call to arms, Hobbit!" Thorin tossed over his shoulder, he had placed
himself directly across from Dwalin on his other side, blocking the little male's path from attack on
multiple fronts if he had in fact been in danger. Instead Bilbo re-rolled his sleeves, settled his pony,
adjusted his suspenders, mostly out of nervous habit.He took the few moments to inhale to a count
of seven and out for five counts soothingly, before responding, “No, I would call that a wizard,
your majesty. It is Radagast the Brown.” The company as a whole turned to look at Bilbo, even
Oin (deaf my furry feet, Bilbo thought), while Gandalf managed to get the other wizard under
control and to leave his sled to speak properly. “Just a wizard...” Bilbo shyly smiled at everyone
for half a second, then moved just a bit to get a better angle for hearing what Radagast was so
enthusiastic about, “...a very tizzied wizard..” Balin shifted his now calm pony to bring their nag's
nearly nose to nose, his eyes boring into the hobbit's face, “What is it Bilbo?”

“Quiet, please..”

Over the shuffling and cooing of the rest of the company Radagast's voice was urgent, if at the
very least more controlled than the earlier nonsense, "The Greenwood is sick, Gandalf. A darkness
has fallen over it. Nothing grows any more, at least nothing good. The air is foul with decay. The
men there, they have taken to calling it Mirkwood. But worst! The worst of it is the webs."

Fili and Kili's head turned so swiftly to Bilbo he worried for whiplash. Balin kept his focus heavy,
Gandalf made eye contact with Bilbo's darkened face, a loaded silent exchanged between them.
Thorin for all his worth observed this all but did not know what it meant in the least.
"What do you mean webs?" Gandalf did not look away from Bilbo.

"Spiders, Gandalf. Giant ones. Some kind of spawn of Ungoliant, or I am not a Wizard. I followed
their trail. They came from Dol Guldur."

Durin went rigid suddenly and Bilbo felt his blood run cold and without thinking he said the same
thing Durin said beside him, just as Gandalf was speaking the words as well, "But the old fortress
is abandoned."

Radagast's eyes shot to the others, as if he had just realized they were even there. "Who is this?"
He pointed specifically to their hobbit and Thorin's body automatically leaned, as if he could
physically stop Radagast's singling him out with his very bulk.

"Bilbo Baggins, he is part of the Company of Thorin Oakenshield." Gandalf swept his hand over
the group.

"No, little Holbytla, it is not." Radagast shook, his kind old eyes wild. For all his ancient magic, the
man just reminded Bilbo of soft butter and warm taffy, and it hurt him to see such fear in such a
kind being. "A dark power dwells in there such as I have never felt before. It is the shadow of an
ancient horror. One that can summon the spirits of the dead." His eyes jumped back to the other
Maiar, "I saw him, Gandalf. From out of the darkness a Necromancer has come."

Durin's hand, still on Bilbo's thigh, went tight enough he would bruise, this...this was not known to
them at all. Bilbo's throat clicked and the boys rode to their uncle's side, Kili's face that of concern,
Fili's serious and thoughtful, truly, Bilbo thought, he was a king in the making. He kept his voice
low, conspiring.

"Uncle. During the rains Bilbo asked Gandalf about the Greenwood, Bilbo said it was sick. The
wizard claimed otherwise."
Balin still had not stopped staring at Bilbo and he wished he could tell him to shove off elsewhere
for the time being, if only long enough he could spare Durin a glance, but now Radagast pulled
something from his cloak, wrapped in thick tanned hide, something thrumming just under. He held
it out to Gandalf to take, very much unwanting of it himself any longer. The old brown wizard
leaning close, as the gray unwrapped one end, said "That is not of the living.."

The hilt glinted from the leather, the jagged crown pommele pulsing the air around it like a pebble
thrown into a lake. Perhaps it was his connection to Durin, to his own piece of the world of the
undead, but Bilbo felt a stabbing force and his throat clenched in a way that had him choking on
his own air. His head fell to Myrtle's neck and Dwalin grabbed at him before Thorin could.

"Breathe, Master Baggins." Dwalin's hands scraped along his back, apparently his possible royal
status had placed him automatically under the guard's personal wing.

"I'm fine, I'm sorry. It just startled me, is all.."

"How can you even tell what it is?"

Thorin glared at Radagast, ready to demand answers, when everything fell to pieces, as they are
quite wont to do on quests with dragons and magic. From the near north a howling began, deep and
echoing. Ori's head popped up from his pack. "Was that a wolf? Are there wolves out here,
brother?" Nori shook his head, backing protectively toward his youngest kin. Bofur's mattock was
lifting slowly again, "Wolves? No...that is not a wolf.."

Spinning Thorin was the first to see the hunched shoulders, the manged fur and bunched mucles,
the shining drooling teeth of the vile creatures across the field, grinning and swaying, too intelligent for their own right. “Warg scouts!” His sword had yet to be put away and he was glad of it. “An orc pack will not be far behind!”

“A pack?” Bilbo looked at him, still catching his breath a bit, putting his hand over Durin's. "You've got to be kidding me.”

But he was not, and would not, and Bilbo knew. No sooner did the wargs begin charging did another wave of orc topped wargs appear on the horizon behind them. Everyone cursed, the ponies began kicking, the howling got louder, the orcs began ululating. Bilbo smacked at Thorin's shoulders as the King grabbed him off of Mrytle, "Arms. Arms. This is a time for calling all the arms, Thorin."

Gandalf too leapt from his horse and began to usher everyone else down off their ponies, to grab their weapons and nothing more, then whispered to his own gelding to lead the little string of nags down into the gully to safety from which Radagast had earlier flown.

Off their mounts the grass was high enough to hide them somewhat better, to at least leave them less overt and without a leader with knowledge of the valley they could already hear sounds of orcs falling into those well hidden pits and crannies to never be seen again. This at least hey had in their favour, it did little to ease their apprehension. The dwarves were very much ready to fight. Bilbo was counting, scurrying between the Company to see where their enemies were organizing.

“What in Durin's name is happening!” Thorin growled when one warg got too close and took a sword to the throat. Somewhere in the fray Bilbo could feel Durin's automatic reaction to his own name being called before it all faded out again and Gandalf burst a stone near another warg scouts face, sending it scrambling backward into a crevice.

Dwalin grabbed at Bilbo and Nori in one hand, walking them backward, toward the cover of larger boulders, “We need to get out of here.”

“I'll draw them off!”

Radagast had remounted his sled.

“These are Gundabad wargs, they will outrun you!” Gandalf's voice cracked.

“These are Rhosgobel rabbits. I'd like to see them try.” Gandalf grabbed at his friend's wrist, willing his mind to bring about a better idea, to stop this madness and find another route, until a small hand grabbed his robes, tugged.

“Gandalf. He knows the land, the orcs do not, he can trap them and drop them easily. We have no other choice.” Mithrandir exhaled but nodded at Bilbo, “The wind beneath your rabbits, Radagast.”

“Go onward in safety, Gandalf!” He spared a quick wink to Bilbo then shot off, whooping and hollering, the wargs quickly catching the scent of rabbit over dwarf and redirecting. With no ounce of gentility he had had reserved for Radagast and the Hobbit did Gandalf turn on the King Under the Mountain.

“Who did you tell Thorin! Outside of your kin! Who did you tell!”

“No one!” Thorin looked up, his eyes wide, a panic in them Bilbo just realized was a hair more manic than even this situation called for, he felt a worry well up within him that half of that look was glued in the past battle of Moira. Not in the current affairs.
“Who!” Gandalf shouted once more and Thorin threw his arm out, the sword singing as it cut through the air, “No one! I swear! What is going on!”

“You are being hunted!”

“Kili!” Bilbo shouted over all of them, “an arrow readied! One is off the pack!” The young archer listened with no question, edged around their cover and took aim.

Kili’s arrow flew true, straight into the warg’s eye, knocking the rider off into the grass, "Hunted! By who!" Bilbo grabbed Thorin by the slight V at the front of his armor, his hands scraping the metal,

“Who do you think?!" Their eyes bore into each other, the world screamed around them, Thorin's hair whipping into both of their eyes, "Who..." "You know who, Thorin. Azog rides for you, and death treads his wake." Bilbo quickly let go, too soon, snapping their connection and turning back to the deteriorating situation. The others had created a defensive formation against their cover, blind now to the orc in the high grass, checking for movement but the wind blowing the tall grass was too severe, and covered the orc's directions too well.

“Where is he!”

“Can't see!”

“Move, you fools!” Bilbo shoved Fili and Oin to the side, “Dwalin! Not you, you don't move!” One large foot hooked the edge of the warrior's knee, then toes curled into his belt and the little hobbit had scrambled quickly onto the dwarf's shoulders. “Lad! You're a sittin' duck! Get down-”

To his left Durin appeared, a few yards ahead, crouched and very visible. Bilbo pulled his sharp little throwing axe from the holster on his side and threw with all his might. A thunk then shriek echoed out and Durin's approving motion was enough for Bilbo who immediately smacked Dwallin's bald head. “Get me down please! Time to go!”

“Good shot!” Kili yelled, surprised as he let loose another arrow. Dwalin yanked Bilbo down by his scruff and tossed him at Bombur for a soft landing.

Ahead Gandalf was yelling at them, waving them on “This way!” to another one of the bleached rocks.

While the dwarves kept the front clear Gandalf began digging about the area, pushing shrub and field grass aside, “Look, Bilbo, look! The entrance looks smaller than it is. Very discreet!”

“You sent ahead for the elves?”

“I sent word we may come through, but nothing of this sort.”

Gandalf harried was not a comforting sight. Bilbo sniffed the air for magic, crawled on his knees, pushed at stones and dirt. The pack and Radagast were too close, he could hear the heavy breathing of the wargs, the thumping of the rabbit's feet, the cackling of the orcs, when a solid boot, Durin's no doubt, kicked his bum so harshly he tumbled forward a few feet and head first into a very hidden hole. Panic welled up within him, always a rabbit hole, he cursed Bullroarer each time his head went over his heels. Not for the last time.

This time at least Durin was waiting at the bottom to catch him, to halt his spinning into the grotto wall. The cave room was oval and shallow, white like the stones and once it stopped swimming Bilbo could hear running water coming from beyond the thin passage leading away from his
landing point. He felt it then, that his head was on straight, the wall of elf magic.

This was it.

Rivendell, he was so amazed he nearly forgot the frenzy outside for one quick moment.

Up above, though, Gloin was yelling, “Where is Gandalf!”

Fili yelled, “Where is Bilbo!” Other’s joined in. Their voices kept getting closer, backing near enough that by the time Bilbo had climbed back up he was able to grab Bifur by his belt and yank him backward. The old warrior went tumbling, dragging Bilbo with him again and jumping to ready in one swift impressive motion. His spear poked the tip of Bilbo's nose, who raised his hands, spewing without thinking, “Sullu iglukhul ya bark ra targ!”

Bifur's eyes went wildly confused but Bilbo didn't have time to care, scurrying to grab the closest next dwarf, Oin, and yanking, yelling “In here!” as he nabbed the hearing trumpet from mid air. The rest of the Company looked down, and between Bilbo's voice and Oin's shrinking hollering, realized they needed to follow. One at a time, in the silly graceful way only dwarf have, each jumped and slid down the incline, Gandalf following.

“Now what!” Gandalf tugged Dori into the trail behind him, “Into the passage, you doltish dwarrow! What do you think!”

Gandalf took the lead and Bilbo stayed behind, counting each dwarf as they went, shoving them if they hesitated at all. Each went fairly easily, jogging into the passage until Bifur who shook his head and rumbled in the old tongue for Bilbo to go, to stay in front of him.

Dwalin, still near, the last to have gone, his ingrained need to care for a royal of the Company pausing him to wait for Bilbo, saw the exchange. He heard Bifur speak (though he did not understand the ancient Khuzdul) in a soft deep tone, with none of his usual gesticulating in an attempt to make himself understood. He merely spoke, and Bilbo nodded, responded in something curiously similar sounding, also old and Khuzdul though his accent was thick. Their agreement seemed decided and the hobbit rushed toward Dwalin's waiting form pushing him ahead just as the orcs found the opening of their grotto.

Quickly they ran, rushing the narrow passage, bits of stone grabbing and snagging them, even as Bilbo could hear the graceless tumbling of multiple foes on their heels. The wargs could not follow here, but these orcs were scrawny scouting orcs, built and bred for this very purpose. For sneaking and creeping through nooks and cracks and fissures. These orc would have no trouble following.

The end of the tunnel came quicker than expected, ended sharply on a hard right that left them colliding with Gandalf's back so forcefully the wizard flew right off the edge and was forced to stab his staff into the ground, swiftly spiraling out into mid air and back onto solid ground before them.

“Down, down! Careful of your feet!” He cried, no sooner had he landed.

And down they went. A thin dirt path, beside them nothing but a very steep drop and a very bad end if they did not hold their balance. They slipped and slide down the zig zag of the slope, tripping and tottering for what seemed like miles. The air became hazy with pine scent, and the magic made Bilbo's head buzz, even beneath the rush of his adrenaline and Durin's hand on his arm to steady his way. Bifur was still bounding behind him but so behind him were the orcs, cackling hauntingly. (What a life of an orc would be, to be nothing but evil and hateful. Did they truly live at all? Bilbo could not fathom.)
Below a bridge was coming into sight but seemed so very out of reach.

“What is your plan, wizard!” Dori yelled, tugging Nori up from landing on his face or worse.

“Friends are already here, Dori! Let your fear go!” A sickening bawl punctuated that from above them, one of their pursuing orcs falling past their shoulders, down, down, down, bouncing head first off the bridge edge then spiraling into the river below. Silence crept in slowly, one wail at a time, easing back around them with the elimination of each orc until Gandalf began to slow their pace and they reached, at last, the threshold of the Last Homely House.

Certainly, Ori later wrote, the least most impressive of all entrances into the realm of Rivendell.

By the time they reached the same spot the orc had struck, the black splatter of it's evil blood an angry star burst smudging the white of the elf stone, they were all sagging beneath their weariness. It was here, now that they could pause, they realized all had truly gone calm and quiet. The cicadas had began to creak, the toads to croak, evening doves cooing softly.

Bilbo could not help but smile to himself, and in comment meant for Durin he said, “It is like the world will always forgive war, and find it's balance, before the last of us are even done dying.”

Thorin's hand touched Bilbo's wrist, edged him back from the bridge and Durin felt his chest warm a bit at the sight of it for one moment until a flash of blue glinted and caught his eye. At first he thought it from Bilbo until he realized it was far too low and was instead from Thorin's hand touching his Hobbit. Within the thick ring there, cased in the silver grid work, was a blue stone. He hadn't noticed until now, the King's rings being the least of his worries. But it was same sort of stone as his ward's necklace, the one with the single smooth edge among the jaggedness, perfectly angled, deliberately cut, perhaps, believably, for a ring long long ago. Durin, beside himself with the irony of it all, just laughed. The sky above, in the length of their hasty retreat, had begun to dim into evening and to fill with nothing but blinding constellations; it reminded him so of the lattice of Laurelin in Mahal's Court. He felt connected to them now again, to Yavanna and Mahal, closer than he had in some time, their visages always ebbing and flowing. Here, now though, the stone sang beneath his feet, the moon flowers opened and grinned at him, there was the smell of cooking fires on the wind, and something like the sweetness of honey about. The tricks the Valar played were delicate little things indeed, but their love of their children was never in question. Bilbo, Durin knew, would be safe here for now.

Chapter End Notes

i know you said you didn't want to do the thing but look the thing! you're welcome!
-gandalf every second of every day ever for eternity always

Holbytla - archaic term for Hobbit from the Northmen (Rhovanian, Dale, Laketown and so on) and Rohirrim

Sullu iglukhul ya bark ra targ - all is well with axe and beard (basically: it's all okay!)

Alternate title: Bilbo Baggins is the best on the fly bullshitter this side of the Anduin.

I'm back! I'm going to be posting this and another chapter probably very soon after to make up for my delay! Much Love!
-S

I've also started a side blog on tumblr for pretty much just LOTR stuff and you are more than welcome to come say hi!
https://stairwellwit.tumblr.com/

It was here they found the Last Homely House, open wide in welcome to all who came in peace. Bilbo spun, his wrist slipping from Thorin's hold, a swarm of fireflies moved in an unnaturally brightly glowing cloud across their slow steps onto the first bridge into the valley. Great evergreens beside them speared up into the skies, slowly becoming sparse the further into the cleft the path ventured to make way for beech and oak. Unimaginably tall, perhaps as tall as Yavanna herself, and some ancient as the elves. Trunks so obviously thick even through the veil of night they'd surely been there since the days of Durin at the very least. Ahead of them dinner fires were popping up in open pavilions, gardens and small clearings outside of the House, little dots of flames lighting open halls, breathing warmth and life into the grand architecture like a great living thing. Bell like bursts of happy sounds reached them next. Laughter and harps, flutes and sweet fragile noises harmonizing with the water that in the dark came from everywhere all at once. Bilbo thought, Perhaps this is where Gandalf learned to throw his voice, from the creeks here, for nothing else could have shown him such a powerful thing.

Something in Bilbo settled right then on that path, curled like an old tired tom cat at the warmth of a fireplace. He knew contentedness like nothing he had ever imagined, his very soul swooned and swayed and felt bright, like light catching through the stained glass in his drawing room, painting his whole being in the warm muzzy colors, edges soft and gentle and soothing. Already he had begun to feel rejuvenated. Where the quest had brought out his adventurer, that wild spirit and need to call into the wind and feel it howl back at him. That decidedly Tookish, and perhaps dwarvish, part of him that had always been restless finally allowed to stretch its legs; this was something else. This was, Bilbo felt, his reading ahead to the last page of a book in hopes of finding a happy ending. He was not sure whose book, but deeply hoped it was his own.

Gandalf too had been looking upon the elvish home with fondness and had waited for everyone to catch their breath and get their bearings before speaking finally, "Welcome my friends, to the Valley of Imladris. In the common tongue it is known as another name."

Bilbo smiled, a woman was humming nearby, or perhaps no where near at all (for who could truly tell in this magical valley), sweet and low she sang between the rustling of the leaves, but he could not find her in the dark. "This is truly Rivendell."

Even as he whispered it, Bilbo was gently tucking his necklace into his tunic, willing the worn cotton to protect his magic from whatever elf magic permeated the air.
To his side something tugged him and he looked in distraction, only just realizing he was still holding Oin's hearing trumpet from the tumble that seemed years ago just that moment.

"I'm sorry, Oin." He apologized, surely too softly for the dwarf to hear, and handed it back gently. Oin said nothing, just nodded rigidly, it seemed the serenity was having little progress on his traveling companions. Their discomfort obvious now that Bilbo had worked through his initial amazement and looked among their numbers.

"What of our ponies?" Ori asked softly.

It seemed where Bilbo was finding the blind sounds of nature and elves entrancing it was (understandably) rattling the dwarves.

"The elves will collect them. Your things will be gathered and returned. Do not worry about anything but the fact you have your life." Gandalf responded kindly, waving them up ahead to another small bridge. This seemed to settle the scribe a bit and his brothers huddled his sides protectively as they moved further into the star lit evening. Bilbo however slowed when he noticed the king's and the wizard's paces were not matching the rest, easing themselves from the group. Gandalf managed to spare the little hobbit a suffering expression under the shadow of his bushy brow.

When the others were of a distance, Thorin edged up into Gandalf's person, halting the loping gate entirely. Bilbo too stopped now, and for all of his annoyance at Thorin's actions he could not decide if it was sheer bravery or stupidity that allowed Thorin's thinking it safe to clash so physically and closely with a wizard constantly.

"This was your plan the whole time. To bring us to our enemies, to seek refuge with them, you knew this would happen."

"That is an exaggeration. I had certainly planned to...nudge your way here. But I did not foresee or go about arranging a caravan of orc to seal the deal. That was something else entirely."

Thorin's broad shoulders rose, the wolf hair of his coat seemed to lift like hackles of their own accord. "Thorin..

Bilbo stepped forward (and perhaps there was something to be said about his own constantly invading a rageful dwarf king's space as well). His little hand touched the king's wrist, just where Thorin had touched him, trying to ground him. He still worried for Thorin's mind at the moment, how much of it was still in the dredges of fight and flight.

"The orcs are the enemies, they are dead now. These elves have done you no harm and they helped us in a time of need. We are tired, we are exhausted. Look at your people...look at yourself...the call to arms is done.." Blue eyes flicked his way.

"Bilbo speaks the truth. You have no enemies here, Thorin Oakenshield. The only ill-will to be found in this valley is that which you bring to yourself."

Thorin said nothing, his head lowering, his jaw grinding with a heavy exhale from his nose. Fili and Kili too by now had noticed their absence and watched from a short skip ahead. Bilbo shot them a comforting smile when both sets of their eyes simultaneously looked to and from their uncle.

"You think the elves will give our quest their blessing? They will try to stop us."

"Of course, they will. But we have questions that need to be answered. And we are already here."
"I do not support this."

"Noted." Gandalf said and walked around him to get back to his place at the head of the Company, "If we are to be successful this will need to be handled with tact, and respect, and no small degree of charm. Which is why you will leave the talking to me." Bilbo's lips twitched just a bit at that but he was careful to hide it as he let go of Thorin's wrist to grip his shoulder as he had seen the other dwarrow do with each other, "I believe our guide is leaving, perhaps we should follow. All is well." Bilbo squeezed, uncertain if his small grip could even be felt through all those layers, then went ahead to shoo his nephews on their way, certain the king would follow in his own time.

Durin nudged him as they walked, Bilbo bumping back, concealing it as a particularly peppy bounce in his step, tapping his head with his knuckles and motioning back at Thorin, hardheaded.

Durin chuckled and agreed, "He will come around. We knew the elves would pose...an obstacle for him." Bilbo nodded in response. "But at least they are not being held captive by these particular elves. We can assume."

Bilbo grinned and looked up into the tree tops at another round of rustling, thinking, no, not by these elves. For one thing, they were making noise on purpose. Bilbo knew that if they so wanted elves could move through nature perhaps quieter than even himself. Then the laughter started again, closer, uproarish and delightful.

"I can't believe this...elves." Bofur said very ill at ease, slowing to take post to Bilbo's left. Oin's trumpet was apparently up and ahead he yelled back, "Oaks! Not Elms!" Which just sent the trees into another fit, a few voices shouting, "Elms and Elves!"

"Imagine how they feel. Probably just out for an evening romp through the woods and here comes a hoard of dwarrow busting into their nice little valley."

"Yes!" One of the tree voices shouted, "What is this Mithrandir has brought?!" They called as Bofur jerked at the nearness of voice and the presence of no one.

"Do they mean us harm?" Kili asked as he too had stopped with Fili to let Bilbo and Bofur catch up to them.

"They are just being jokesters. For all their high glory elves love nothing more than a joyful song and a good joke."

The three dwarves looked at him shocked, shifting closer around him as if this knowledge would bring them protection and Bilbo was not entirely certain at what point he had become a very small comfort blanket for a growing collection of Mahal's children.

"Every story we have ever heard is of them being so uptight!"

"I'm sure I can imagine what most of your stories have been. Can you imagine what they have heard of you? There are many times that it pays to be serious, even a little uptight. The midst of war and turmoil to name a couple. I'm sure not many celebrations have been had between dwarf and elf, so why would you know much of anything of each other. Besides, you don't share things you enjoy most with every creature you meet out in the world in every situation. They enjoy these things but they aren't going to go around playing pranks willy nilly wherever they are."

The dwarves looked thoughtfully at the trees as another round of giggling came from above, this time seeming not to hear it quite as maniacally as before.

"You said they like song?" Bofur asked, patting his breast pocket where his flute sat.
"We could sing you one!" Someone shouted and causing Bofur to jump then smile broadly at his own surprise this time. "Yes! Please!" He said, pleasing Bilbo to no end.

"Oooh, what are you doing,
And where are you going?
Your ponies need shoeing,
The river is flowing!
Oh, tra-la-la-lally!
Here down in the valley, ha! Ha!-
"

"No!" A male shouted, mirthful and frantic, "Not that one! It's far too early for that one! It isn't even June yet!"

The others agreed in a flurry, "You're right!" They all cried at once, and Bilbo laughed happily, which seemed to put his little tribe of friends at his sides even further at ease. Oh, for all that he loved everything dwarf, he did so very much love elves as well. His mother spoke of them much, always of their sly tongues and witty words. Both things Bilbo was very fond of and strove to have for himself. (Perhaps there was a bit of truth to there being elf in the Tooks.)

Ori, ahead, glanced back at their group and slipped from his brothers to join the young princes, noticing they did not seem nearly as concerned as earlier. Not at all.

"Should we be worried?" He asked Fili, who shook his head. Kili was now grinning with no abandon, apparently now that he had been given permission to be excited about the whole thing, even if it was by Bilbo and not his uncle or Balin.

So excited in fact that when the trees yelled, "Is that a hobbit!" Kili shouted back with no caution, "He is!"

"Is that Bilbo perhaps!"

"Yes!" Bilbo answered, surprised and rather giddy they would know his name. Logically they had just heard Gandalf say it but it made him smile nonetheless. Another round of hysterical tittering started up and Durin made an amused little chuffed sound, grateful that the danger had passed and now Bilbo was glowing with joy through their connection.

Thorin was following very slowly though, but Durin understood his dark expression, even if it was far from necessary. For once he had felt similarly of elves, then he had learned, as all must. Durin had warned Bilbo long long ago that perhaps one of the great foolish things someone could do was to think an elf truly foolish, by any measure of the word. And he could see on Thorin's face, and a few of the others, that foolishness was all they were seeing around them.

But, elves and dwarves seemed born to have cold waters between them. Bilbo, as a child, compared it to a pair of siblings he would play with sometimes. The first was what everyone called the golden child, and the second was always digging for his own love. Hunting for the thing which would make him golden to the eyes of his parents as well. It had chafed Durin at the time. A little Hobbit child saying such things while making flower crowns! For as we all know the dwarves were made first but the elves were appointed to be first, and dwarves asked for no love or validation from anyone. But then...the longer he stewed on it...in hindsight he could see the tentative lines drawn, those innocent things Bilbo could connect with no effort in the least. Things like bees and birds and dragons and dwarves.

So perhaps he did not entirely agree, for he was still a dwarf and was second to no one, but he
could see it was these innocent things that kept darkness and war from Hobbity hearts. He had seen after all of this time they had little concern for who came first or second or when or not ever at all so long as everyone was well fed and comfortable. (And shouldn't the whole world be as such?)

Around them the elves seemed to debate in a mix of languages before settling on a song. A tune kicked up and a few voices began something sweet and jolly and all together fantastic - then the voices ran. Bilbo jogged to catch them, his little band of dwarrow rushing with him, but they were gone too quickly for Bilbo to hear the words they were saying for they had disappeared under the sound of very near water and Bilbo then realized they had reached the final bridge into the open doors of the Last Homely House.

In they walked two by two, passing between a pair of armored statues, into a rounded entrance chamber lit brightly with what was certainly more than just candle light. For it was so very much like daytime again so very quickly they were all left blinking and squinting to adjust.

"Mithrandir."

All turned, their vision still a bit spotty, to a lithe dark haired elf walking to them down a set of high grand stairs. His long hands folded beneath soft looking robes, flowing like wine from his person. There was a sweetness to him, something light and innocent, and Gandalf greeted him pleasantly as Lindir, which brought a small yet glowing smile to his lips and eyes. The elf bowed his head, a hand to his chest which he brought out to the old wizard.

Thorin, who had finally caught up, leaned into Dwalin as Gandalf spoke, pushing the little hobbit behind them before he could gravitate to the elf.

"Stay sharp."

The royal guard nodded firmly and Bilbo strained the very last set of muscles in his eyes rolling them this time. "Please do not push me." He said politely, going to walk around the two.

"Stay here. It's safer with us, halfling."

"You're being ridiculous, let me through."

He tried to go again and again Thorin's hand halted his way.

"You do not understand the dangers of walking into an enemy stronghold."

"I walked alone into a troll camp for you." It took both of Bilbo's hands to encompass and pick Thorin's large one off his chest as if it had offended his very sensibilities, "Remember? You said thank you and also apologized about it?"

Dwalin lifted an arm to finish letting him through, shrugging at Thorin. For what could either of them say to that, as it was very much true.

"And," Bilbo placed Thorin's hand against the dwarf's own chest, "as far as I know, none of you speak Sindarin."

Before they could be stopped Fili, Kili, Ori, and Bofur scurried through the split between king and guard after Bilbo again.

"What are they saying? Do you know?"

"You can understand them?"
"Yes, yes. The one named Lindir is telling Gandalf that Lord Elrond is not presently here."

"Not here?" Kili asked.

"Where is he?" Fili said.

"I would presume there," Bilbo listened carefully and pointed. Moments later there came the sound of thundering horses loud enough now for the dwarves to hear and validating his observation. An armored line of elves came galloping single files down a path north of where they had entered Rivendell. Before they could get too near though Thorin yelled something in Khuzdul Bilbo did not catch, then another order for the Company to close ranks. Bilbo, and perhaps he did have one more eye roll left in him, grabbed at the four dwarves cuddled up next to him before they could 'close ranks' or be trampled entirely and drug them over to Gandalf and Lindir's perches.

Every ounce of Baggins within him was deeply embarrassed by the nonsense happening behind him and he did his best to ignore it entirely, tugging on his dirty shirt, wishing he had at least a waist coat of some sort on. But one could not have everything perfect all of the time, so he settled for what he was and bowed low to Lindir and copied the motion the elf had made to Gandalf with his most charming smile.

Then he began in perfect Sindarin, "I am sorry for my state of being. I had hoped when I finally had the honor of meeting an elf my person would be some sort of presentable. My name is Bilbo Baggins of Bag End." He gave another tiny bow of his head for good measure, which Lindir returned.

"I am Lindir. Master Bilbo Baggins, I am pleased to make your acquaintance. Who are these with you?"

He motioned to his duckling like group of dwarves and Bilbo decided Lindir was a good sort of person, for he did not ask it with any distaste just honest curiosity, probably uncertain as to why these few were with the Hobbit and not hissing and spitting at the royal guard behind them.

Bilbo pointed to each of his companions, switching back to common so they understood they were being introduced and would perhaps lose those ridiculous gaping fish expressions.

"This is Ori, our most honored scribe. Bofur is a miner by trade and an adventurer and musician by passion. Lastly these are Fili and Kili, the sister-sons of Thorin Oakenshield." Lindir gasped a soft little sound and bowed lower to the two boys.

"Excuse my manners, princelings. I had not realized there was royalty at my feet."

He even took the two steps down to the main floor so as not to be unnaturally above them (any more than their height difference already ensured.) Bilbo felt a little rush of parental adoration toward the two princes as they stuttered, Fili finally bowing, Kili just blushing under the attention. Lindir seemed to take no offense at their youthful reactions.

"It is my great pleasure to greet you all. Masters Bilbo, Ori, and Bofur. Princes Fili and Kili."

"The pleasure is ours."

Lord Elrond and Gandalf seemed to have already exchanged their pleasantries and now joined them at the base of the stairs, Gandalf weakly saying something along the lines of, "That may have been us." Of which Bilbo could only assume was about the orcs.

Thorin also now deemed to grace them with his presence, breaking up his battle formation, and for
a moment they all looked at each other, an awkward gathering of the greatest assortment. Elrond Halfelven though was the host, however unplanned, and he played the part with grace, smiling in that way one does when you are greeting someone politely while still being privy to their primal distaste of you.

"Welcome," he said, "Thorin, son of Thrain."

Thorin's teeth seemed to grind, "I do not believe we have met."

Bilbo rubbed his eyebrows, for wasn't that half of being royalty? That other royalty knew you regardless of knowing you? And also could Thorin not be snooty for five whole minutes?

"You have your grandfather's bearing. I knew Thror when he ruled Under the Mountain." The elf said vaguely and all Bilbo could think was, Was he also snooty?

Thorin said "Indeed? He made no mention of you." And Durin made a sound that shared in Bilbo's assessment.

If there had been an inch less Baggins within Bilbo he'd have said something very rude right then to Thorin directly. Likely involving a few choice Khuzdul words he did not need Durin to translate and supply him with at all (nasty words are always the easiest words to learn in any language and also seem to stick the best as well, even in gentlefolk.) Instead, in a pleasant tone he had learned from many tense extended Took-Sackville-Baggins-Brandybuck family dinners, added to the exchange, "My great uncle used to say he would rather never be spoken of than to be spoken of in an ill light."

The Lord of the House looked down just in time to catch the whips end of Bilbo's disapproving look to Thorin before the little Hobbit (and truly what was a halfling doing with this band of miscreants?) smiled up at him with lively eyes.

"He was also a mute. So. He often had that going for him in polite company."

The slight was not lost on the dwarf king it seemed, if his frown deepening was anything to go by, but surprisingly he had nothing to add.

"Is that so?" Lord Elrond asked once he realized Thorin truly wasn't going to object to the interjection or the halfling's entirely taking control of the conversation.

"Yes, a very jolly fellow. Dare I say the most polite Took to ever walk the earth because he could not speak a word. High Hobbiton Champion at Conkers though. Do you remember him Gandalf?"

Quick to fall into his part the old man nodded, both hands grasped at the tip top of his staff to lean into it. His cheek pressed against his knuckles, the wide brim of his hat curving up.

"Yes, I do believe I do. One of my fireworks once went off right in his hand. He hadn't a complaint to say about it as I recall."

Bilbo wiggled his shoulders gleefully, either at his (very likely faux) uncle or just Gandalf's playing along. "The absolute most polite. Pride of the countryside."

"And this is?" Elrond's smile was so endeared he was hardly bothering to contain it. Lindir motioned to Bilbo and his little group and went through their introductions.

"Well met." Elrond bowed his head.
"The honor is ours!" Bilbo said.

The other four stuttered out some mixture of responses, 'you too' 'you're welcome', completely irrelevant and nervously given under the stares of their moody king, two elves, a wizard, and a very bossy Hobbit. They were well meant though and well received still yet going by Elrond's tender expression toward them which fell when he looked at the remaining part of the Company. Their crowd still grumbling and Thorin glaring in every which way at once. Watching them Elrond tilted his head to Gandalf, speaking in Sindarin, and Bilbo caught that move for the tidy bit of underhandedness that it was. Poking their nerves.

Gloin immediately puffed up, all that Firebeard temper flaring at once, "What was that he said! Does he offer us insult!"

"No.." Bilbo turned and knocked his head against Bofur's shoulder a few times, "He invited us to dinner."

"Oh. Well..In that case. Lead on."

That seemed to seal the deal enough and Gandalf went on ahead with Elrond, his staff tapping the stone floor every third step. Lindir seemed to have taken personal agenda over Bilbo's little group and hovered near them while the archers dispersed and the other dwarrow conspired among themselves in their own language.

Bilbo was still rubbing his face against Bofur's dirty coat, hoping it would rub away the very dwarf shaped headache beginning there. The miner, bless his heart, pet Bilbo's curls very uncertain how to handle a crabbed Hobbit.

"Master Lindir. Would you mind very much- would it be too much to ask for a bit of a...refresher. I don't expect to be ready for a dinner party but I would very much like to not be as..ripe. And I think-" Bilbo grabbed Ori's arm without looking as the young scribe tried to escape, "My friends would also like to freshen up a bit as well."

Lindir's cheeks turned a bit pink at that, as if the thought they'd want such a thing had not even crossed his mind. (And didn't that say something about his dwarves, thought Durin.)

"Of course, Master Baggins. I apologize for not offering before." His long hand was stark against the place over his heart. "This way."

Bilbo ushered his four that direction but Lindir paused and glanced to the others, "What of the rest of your party?"

Bilbo waggled the hand not pushing Ori into the air, "Don't worry about them. I'm sure they want to be as disrespectful as possible and besides it all I'm mad at them. Leave them as they are."

"Oh." Lindir folded his hands again and turned but Bilbo did not miss the tiny smile threatening the edges of his features. "This way then."

On the main floor Thorin watched their Hobbit easily goad his nephews with little trouble to follow the elf, to bathe apparently, of all things.

"He's one upping you more than Frerin even ever did." Dwalin was stood beside him, watching as they all disappeared around a corner.

"He's even getting the boys to bath before dinner. Dis may want to keep him on payroll after this."
"You are by far the worst royal guard I have ever met in my entire life. You're not helpful at all."

"Oi, he wasn't hittin' you. What do you want me to do? Start tossing him around every time he opens his mouth. It would be a full time job, we'd never get anywhere."

"It might help."

"How's that?"

Thorin lifted one shoulder, sticking his long nose up in that particularly pretentious way Dwalin used to dog him for as a child.

"It might make me feel better."

"I'm not here to make you feel better. I'm here to make sure you don't get stabbed."

"Maybe I should promote you to jester then."

"Promote." Dwalin crossed his arms tightly, his axes clanking, "I ought to let you get stabbed."

Thorin's sudden smile was young and brushed his eyes. For a moment, in that expression of ease, Dwalin thought to tell Thorin right then of what he had seen in the grotto. Bilbo speaking to Bifur in Khuzdul. They had known for a while he knew a few words, but none of them were desperately concerning. Just names of places he could have heard from songs or casual conversation. Dwarves passed through the Shire and Buckland for trade from the Blue Mountains fairly regularly and strong ale will make anyone chatty. But with Bifur it had been not only fluid, but ancient. A version of his own language that Dwalin couldn't even speak. He almost spoke just then, bore this finding to the king who he often saw as his own brother, but then that moment of softness fell from Thorin's face, all of that tenseness creeping back in with a vengeance and Dwalin thought twice. For he was willing to tell Thorin, his friend, but he worried about Thorin King at times.

Thorin seemed to notice his un-hidden stare and turned to look at him with concern, "What, Dwalin?"

Dwalin thought, I should tell him, "Nothing."

Perhaps he would bring it up to Balin first, for his brother had always been the thinker between them, then he would see what to do.

"Do we have to bathe for dinner."

"Yes."

A loud sound of complaint came from Kili, not unlike a cat being stepped on, even as he was doing just as he was told. In the next room there was a splash from the bathing pool of Bofur and Fili already sloshing about and shouting at each other. Not entirely cleaning but Bilbo would settle for a decent rinsing at the very least. He waited, arms crossed, dutifully making sure the last two young ones went into the pool room before undressing himself.

"Lord Elrond saying that in Sindarin just to rile the dwarves. Durin, honestly." He snickered to himself, "So pettish."

Durin had taken to puffing on that ornate jeweled pipe of his and lounging on an carved bench,
"You left the whole company in troll bags and on a spit because Thorin used his King Voice at you."

"That was warranted."

"You keep telling him he has tube bugs."

"I've only done that twice at most."

"And you just compared him to a fake mute uncle."

Bilbo sniffed and twitched his nose, "We're not talking about me."

"Bilbo are you coming!"

"Yes, yes."

He finished undressing, wishing he could do something with his clothing but knowing there was no time, and tightened the cords of his necklace so the stone sat close to his throat now and would not slip off in the water.

Their bathing was short lived but refreshed them all, even the ones who had fought about it up until the last moment. Bilbo especially felt immensely better, and Lindir, in all of his thoughtfulness had placed some grooming items and extra clothing out for all of them.

Bilbo spent a few minutes brushing out the knots of hair on his feet then oiled his curls head to toe. The clothes beside his own, he assumed, were children's going by their near perfect sizing, even if he still had to roll the pant legs and arm sleeves to a proper length. But he did not mind for they were all of the softest material he had ever felt. The pants were of a similar burgundy to Lindir's own clothing, the tunic creamy and edged in a little bit of fine silver threading.

For the most part the others ignored their offering of clothing though Bilbo noticed all of them putting on their new tunics, even if they piled their own clothing back on top. Once dressed, and he had convinced everyone not to bring their weaponry to the meal, Bilbo lined them all up at the door and checked them over.

"Much better."

"It's just dinner."

"Yes and I know how you all are at dinner. Which is fine in general but this may play into something a bit political so I would like you to at least start on your best behavior. We can only hope the others will stay some kind of quiet."

"Political?" Fili set his shoulders as he did when his mother looked him over before royal duties and was left feeling very much the same with Bilbo stood in front of him giving him a careful inspecting eye, "How so?"

"You need to have some kind of good will with at least one group of elves, which I will tell you your uncle is not off to a running start on. I understand you may not want to, but even so, how do kingdoms survive if they do not openly allow communications with others? You do not have to be best friends with someone to coexist and work productively with them peacefully."
Bilbo brushed at a dirty spot on Fili's chest, then stepped back to look at them all again, "There are times ahead, sooner always each moment than the moment before, that will call for us to all to find an understanding. A truce. Because without that we may all fall to a very dark fate. Surely, you can wait for it to come forced out of necessity. Wait for a war to demand it under strain and anger. But a forced bond is like a boulder being dropped upon your shoulders. It is a burdensome thing to support and most often will go discarded." Bilbo held up a finger, "Or, you can work at it early. Show these elves here, a group that truly have no quarrel with you, that you are ready to open a channel, meet half way. You cannot tunnel into your caves and pretend as if the whole of Middle Earth does not exist."

"The Shire does that-" Kili snapped his jaw shut so quickly his teeth clacked and Bilbo gave him a forgiving look. "We do often forget there is much outside of the Shire, this is true. But we also do not fight with others, or actively drive them away. We are on friendly terms with all the men, dwarf, and elf that wander our way. And so we have little to no troubles. We do not seek out confrontation, and so it rarely finds us. But it is true, Hobbits often find many excuses to hide from the rest of the treacherous world, and one day that treachery will find us again. I do fear we may not be ready for when it comes."

Fili seemed to grasp an understanding of Bilbo's speech, stroking his beard much like Durin did when he was thinking deeply, then asked, "You say war and dark times as if you know for certain something is coming. Is this- Do you say this with knowing as you spoke of the Greenwood being ill?"

Fili truly could be a very good king, in some ways he reminded Bilbo of Durin more than Thorin did.

"Something dark is always coming, Fili. That is the way of things, I do not speak from a place of certain knowing. Besides, what would Shirefolk know of world and war?"

Bilbo smiled at Kili's flushed cheeks then yanked Bofur's hat off and slapped it into his chest. "No hats at the dinner table. Let's go now."

Lindir had been waiting for them at the end of the end of the hall and by the time they reached the dinner room most everyone was already seated about the main long low rostrum at its center and Bilbo made automatically to join the others there when a large hand grabbed and yanked him to the side.

"Did you enjoy your bath?"

It was a challenge and Bilbo clicked his tongue. He had been chased by wargs and orcs such a very short time ago and he wanted no part of Thorin's sudden dark moods, not when he was clean for the first time in weeks and with dinner quite literally a few feet away.

"I did, thank you. I see you're still being ornery. Perhaps a bath would have done you some good too."

He managed to shake the hand off of him and Thorin scraped his eyes over the elvish clothing on their halfling, his eyes narrowing, annoyed at how perfectly it all hung on his little frame.

"Oh, do drop it, Thorin, honestly. It was time enough getting the boys to behave."

"I think you forget," Thorin's body edged into Bilbo's space a bit more, his voice going low to keep
"Oh, does their audience and opinion matter to you now? Or is it just your opinion of yourself you're worried about?"

Thorin's lips thinned, because truly it felt more like it was Bilbo's opinion of him that was mattering but he would not state words upon the matter.

"Their royalty welcomed me with a proper introduction and offered me dinner. Your royalty ambushed my home, wiped their boots on my mother's antique, and then your king called me a grocer."

Bilbo's lips lifted but it was not a kind smile so much as a meddlesome one, damn near wizard like, "Must be those parasites I hear his majesty has."

Two passing servers stopped for just long enough to ensure they had caught the comment, their stride then speeding up as they rushed off toward a side entrance. Durin jabbed three fingers into Bilbo's back saying, "Pettish fiend."

Thorin rubbed at his whole face with both hands.

"Go sit at the head table."

"Am I allowed to eat now, your majesty?" The king gave him a withering expression.

"Please go sit down."

"Oh, thank you." Bilbo bowed and finally went to take his spot.

Fili looked up from his crouched seat at the lower table when Bilbo escaped his uncle's scolding; though it was not the sort of scolding he normally saw from Thorin with anyone but Bilbo, because it was always Thorin who somehow seemed to have been chastised between the two of them. What Bilbo had said, about war and friendship, seemed to have dug a stake into his mind he could not get around. Now he worried about his own uncle's behavior and those around him, actively working to keep the majority chunk of the Company calm and somewhat under control. He was relieved not to be sat at the high table but also comforted that Bilbo was just beside him, for even though they were separate it was only by two feet if that, very much within arms reach.

Bilbo nudged the boys' backs as he passed and took his place beside Gandalf, diagonal to Thorin who was left of the head seat of Lord Elrond. There were two other open spots to Thorin's left that Bilbo eyed curiously until the elves appeared for dinner. Two nearly identical dark haired elves with darting jocund eyes sat down in the seats in question. They moved in very flowing synchronicity, much like Fili and Kili did often.

"Master Bilbo, Master Thorin, I would like to introduce my sons, Elladan and Elrohir." Bilbo saw the way he watched them cautiously as he pointed to each with their name. It was the same look Bungo used to give a particularly excitable Bilbo at formal parties, and much the same one Bilbo was probably watching the dwarves with.

"My daughter is currently in Lorien. I regret you cannot meet her."

"Perhaps another time." Bilbo smiled, hopefully planting a seed for future opportunities of meeting, as the food started to be served and soft music began playing. Everything was fine for a few moments, but then it didn't take long for a ruckus to start up around the low table when everyone
realized that Bofur, Ori, and the princes' plates had meat and the rest did not. Fili quickly
demanded their portions all be split up and shared evenly between them. As the protest continued
he even pulled his princely rank, calm yet firmly, when Gloin demanded it wasn't nearly enough
and after that everything was fairly effectively quieted and a crisis went averted. The young prince
made certain everyone was behaving then turned up to Bilbo who gave him an approving look that
made Fili sit a little prouder. Balin watched from the end of the table, wondering what sort of talk a
halfling could have had with the boys that had them conducting themselves so well and calling
royal rank for maintained order. He also saw the way Dwalin watched the halfling now. This he
would have written off being about Bilbo's climbing his brother to kill an orc if it weren't for the
way Dwalin would glance at Bifur every single time he looked at Bilbo. What would Bifur have to
do with anything? He had never even seen Dwalin and Bifur converse..He was not even certain
they could without Bofur there to translate and Dwalin had not looked at the halfling with much
concern until they entered Rivendell. What had changed between the Ford and the dinner table? It
all made little to no sense. So, for the time being he would just continue to observe and eat his
dinner without complaint.

Back at the high table, Thorin it seemed was also getting special treatment, a different meal made
just for him.

"Sire, this is a special mushroom soup, we heard your highness was...sick. Perhaps this will help."
The server placed a bowl before him.

Lord Elrond's head cocked curiously, his sons four eyes glanced up from their plates to Bilbo as if
they already knew this was his doing. "Are you ill, Thorin Oakenshield?" Gandalf looked thrown
for a loop as well and honest concern crossed his bearded face.

"No." His response was flat and bland as he stared at the soup and Bilbo choked on air. He had to
cough into his hand to cover his laugh, then delicately reached to smear a bit of butter onto a piece
of flaky bread.

"No. Just. You know. Travel food." Bilbo wiggled his little fingers toward his own belly,
"Stomachaches. He's fine." He gave Elrond and Gandalf his brightest smile, then nearly gagged on
the need to laugh again, "This is lovely Lord Elrond, compliments to chefs. This is my first time
having elven cuisine."

The twins across from him both laughed now too, and Bilbo immediately recognized them as two
of the prominent voices from the trees (no wonder Elrond was watching them so closely.) The
Lord looked between the Hobbit and his children for a moment then seemed to decide he did not
want or need to know the full story and turned back to Gandalf, "You said you had swords for me
to inspect?"

"Yes." Gandalf first freed his long sword from his hip and handed it to the halflf. "This is
Glamdring, the Foehammer." He was quick to identify. "The sword the King of Gondolin once
wore." He handed it back to take Thorin's, "This is Orcrist, the Goblin-cleaver. This too is a famous
blade. Both were made by the High Elves of the West for the Goblin Wars of the First Age." He
slid the blade home and handed it back to Thorin with a soft, respectful, "My king."

Bilbo munched on his salad and watched in great interest. Durin had once tried to get him to name
his axes, and though he had crafted much of them himself he felt odd naming an inanimate object,
so he never had (much to Durin's duress). His sword too did not have any runes or Sindarin on it so
he was not too concerned on its having a name nor had he bothered to bring it to dinner anyway.
(Really, who brings their swords to the dinner table? He thought, knowing full well every dwarf in
the room, and apparently wizard, that had not bathed was armed to the gills.)
"Now, how did you come about these?"

"We found them! In a troll hoard of all things. On the Great East Road..." Elrond's brow was up, creeping beneath his circlet, "Shortly before...the orc situation."

"And what, pray tell, were you doing on the Great East Road?"

Gandalf opened his mouth, realizing he'd perhaps said too much too soon, and Thorin began to bristle. Bilbo could see his body readying to take flight from the table.

"Touring."

The group, all five heads, and perhaps a few from the low table, turned to Bilbo.

"Touring?"

"Yes. For a concise and comprehensive compilation of indigenous foliage and herbaceous vegetation of Middle Earth."

"Is that so?" Elrond asked slowly. Thorin seemed to look less ready to run, if only to figure out what the halfling was on about now, and the twins looked absolutely elated by Bilbo's nonsense.

"Yes, absolutely so. Oin is a healer, looking for new practical ingredients for healing potions. Bombur is a chef, curious about new worldly recipes. As I told Lindir earlier Bofur is an adventurer by passion and joined us for the intrigue of the world when he heard his brother, Bombur, was going. Bifur is a toymaker in search of new woods for carving and berries and barks for paint making. Dori owns a very successful tea shop and, much like Bombur and Oin, is looking for recipes to expand his craft."

Elrond seemed willing to see this fabrication through, "And the royals, a scholar, a scribe, warriors?"

Bilbo did not miss a beat, "Aren't all dwarrow warriors? Or perhaps they've been lying to me about that." He shot a dubious look to Thorin as if he truly questioned something before continuing.

"Balin is the princelings' teacher. They've never left the Blue Mountains and he wanted them to know the ways of the world by experience. Ori there is Balin's protege and to be the scribe under the eventual rule of Prince Fili and too needs to learn the ways of the world outside of the Blue Mountains. So, two -three?- birds, one stone, that is. Teaching the next generation, you know? Dori may have heard about the trip through Ori, I didn't ask, to be honest. Nori is by far the most experienced traveler of the Ri brothers and he highly protective of his family so along he came as well. As far as I know that is his main reason, to tell you the truth we haven't spoken much so I'm not even certain of his occupation, but family is always a good enough reason in the Shire. Gloin, for all of his seasoned warrior-ing, is a treasurer by trade and in charge of our Tour Wallet. Dwalin had to come, he is the royal guard of course, where Thorin goes he goes. And Thorin here came, I think, because his sister insisted he take care of his nephews. Also perhaps to have the kingdom to herself for a bit."

Here Bilbo leaned into the table as he would back at home if he had a juicy bit of gossip, "I think she's secretly in charge, pulling the strings, you see, and trying to officially take over." He made a little motion of his hands like tugging puppet strings, "At least from the gossip I've gathered between the boys and Thorin himself that's what I'm putting together. It's all very scandalous. At least for a gentlehobbit like myself."

"Most scandalous!" Elladan concurred passionately.
"Perhaps you should watch your crown more closely, Thorin King." Elrohir said.

"Apparently." Thorin agreed.

"And yourself, Master Baggins? What is a gentlehobbit like yourself doing in a dwarf party?"

"Why, I'm a writer! I'm always working on a number of topics and botany is one I've written before and leapt at the chance to expand! Gandalf has known my family for generations, even whisked my mother off for some small little adventures in her youth. First he asked me to house the Company as they passed through the Shire. Then, after dropping a whole party of dwarves on me, asked second, like an after thought, if I would like to join. I'm not sure yet if wizards are purposely good at inconveniencing others or just innately poor at pre-planning. I am taking notes on it as we go also though."

"And a wizard is travelling with an educational plant party because?"

Bilbo shrugged blithely, "Who ever knows what he's doing?"

Dark eyes watched him until Bilbo looked up from his plate and held Elrond's gaze, "Just a journey of curiosity, my Lord."

Elladan and Elrohir's head twitched back and forth between the staring contest.

"Curiosity can be dangerous, Master Baggins." There was something darker under those words and Bilbo did not shrink.

"Apparently so. I'd never been attacked by orcs until I became curious."

There was a long pause, filled with only the sound of the elf music, even the low table had gone quiet.

"Is this the story you're going with?" Elrond asked.

"Until something else serves me better, my Lord." He tapped the end of his little Hobbit nose. Something in the air popped, everyone exhaling at once perhaps, and the elf raised one hand, tipping his chin to his chest to smile despite it all. "Peace, Master Baggins. Please, enjoy your meal, we have taken too much time speaking over inappropriate dinner topics as is."

"I agree." Gandalf cut in, steering the conversation to something much more casual.

The rest of the course was most enjoyable. Bofur kept his hat off the whole time and by dessert he had ended up striking a more lively tune up with the musicians, trading flutes with one of the elves and letting Lindir explain how to play the elf instrument. Elladan and Elrohir quickly joined in this and left the high table to demand to be taught the lyrics to the highly inappropriate song Bofur got the others singing. Elrond and Gandalf both excused themselves before this, agreeing to continue speaking of their educational venture after everyone had gotten their fill of food.

With the table empty now Bilbo brought his plate around to sit beside Thorin.

"Trade you? I didn't eat any of the meat."

Thorin looked down, away from the odd scene before him, still uncertain what all had transpired at the table this night. He automatically went to agree, reaching for the soup he did not want, when realization came over him and a suddenly smug look took up residence on features. Bilbo was eyeing his mushroom soup greedily and did not notice right away.
"No, I believe I need this for my stomach." He ate a large spoonful. "As you said, travelling aches. You would not want your king to be ill."

"You're not my king." Bilbo's mouth twisted, "You're such a brat." Bilbo kicked him under the table, "Give me that."

Thorin grinned, his whole face and his eyes dancing so vividly it struck the hobbit's little heart. Without further complaint he slid the soup over and let Bilbo replace it with the plate of what smelled to be deer and a healthy chunk at that. Thorin traded him utensils and realized the evening had not been as horrid as he had predicted even if he wasn't sure how he felt about the mingling in front of him.

Most certainly he was confused by the whole affair, and some part of him most definitely wanted to be annoyed by it, but he couldn't find it in him to stop it, not when the boys looked so happy, teaching Ori a dance off to the side. Beside him Bilbo made a soft little happy noise, the spoon in his mouth, eyes closed, and not often did Thorin find the word 'cute' coming into play in his mind but also not often was he at dinner with elves who were singing dwarvish drinking songs, so in light of this he decided to allow it and watched Elrond's twins dance a circle around a peevish looking Dwalin.

Disappointingly, after dinner Thorin's mood turned again and Bilbo felt keenly the loss of the king's smile, more keenly than he fully understood. On some level Bilbo sympathized, it was getting late, it had been a long day and Thorin was less than enthusiastic to speak more to Elrond at all, let on the matter of his map, and Gandalf's pressuring not helping his temper. If anything the wizard's prodding was just stoking the flames.

"Our business is none of the concern of elves."

"For goodness sake, Thorin, show him the map."

"It is the legacy of my people. It is mine to protect, as are its secrets."

"Save me from the stubbornness of dwarves. Your pride will be your downfall."

It had been going like this for what felt like hours longer than it had truly been. Bilbo had been surprised to be asked to come along by the king himself, more so even than he had been surprised to be sat at the high table. Perhaps if Gandalf had asked it wouldn't have been as strange, but Thorin seemed honest in his wanting Bilbo there, having asked him when he was still soft and unstressed at the dinner table, passing back and forth a glass of wine between them. So Bilbo had agreed, and had come along, and now stood doing not much of anything but listening to Thorin and Gandalf's nonstop arguing, which was a common occurrence that had long lost its novelty early in the trip. The hobbit had yet to even speak once at this point, letting Balin and Thorin disagree with the wizard as much and as loudly as they wanted, partially to keep up the fact he had said he was just a writer along for the ride. Of all of them Bilbo thought certain Balin would have appreciated the need to get help where they could find it. But he had been wrong, not for the first or last time, and Balin was nearly as fed up as Thorin.

 Mostly, Bilbo had spent the meeting (if one could truly call it a meeting in any form of the word other than they were a group of people that had met in a place at the same time, for it was surely not in the productive definition that this fell into just yet) just idly watching Elrond walk the room,
their eyes catching once in a while. For as we have said, dwarves are not the most subtle, and any ounce of Bilbo's story that could have gone believed, or at the very least blissfully ignored, was being tossed out the window by the two dwarrow's adamant refusal to share their map.

During this Durin hadn't had much to say and seemed to have entirely tuned out the situation, just standing in the moonlight looking out across the valley cleft.

After nearly another fifteen minutes Elrond stopped beside Bilbo, watching the argument unfold further, now including Khuzdul cursing.

In Sindarin he spoke, "Just an educational trek you said, yes?"

"I did say that."

"Would you like to change your story?"

"Perhaps. As soon as I come up with another one or decide to stick with the plant studies I will tell it to you. Excuse me." He bowed his head to the tall elf and headed over to what he assumed was the reason he had been asked there, to play dwarrow comfort blanket and talk sense into the king.

"Thorin."

The three turned mid shout.

"You need to give Lord Elrond the map." He said it bluntly straight out, tired of the round about and entirely wanting nothing but for this to end, the map read, and to curl up in that bed Lindir had promised him ages ago.

Gandalf jabbed his staff against the floor, the shadows lurching as if he had startled them. "You speak some sense into him, Bilbo. You seem to be the only one who can."

The wizard turned away from them all, the shadows coming back to gather at his feet in some sort of wizard tantrum-like act.

"Apparentlly enough dwarf for the moment then, Bilbo thought.

"Lord Elrond has been nothing but friendly and helpful. They saved us from orcs, fed and clothed us, and have given us beds. Now he is offering, freely mind you, to read the map. Waiting patiently in fact to do so while you three argue like fauntlings. You're being ridiculous for the sake of being ridiculous now and I think that you know it." Balin opened his mouth to protest but Thorin raised his hand, "Peace, Balin."

The old scholar's eyes turned sharp, what was the dominion this little creature seemed to pull over Thorin constantly? Thorin's whole face shifted from irate to exhausted under Bilbo's attention and if Balin didn't know any better he would say he also looked hopeful. (Did he know any better...? Yesterday he would have said yes but...well now he wasn't so sure.) This all came off as if the king had brought the hobbit just for this, just to give him an out and a solid reason to give up the map. Balin's eyes saw much and he had known Thorin for his whole life and perhaps part of it did make sense on one hand. Thorin wanted to maintain his kingly duties, his lawful upholding of the dwarf laws and standards, but perhaps he did think this was the best route and for some reason Bilbo was scale tipper. But why Bilbo and not Tharkun? Why a Shirefolk over a Maiar? Why he tipped the scales Balin couldn't be sure and it left only more to add to his growing list of questions regarding the Hobbit and his being with them in the first place.

"Do you truly think it wise to let this elf read my map." Thorin was asking.
"Yes, of course. I would not tell you to do it if I thought he would harm it or you or the Company."
The king's eyes looked down over Bilbo for a long time, searching his face for something Balin could not be sure of, then he began to dig into his tabard. Without turning from the halfling he held out map out for Elrond to take, nudging his old teacher's reaching hand and feeble protest away with his elbow.

Gandalf sighed in relief once the old parchment was finally in the elf's hands.

"All is well." Bilbo said, cupping the back of Thorin's hand at his side.

"Erebor?"

"Yes." Gandalf's shadow stage had dispersed entirely back to their proper homes.

"Are we sticking to academic?" Elrond looked down to Bilbo who stepped away from Thorin with a halfhearted shrug. "It still seems like the best explanation and it's all I've got at the moment."

"You do still read ancient dwarvish?" Gandalf furrowed his brow a bit at the exchange. Elrond did not respond immediately, tilting the parchment into the light at different angles.

"Cirith ithil..." Bilbo gasped, "Moon runes!" Was he supposed to know about moon runes? He couldn't remember and didn't care to. He rushed forward, running from the king and his adviser all the way up to Elrond's side forgetting all propriety and any tension that had been in the room. Bilbo loved unique writing nearly as much as he loved maps. (His own writing was forever scratchier and not as graceful as he would have liked. No matter his care and practice and it wounded him unendingly to be so untalented in the calligraphical arts.) Moon runes, though, were something very special. Durin had gone into great detail many times to explain them and their silver pens and magic ink, the binding of them to their pages and the moon. Bilbo could barely contain his sudden overwhelming excitement, up on his toes to look over Lord Elrond's elbow, his fingertips touching the elf's arm just barely to steady himself.

"They are blurred, I can't read them." He said this not thinking of the implications that if they hadn't been blurred he could read them then, "So this is not their moon? That's much harder to do, to bind them to a specific moon? Isn't it?" He dropped down at looked to Thorin, Balin, and Gandalf. "Isn't it?" Thorin shrugged almost dumbly, Balin and Gandalf just stared at him with no small amount of judgement.

Elrond looked impressed at least and was polite enough to answer, "Indeed, Master Hobbit." He turned to the two dwarves and gently folded the map back, "Your map does hold moon runes, but they are not for this moon, as Master Bilbo has said. I do suspect it will be soon though, going by their outline. You may stay until I can help you further. Rest, please. Our doors are open to you always, Thorin Oakenshield and your...academic company."

He returned the map with all the necessary reverence and said goodnight for the evening. They all watched him leave and then stared at Bilbo again who absolutely did not know why they did so nor what to say at all so he settled on, "Well, that wasn't so bad, now was it?"

No one answered but the crickets, and the toads, and a very small laugh from a very dead old king.
An Aside for Lists and Selfishness

Chapter Notes

So for some reason it's saying I haven't updated since the 11th? But I've updated since then DX idk what's going on. Would everyone want me to maybe put in the main description the date I update it just in case? Let me know in the comments if you have an opinion one way or another! This chapter was stressful for me to type and I decided to cut it into a short aside and a long chapter next. I'm still not sure how I feel about it still but here we go! Gotta take that jump and learn from experience!
Much love always!
-S

The majority of the next day was spent sleeping, exploring the whole of Rivendell, and doing absolutely nothing outstanding to speak of at all. Which was quite fine with Bilbo Baggins. If he were to be truthful he had been doing his best to avoid anyone and everyone, especially those of the dwarvish or wizardly persuasion, as he was beginning to feel their stares stacking. Most intensely, it was Balin who had gone from mildly curious glances to something much more direct and digging, which Bilbo did not appreciate. Not at all. (Balin also had sealed his avoidance of the Company this morning when, over the lay of breakfast the elves had left them in the guest house, he had done nothing but puff his pipe and stare at the Hobbit and not blinked once for twenty minutes.) In addition, to a lesser extent, Dwalin seemed to be watching him also, for reasons he wasn't sure of at all. At least with Balin he could assume the reasons. Perhaps the brothers had been talking? But that didn't quite fit the bill and Bilbo didn't know why.

Bifur, at least, seemed not to hold any distrust or questionable concerns. His few glances seemed more along the lines of wishful. Bilbo imagined he didn't often find people who could understand him without Bofur and mentally made a note to chat with him when they could find the time to tarry. But, today he was feeling particularly self indulgent and again he wanted to peak into the happy ending of that book, to see all of the comforts and beauty Elrond's home had to offer.

By late afternoon he had explored less than half of what there was to see, even with Durin scouting ahead to find the most interesting bits, and eventually he had to slow down and let himself rest. It took them a little bit but finally they picked one of the more lonely delicate looking bartizans, one made of thin mostly open railings that overlooked a courtyard with a very vivid collection of flowers and two small fountains at either end.

"You seem at ease."

The old dwarf king was dressed similarly to Bilbo at the moment, even going bare footed, the sight of which was oddly uplifting. This is how they would sit, in such this way, in the Shire during lazy afternoons where they both decided leaving the home just wasn't the thing to do and instead stayed in doors and enjoyed a pipe and a good conversation.

"I love it here, Durin."

There was something sad in Bilbo's eyes, as if he were remorseful for his love of this place.
"Why should this depress you, my little one?"

"We will be here a short time and I think I will miss this place longer and more deeply than even the Shire. Why is that?"

"Because you are meant for big things. Things the Shire is too small to contain. Things that will bring you fear, and pain, and sadness. It is only right you should crave this peaceful place which is meant for healing."

Bilbo let the late May breeze blow warmly over his cheeks thinking that over.

"I still feel too often I should be too small for such things."

"Perhaps you are, perhaps we all are. But I have met many great people; dwarf, and man, and elf in my 2000 years and perhaps being larger just spreads you too thin. For I was not sent back a second time for any of them. I was sent back for a little Hobbit, of a little Shire, of a little hole in a little hill. I do often think Hobbits are the only thing left with any true surprises in the whole of the world. Especially of the truly good sort of surprises."

Down below Fili, Kili, Elladan and Elrohir were rushing off somewhere, from one fountain to the other, nearly tripping over each other in their hurry. Lindir appeared soon after in a flustered billowing of robes and took off in the wrong direction to follow them. One could only imagine what they had gotten into, but at least they were getting along and being young for the time. Oh, to be young. Bilbo had felt fairly young before this trip, a respectable age at the very least. He questioned whether he would ever feel either such thing again past this lovely place. With a huff Bilbo began packing his pipe, he had brought some Old Toby as back up but right now he pulled out his Long Bottom Leaf stores.

“What of the Necromancer?” he asked, leaving the thoughts of youth behind and kicking his feet over the edge of the floating gazebo. He lit his pipe and wagged out the match.

“I'm not certain. Gandalf still has the sword, though I am certain he has yet to tell Elrond anything of it.”

“Do you think he will?”

“I'm sure he will bring it up. He holds Elrond's council in high regard and if it truly is a Necromancer it would be something that would concern more than just the Maiar.”

Bilbo chewed the end of his pipe, though it was a nasty habit and he hated that he did it.

“Let us keep an eye on that. I'd like to know what is going on, especially since this is another thing we knew nothing about. I'd like to be on the same step if not a step ahead, at least prepared to sprint when needed on the off chance we are a beacon of some sort.” Bilbo tapped his necklace for emphasis.

“I can watch Elrond and Gandalf. They seem entirely blind to me. I had worried at first but,” Durin shook his head, “nothing.”

“Good. That's good.”

A comfortable long silence came between them as the sun crept behind the hills, casting great long shadows across the earth.

"I think perhaps you hide them all in your feet.” Durin stated suddenly, his eyes squinted against
the brightness of the sky turning slightly orange.

“Pardon?”

“All of those surprising things, they must be stored in your feet, it would explain their size.” Bilbo blinked at Durin's seriousness, then a guffaw got clogged up by a cloud of smoke in his throat. It took him a moment to manage to properly laugh and then once he had started he could not stop. So he laughed until it hurt and tears came to his eyes, entirely uncaring if he looked mad laughing up in the bartizan alone.

He would not force himself to stop this day, he would keep open for now the last page of his book (whether it was truly his book or not.) For the page he had thumbed to come back to was one he knew was not far off from chapters when he may not have the ability or reason to laugh at all.

The rest of the sunlight hours were spent there, sitting beside Durin and watching the sun starting to set and Rivendell light up. They spoke of what was to come next and, almost unarguably, they both agreed upon goblins. The very thought made Bilbo gag. Goblins were much dirtier and nastier and meaner than trolls and he would prefer to avoid the High Pass entirely but they knew this was, for some reason, unavoidable. What could be so important neither of them knew, but it was enough so that Yavanna had told them little but that it must occur. The less she told them the more it was likely to go unchanged but he was made restless by its importance just the same. To calm himself, and to give the facade of control, Bilbo began to take a few notes in his little notebook. He started with recording the dates, what they had learned thus far from Elrond of their swords, and new things he felt he needed to know:

Who did that dead sword belong to and how had it come about?

Did the Who matter?

On the matter of who: Who is the Necromancer?

What would the Necromancer want with Greenwood?

Was this relevant to Smaug the Terrible to the great war that followed?

Why the war? What is the cause?

Where was Azog?

As best as he could assume Azog had been staying North toward Mount Gundabad but he had not heard anything of the creature from anyone to back this up. The Shire was not the greatest epicenter for worldly news but The Green Dragon and the Prancing Pony heard their fair share of tales regaled and none had been of a pale orc. A number of years back someone had mentioned a giant pale goblin worrying the north stretch of the Hoarwell, south of the Ettenmoors, but at the time he hadn't given it much credence, goblins came in all shapes and sizes and tended to be very pale, and while they rarely left the mountains it was not completely unheard of for them to banish one of their own or for them to leave the mountains in the dead of night. There had been no mention of other orc with it, nor of a warg mount either. Bilbo was rethinking those stories now, nearly, ridiculously, wishing he had taken it upon himself to track the reports down if the Possible-Azog had been moving so openly and alone. Alas, it was not relevant now he supposed (but still annoying) and there had been no news of orc or goblin as of late. The pack that did jump them could have nothing to do with Azog, could have merely gotten wind of their activities nearing the
Misty Mountains, as goblins and the orc-holds still kept their grimy hands over everything from the gates of Moria to their south up to aforementioned Gundabad, but Bilbo suspected worse. That worse being in the shape of a Pale Orc and a Necromancer. Orcs, in general, were always an issue, but even they were somewhat predictable. If they had been a true threat Gandalf would have mentioned it, they would have been on look out for more than just straggling random orc packs. But it was so rare a threat in these parts. Then with the ambush so boldly on the front lawn of Imladris and upon the skirt tails of Radagast's sword, Bilbo could not let it go and sketched out his concerns.

There was always the chance he was just being paranoid. Better paranoid and prepared than surprised and dead, he was certain his imaginary mute Took uncle would say, and he couldn't help but agree. Though what Bilbo would do with all of this prepared information he wasn't sure, perhaps he could talk Smaug to death, and wouldn't that be a blessing. He began to pack his pipe again. “The world is just a right mess,” he decided, and blew a perfect smoke ring for Durin to puff one right through its center. This still raised the question of where was Azog, he had not been in the pack, so where was he. Was he so readily willing to let Thorin's death go to any orc so long as his death occurred? The thought was not comforting one way or the other. He was left wondering if Thorin's death had taken a second seat to something, or someone, in Azog's eyes, and what could that be.

Once again he was back to the Necromancer.

And who would think on a journey to kill a dragon the dragon was to be barely mentioned at all.

The sun fell deeper, the shadows draining color from the greenery, but Bilbo stayed where he was, just like this, thinking far too much and far too hard until his stomach grumbled and he knew he had to find a meal. He had skipped all but first breakfast and was paying for it dearly now, so through his cramping stomach he set about packing up his little mushroom purse with his leaf and matches and notebook but then paused looking over his scratchy shorthand. As a last thought he added to his list:

*What Wise is not to be trusted?*

Durin's expression was unreadable but between them Bilbo felt the anxiety roil. Yavanna had said it, however concealed it was, and they both knew the possible implications. That someone higher than Lord Elrond or even Gandalf was doing something they should not.

"It would be nice to know if the Necromancer was any of our current business or just a simultaneous event because it is taking up the majority of my notes now."

Bilbo nudged a grasshopper from the path as they walked back to the guest houses.

"We shall work it out. It's what we are here for." Durin said and the way Bilbo nodded with a renewed sense of affirmation made his old heart suddenly ache.

“You are right, as always, my friend. I just worry more now than before, darkness seems to come from all directions the further from home we get. There are more directions than Durins. There are many more than you and I of both of those.” Bilbo puffed at his pipe. “But we have no choice but to succeed.”

Durin put his hand upon Bilbo's curls to steady himself. He did not often question the ways of his Father and the Green Lady, but he did ask himself at times what the reasons for his quest being accepted had been. Was there truly something to be gained, some evil to be stopped more efficiently?
At the start it was no question, truly. His task had been obvious and singular, it had been simple for all of its assumed danger: Save the Souls of Durin's Sons. But the longer this went, and now that they were here, everything had Durin second guessing his mission. Had Durin merely managed to drag this little Hobbit back through another life of war and fear for nothing and no gain for anyone but himself and his legacy? Surely there had to be more. Something further down the line he could not see that Thorin, Fili, Kili, one of them, could help to accomplish or improve. There must be some gain outside of merely Durin's (he was now thinking the adjective *greedy*) need to keep his lineage alive.

Bilbo, at this point in their journey, cared more about Durin's legacy than his own Hobbitself. He concerned himself with the fate of Durin's Sons more than Durin. Which Durin had not realized until just this moment, and wasn't *that* something. He had come back from the warm resting grips of death for these dwarves and he had yet to truly occupy himself with them extensively. Not because he was heedless of them, not at all, their survival was still his goal (for all it seemed now almost the secondary goal). But, because he did not know these dwarrow, had not realized how far detached from this modern family he had become, he was not as emotionally inclined toward them as he so thought he would be. He had been given a son in Bilbo, a son he dreaded he would see lost in worse ways than death by the end of this, he feared that blank stare from the hobbit's eyes more than anything he had ever feared before. At that moment in the garden of his Father he had barely been thinking of the others involved outside of Durin's Sons. He did not remember thinking on the outcome of the Company at that time. Even the thought of Thorin's betrayal had not been about how the other (who had turned out to be Bilbo) had felt, but the pain his son had felt at his own shame.

Upon waking up had his greed run so deep? Had he been like this in life? It made his ghostly skin crawl. How he hated that word, *greed*. How much had he heard it over his long life and despised it and denied it vehemently every time. But in hindsight, always in hindsight now since his return to Arda, was his selfish need to see his blood, *himself*, continue on that he had asked the whole world to change for this reason? He told himself it was to help his children rest easy, but, he had seen the Halls of Aule. He had existed and rested happily within them for centuries.

Their end may have been painful but Thorin, Fili, and Kili would have rested well, their souls would have settled. Bilbo though…?

Ahead of him Bilbo's name was being called happily by the Company when he joined them, Bofur tugging him to a spot between he and Bifur. Durin did not want to question the judgement of Mahal and the Green Lady, but he thought of the list in Bilbo's bag, and had his request been worth this treachery, worth dragging innocence through this all again? Was all of this worth something so tedious as honor and a name?

He did not know.

He wanted to say yes, because some part of him grew ill thinking he should have just soothed their souls in the afterlife and stayed dead as he was. It made him feel wrong, as if he were turning his back on all of dwarrow-kind to think mayhaps this had been a selfish venture. He saw the way Bilbo watched Thorin and the princes and parts of him broke in ways and shapes he did not think they were able to.

Durin could not know if it was worth it, but it was not his to know. If it was for life he supposed it was all worth it, especially for Fili and Kili as young as they were, yet to even grow into their beards. Thorin was trickier, Durin was not sure he could save the young king from the gold or his life, but he would do his best. A part of him suspected Thorin was to die at the end of this
regardless, but he would not let Thorin fall in shame, not this time. It was too late to turn back, the Valar had made their decision, he was here now with his Hobbit and his family and he would not complain, even if parts of him long dead and void of such feelings continued to find new ways to pain him.

The ancient king watched from the entryway for a long while, taking in the way the two princes preened under the halfling's affections, their eyes wildly excited for his praise, Bilbo's blushing cheeks and joyous eyes. He mused if it had been like this before, if Bilbo's eyes had lit up in the Company's circle the last time or if he had been on the outskirts and scared and alone. Durin did not know if his being here truly helped but he hoped, for the sake of Bilbo and the boys, that there was something happier left this time, a greater happiness than the time before.

Durin did not know why any of this was, why he had been gifted it so, but as he turned to find the wizard in the maze of Rivendell he thought to himself, *I will see this through. I will see them all through, Bilbo and my Sons and they will live.*
Of How We Mourn Ourselves

Chapter Notes

I'll respond to comments in the next couple of days! Thank you all so much!! Your comments and encouragement mean the literal world to me and get me through the day!!!!
So much love!
-S

(I edited the layout a little! I hope that putting the paragraph spaces helps it flow a little better! I appreciate the feed back!!)

Chapter Posted: 31 August 2019

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On this night, the 28th of May as Bilbo had written in his journal, the Company took their dinner in their guest house instead of the main dining hall. Balin and Thorin were missing, to Bilbo's mild relief (at least on Balin's half), as presumably neither could escape the necessities and niceties of being royal and adviser. Elrond had, of course, agreed to check the map again after nightfall and apparently Bilbo was not needed a second time to make this exchange acceptable.

Even without them though it was much like the Night of Dwarves in the Shire, food and song tossed freely about and much rumpus and levity for all. Bilbo could not remember being more entertained in all of his life; there was a feeling of comradely warmth he had never experienced in the Shire. Even with the occasional watchful eye from Dwalin he found conversation was easy and swell.

A juggling contest commenced mid-dessert, with Nori snatching items from the jugglers per request. Whatever item picked was grabbed without breaking the juggler ring, and promptly flung like darts through a randomly blown smoke circle. Off to the side, Bofur and Bifur managed to drag the Hobbit in with their own little game, which allowed Bilbo to show off more of his Conkers skills. Each took turns tossing odds and ends to knock Nori's projectiles straight out of the air before they could make the smoke rings, and they did a fair job at hiding their guilt. That was, until one throw went particularly high on an arc and landed in Oin's beard, which would have been fine if Bofur's resounding yelp hadn't given them all away without question. This immediately ended in Nori's tackling of Bofur and Bilbo's being bodily snatched by Bifur away from their impromptu wrestling match. Once again Bofur's hat was taken as a reward and Bilbo was sure they'd all get a chance at wearing it before too long. (Nori's hair did not appreciate Bofur's hat in the least, so his reward was short worn.)

After this merriment, even with the option of personal rooms where most had slept the night before, they all reverted to how they had been living on the road with silent agreement. If Bilbo didn't know better he would have said it was a show of paranoia with insult to the elves, but watching them he saw everyone's mingled pairings and picked sleeping spots beside those who were not blood brothers but seemed brothers now just the same. So early in their journey and they were already becoming so close, the Company of Thorin Oakenshield would soon be a family unbreakable. Bilbo couldn't even help his bashful grin when Bofur and Bifur set up on either side
of him again, and the blush when the princes promptly plopping just to Bofur's left while noisily announcing how put out they were at losing the opportunity to cozy up to Bilbo. The two fire starters soon had the hearth blazing and all twelve present crowded around on the floor on various piles of pillows and blankets and slipped into that age old tradition of story telling, all of which began to stray into the realm of their eventual taking of Erebor.

Balin did eventually appear, taking up an empty armchair, carrying news that this too was not the night of their moon. There was a chorus of quiet dismay but it seemed all were loathe to complain on the comforts of Rivendell compared to the open road. (Even if it was of elvish comforts they were partaking.) The conversation again soon found its way back to Erebor, the boys asking for tales from those who had lived within the mountain, then to plans and ventures to be accomplished once they each had their share of the treasure. Bilbo said very little. He was more than pleased to just share a pipe with Bofur and listen to Gloin regale the grand garb he would drape his beautiful wife in until Durin appeared in the doorway and motioned to join him outside. This was just as well for the Hobbit, for they would be soon to his turn and he didn't have much to add about dragons or riches. Quietly he excused himself, passing the locket of Gloin's family to Bifur saying he needed to stretch his legs, and determinedly ignored the Sons of Fundin's eyes following him out.

“Gandalf and Elrond are speaking.” Durin informed the moment they were down the hall.

"Anything specific?"

"Elrond isn't pleased Gandalf hid this venture. Tharkun also asked Elrond to inspect the sword once everyone in the Company is sleeping, or at least in their quarters. Thorin is still out and about lest he would have seen it already."

Bilbo slowed his pace and took the stairs to his right quietly, sneaking as silently as possible while keeping his ears open and his body language casual. The conversation of their concern traveled in one of the courtyards, their voices at a casual volume under the assumption no doubt that no dwarf, hobbit, or even the majority of elves in Rivendell could speak Quenya. Bilbo was sorry to disappoint. Quenya had, in fact, been the first language he had learned along side of Westron.

After his entering the Halls, Durin had been gifted the speech of Quenya, the whole of it dropped into his mind fluent as if it had been there always. As it was the language the Valar used most prominently, especially when communicating with Children of Arda, it was necessary and Durin felt lovingly personal. The Valar were not required to speak to him at all, yet they had given him their own language so that they may speak as equals. In turn, he had taught it to Bilbo as the child learned to speak in hopes it may assist in other learnings and future linguistic ventures. The gift of Quenya made up for his still unwillingness to teach Khuzdul outside of dwarrow-kind as well. (It was also worth it just to see Bungo's concerned expressions when his child rattled off what sounded very much like intricate, yet consistent, nonsense while jumping on furniture with toy weapons.)

“Of course I was going to tell you. I was waiting for this very chance.”

Durin split off and Bilbo could feel him crossing the gap over onto the thin bridge Elrond and Gandalf walked on through the gardens. “And really, I think you can trust that I know what I am doing.”

Bilbo scoffed quietly at that, Elrond seemed about the same amount of convinced.

“Do you? That dragon has slept for 60 years. What will happen if your plan should fail, if you wake that beast?”
"What if we succeed? If the dwarves take back the mountain our defenses in the east will be strengthened."

Bilbo crested to the top of one set of stairs onto a platform and pressed his shoulder into the wall to keep his whole person shrouded in its shadow. *Is he worried about the defenses because of the Necromancer and Greenwood or something bigger...the war? We still do not know the cause. Is it already in motion?* Bilbo pondered. He nearly wished he had grabbed his notes.

“This is a dangerous move, Gandalf.” Elrond sounded weary in that way only immortals can.

“It is also dangerous to do nothing. Beside all of that, the throne of Erebor is Thorin's birthright. This is not disputable, least of all to him. With or without our help, these dwarves will march on the mountain. They're determined to reclaim their homeland. I do not believe Thorin Oakenshield feels that he is answerable to anyone. Nor, for that matter, am I. What is it you fear, my friend?”

The two stopped in the middle of the bridge, they were of a height but Elrond still hovered over the slightly stooped posture of the wizard. Behind him Bilbo heard a movement that he quickly identified as Thorin's boots and did not turn from his eavesdropping.

“Have you forgotten? A strain of madness runs deep in that family. His grandfather lost his mind. His father succumbed to the same sickness. Can you swear Thorin Oakenshield will not also fall? Gandalf, these decisions do not rest with us alone. It is not up to you or me to redraw the map of Middle-earth.”

Gandalf sighed curving to his staff like a young willow weathering a storm, "You know I can make no such promises, but if I am there perhaps I can stop him from falling. We need Erebor, you know I am right on this."

Thorin shifted again, adjusting the map in his breast pocket. He knew the halfling had heard him but he did not acknowledge him, entirely too focused on the garden walkers below. When he had seen that curly mop of hair speeding from the guest house mumbling to himself he had assumed Balin had finally cornered him and brought about the small male's fury. What he had not imagined was the hobbit rushing to spy on their wizard, let alone the elves he seemed so fond of, but the way he was hidden, very successfully mind, if Thorin had not followed him from the start to his post the dwarf could have wandered right by him never knowing any better. Spying was most certainly what he was doing. It spoke to his being a very gifted burglar, but this furthered what Balin had mentioned earlier just that night after dinner, that Bilbo seemed to have his own agenda, and Thorin was not certain if it should worry him or not.

The courtyard conversation continued on with an edge of terse familiarity that said Elrond was used to moderating Tharkun's antics, which antics specifically Thorin wasn't sure, they continued to speak in a language he did not recognize in the least. He did hear his name mixed in several times, much to his chagrin.

"What are you doing out here?" Thorin watched the pair walk on, one behind the other, down the skinny bridge. He knew Bilbo again heard, yet still he did not acknowledge or answer his query.

“Bilbo.”

The little male held up a finger to imply *'one moment'* and stepped out of the shadow to the banister, placing his hands upon the angled decorative stone. Thorin moved to follow just behind Bilbo’s shoulder, straining his ears for any words he could recognize. It was not Common nor were any of the words regular elvish sounds he was accustomed to that he may have been able to parse. Bilbo did not seem to be having the same problem.
“You know this language?”

“Yes.”

“What are they speaking of?”

“Waking the dragon, gold sickness. Elrond is not approving of Gandalf’s efforts on our behalf.”

Thorin’s body tensed at the very mention of the gold sickness. It would do nothing to deny the shameful truth of it, but he had hoped to leave it from their minds until much later, or forever. He could only imagine what the elf and the Maiar were speaking of in specifics and he could not understand them to deny or confirm their accusations. The horrors he was certain they were saying of the madness in Thorin’s very blood, the actions of his family. Thorin could not defend against words he could not understand and he felt anxiety twisting his gut. The king said the halfling’s name again only once more to be met with nothing, just Bilbo’s head jerking away sharply. In a sudden surge of frantic discontent the royal was sure it was to hide his expression of disgust at his weakness, the cowardice of his father and his father’s father, but with nothing else to do, and an unwillingness to run, Thorin waited and found he could not stand the silence. A part of Thorin wanted the hobbit to about-turn and scowl at him; to leave them all behind in his disgust, because this, he was certain, would be easier in the long run. Bilbo’s hatred Thorin could accept quicker than the gentle looks the blond gave his nephews and the way in which he bossed Thorin around as if he were not royalty of any sort. More than that, that same part of him wanted his hatred so he did not have to inspect the way Bilbo’s defiance and general person did things to tighten his own chest.

Thorin weighed his options of just leaving him to it and going back to his room in the guest house. Here and now, if Bilbo were to ask of it, he could not wriggle his way around the talk of the ailment. He knew it had been mentioned in passing, back in Bilbo’s little home, but he was certain the true danger of it had not been explained in the weeks since. What could he say? That he would likely fall as his father had and fail Durin’s line? Thorin Oakenshield was to succumb to the greed which so much of Middle Earth swore ruled all dwarrow? Could he say much else and not be lying? His brain felt as if an angry swarm of bees were rattling within it when Bilbo did finally respond to the question Thorin had stopped expecting an answer for. There was a distracted edge to blond’s voice and his eyes were still focused elsewhere, "The others are spinning yarn on what they will do with their share of the gold of Erebor."

The dwarf’s knees nearly failed him as he crashed back to reality and came up directly next to Bilbo with his shoulders low, unkingly, certain the mention of the mountain’s treasures to be some kind of test meant to gauge his resistance to the talk of wealth. He could not blame Bilbo for his small subterfuge.

"You do not wish to plan your life of riches with the others?"

He hoped this was the correct response, the correct amount of avoidance, as he cleared his throat willing his person to be casual.

Bilbo made a strange sound of disagreement back. It was grossly unimpressed, his nose curled up so harshly it lifted part of his lip in a little sneer with it and Thorin realized that this was not a test. More like, it was just Bilbo’s unfiltered honesty rearing its brazen head. The thought of distrusting Thorin or running him through a gauntlet had probably never even passed his mind. This left Thorin thankful and enormously relieved. Bilbo could have easily written off the Company’s talk of gold, withheld it, proved his fear of Thorin’s illness in that moment by diversion. Instead he spoke as he always did: bluntly, if preoccupied by his own eavesdropping, and wholly concerned with other affairs completely outside the wherewithal of anyone else.
"Assuming I'm not incinerated?" He said, "No, I haven't decided yet. I'll have to look about the merchandise, I imagine. Gloin is teaching me how to appraise things by sight. Apparently, everything in Rivendell is of very low value. If you didn't know." His voice was muffled, angled on trying to grab the last bits of what he could from the conversation below.

Thorin seemed to read between the lines and the gentle joking, "You do not want the gold at all do you..?"

Bilbo leaned over the banister with an annoyed sound. Gandalf and Elrond had gone even out of his earshot, it seemed, as one of the gazebos lit with the blue glow of the wizard's staff leaving the occupants' faces as just smudged expressive shadows.

"I may take a little, it seems silly not to. A good idea, I think, to have an emergency fund for young cousins, as there is always a slew. Or as general gifts. There's always a wedding or a birthday happening in the Shire. Any excuse for a party really, and parties need favours."

Thorin choked a little, Mahal he was planning to use the treasures of Erebor for party favours.

Bilbo finally gave the king a sidelong look and his full attention.

"You did say I can pick what I want." He looked up at him completely, "You said so and you can't take it back. I had Balin add it to the contact."

"Did you?" Thorin couldn't help his own amusement that was slowly taking place of the prior anxiety. He was so unsure of how the halfling swayed his moods so freely. "I did. Fili and Ori signed as witnesses to the addition."

"You'll make me think you're after something important. Like the crown."

"Oh, you could make another one." He elbowed Thorin's side. "Besides I heard your sister is after your title, if you're one for gossip."

"You started that gossip."

Bilbo ignored him, "But truly, before I start taking gold I'd like to see your dinner plates and cooking pots. Your throw rugs, some of those famous wind up toys perhaps. Erebor was once renowned for it's toy making, wasn't it? Those would go over wonderfully for the Blackberry Festival. Maybe a golden set of cutlery. now wouldn't that just twist Lobelia's skirts-"

Bilbo guffawed at his own self so loud Elrond's head turned to their direction in alarm. He watched them only for a few moments before he left them to their own devices.

"Almost everything you've said or picked you've also said it with the plan to where you will give it away." One heavy steel tipped boot tapped the ground, "You truly do not have any craving for the gold."

Bilbo tilted his head to get a good look at Thorin, "You've already said that."

"I've only just begun to understand how little the financial reward means to you."

"I wasn't even told about the reward until the contract."

"So this was never about payment."

"Thorin, the only gold I care about, outside of basic coin necessary of living, is more of those gold
mushrooms you found. Twice a day I'm very partial to a golden sky; sunrise, sunset." He rolled his hand in the air, "A marigold and a sunflower, a lawn of yellow yarrow and celandines. Otherwise I've nothing for it. My home is not very much made for a hoard. I'm afraid grand statues and gaudy gem work would clash with my rustic decor plan and Mungo's antique chair. As for wearables, gold metal has never done my complexion any favors." He motioned at his face and neck. "Also it is often so heavy and rings are inconvenient for gardening. I find most jewelry a true discomfort. Useless, unnecessary, and impractical."

"Except your little rock." Thorin reached out and tapped the necklace with his knuckle, his ring making a soft metallic sound against it. In the garden for half a moment he thought he saw a person in the blue glow of the wizard's magic light, but it must have just been a trick of the shadows. Or a sneaky little elf..though it seemed stout and thick for an elf. Perhaps Nori was prowling about as well tonight.

"Except my little rock." Bilbo agreed.

"You never take it off, why?"

"Because it is mine." He grabbed at it automatically, knocking Thorin's hand back. "You never take off that key, not since you've gotten it."

"Because it is my destiny."

"Perhaps so is my rock."

"The rock is my destiny or yours?"

"Who is to say they are two separate things."

"You mock me," the dwarf sighed.

"Not yet this conversation I haven't and still am I yet to at this moment. A fork has many tines but they all lead to the same handle."

Thorin's eyes fell down to the rock and he appeared suddenly very deeply worn through and much older than he was.

"You speak too much." He stated softly.

"You can never speak too much if what you have to say is truly worth saying."

The crickets chirped around them and Bilbo turned away, unsure if it was himself or the necklace he suddenly didn't want Thorin looking directly at any longer.

"I want to admit something to you, Thorin."

He chewed the quiet between them for one moment, tasting the midsummer air, sweet as honey it was here in Rivendell. "There was once a time I would have agreed with you, I think, that I was no good for you." His brow twitched at his own odd slip of phrasing , "for this."

The dwarf couldn't imagine a Bilbo not ready to stick his whole foot nearly up a troll's nose or readily prepared to put down wizard and king alike.

"When was this?"

Bilbo pouted his lower lip out, tucking his upper lip down, his arms clasped behind his back, and
he wished very much to have his pipe. His eyes found Durin who walked the garden below standing sentinel outside the gazebo. His voice turned melancholic watching his dear friend; they were so far from home, and they had so much further yet to go, and still he did not know if Durin would be coming back-

"A long time ago."

He forced himself back the former thought, away from the thought of a Bag End devoid of Durin the Deathless. Devoid of anyone at all. Maybe even himself.

"A whole other life and time in fact. A time that doesn't exist anymore, or at least I don't believe. That Bilbo Baggins is quite gone for good if I had to guess."

This wasn't a place he let his mind go down often but it was something he needed to say. Perhaps it was the healing air in Rivendell that brought on the need to purge this depression from his soul.

"It is an odd thing.. to mourn yourself. To mourn a you which you will never know. To wonder how you would have been otherwise, had your current life and it's tragedies not touched you - though I suppose each life must have it's own tragedies by definition - but still, to hope for your own would-be happiness like a third party observer, just in case in another place we can't grasp that Other You is living still, and differently. I mourn him, but I wish him the best, if he is still out there, wherever it was our ways parted." Thorin watched the side of Bilbo's face, unsure of what he was seeing play across his features.

"Have you ever done that? Mourned a Thorin you've never known?"

Thorin's brow furrowed low, creating a star shaped crease between their heft and the bridge of his nose. His fingers curled, short nails tingled against his palms as they threatened to bite into flesh. The key around his neck was heavy and solid and weighed him down, the map in his pocket burned at his breast, and he was speaking before he realized he was doing it, before could stop the stream of truth he did not allow himself to drink of, the river of thought pouring from his mouth.

"I mourn what I may have been in a world where Smaug did not come and my brother did not die. So often do I wish for Frerin and his guidance. I mourn myself with my family, without the greedy hands of their ailments. I mourn the me being woken by the song of our mother in all of her beauty. Her braids and beads, broad and strong and proud. She was so very wise, well spoken and collected, feet of velvet would whisper behind her steps as she walked the halls. I mourn for the old reflection of myself I see in the boys. Kili is like looking into a mirror, tarnished and aged and so painful some days it strains my eyes to see him; adventurous but always so self conscious, worried how he will be received. And Fili always there with him, the image of my brother. They are well molded copies of us. We once had that coltish youth, quick to friendship and eager to learn. That reflection which I have lost and long replaced with something…toilworn."

Thorin touched absently at one of his braids, the one, Bilbo noticed, which housed the most gray.

"I mourn the me which knew equanimity. The me which was not bursting at seams with anger no matter what direction I look. Anger is so exhausting, Bilbo. I do not- My temper has never been my greatest asset but it is now my first defense and my first offense. I have long lost all I thought I would be, had planned to be, and I will never truly know what I was to be. I scramble up a landslide of expectations that I am not certain mean anything to this day and may drown me in the end." Bilbo's face had turned to him, gauging his moment of silence for what it was, a pause or a finality. The exiled king continued, "I mourn a Thorin son of Thrain who dreamt of being king rather than feared it, but perhaps that want was just foolishness. I have never wanted anything less than I want this now. Because I have never wanted anything more than the gold in Erebor. I say to
myself it is for the dwarrow, for the kingdom, our people. But some lies are so painfully thin, like cheesecloth, and the viscous truth easily seeps through so freely I do not know why I bother with it. I also do not know why I tell it to you now, either, for a king should never admit he does not want what he has, but for the fact I feel- I fear the culmination of all I will accomplish will kill me. Or at the very least, what is left of the parts of me that matter."

The light in the gazebo went dim then doused. The color of the world folded to moonbeams and blue scales around them. Thorin stared at his feet, his brow deep like the fissures after a great quake of the earth.

"I would like you to know, Bilbo, I do not willingly accept the greed of gold..even if it is meant to devour me."

They allowed the night air to whisper around them then, fireflies like living stars moved about the garden, the water sounds coming from all sides.

"I shall write a book of us at the end of this." Bilbo said abruptly. Thorin looked up as the Hobbit wiped his hand across the skies above them as if presenting his idea upon a grand banner in the constellations.

"The Great Tragedy of Thorin Oakenshield and Bilbo Baggins: Adventures of Identity Crises Across Middle Earth."

"The greatest tragedy of all time, I'm sure." Thorin's lips tugged thoughtfully, easing his coiled body just a hair, "The title needs work."

"It is rather lengthy. Give me a moment I'll think of something better. "

He tried to think, but it was not easy. Bilbo was notoriously long winded when it came to naming his own writing. He was notoriously long winded when it came to everything he supposed. Pinning life down precisely was just so difficult-

"There and Back Again."

Bilbo cocked his head at Thorin who looked suddenly embarrassed at having said anything at all. Bilbo could see Kili then, now that he was looking for him since Thorin's comparison, that sudden bout of confidence quickly whetted down by his own uncertainty, "There and Back Again...it has a certain ring to it. But why that?"

"I have been many theres, but I know only of one back I'd like to be again."

"Erebor?"

"Not as such."

"The Blue Mountains?"

"No..."

Bilbo replayed their conversation in his mind, "Yourself? The Thorin back before Thorin King Under the Mountain. You just wish to be Thorin Oakenshield?"

"...Just Thorin. Before Oakenshield. Before the gold sickness, Azog, Smaug. Before all of them I was merely Thorin, and I think that just Thorin is the only name I hold that is truly mine in this world and who I would like to be at the end of it all. Nothing additional. Just...Thorin."
"If this is Just Thorin I am seeing I think I am fond enough to see him back again to stay as well. I too would like just to be Bilbo Baggins someday again. I feel I am much more Bilbo Took right now. But I fear a career of Tooking may be bad on my knees." He laughed happily and bounced, precisely nothing wrong with his knees or any of his joints for that matter. "Or perhaps I'll just be Just Bilbo as well."

Thorin was uncertain how the others smile cancelled out the whole of Eru's skies, but it did. (Upon closer inspection perhaps he did know why this was, but he was not ready for that thought. That One thought. So ridiculous it would be to hope for that part of a dream. A dream which belonged to the Thorin he mourned.)

"I believe I would read our There and Back Again and enjoy it most pretentiously." Bilbo decided. "Would you read it if I wrote it?"

"I think so."

"I'm humbled."

"You should be. Kings don't usually read novels for fun, especially biographical. We just demand it paint us in a good light. Or else."

There was a slight manic edge to Bilbo's sudden smirk, "I'm going to paint you in the most petulant, self centered, self important, rude light, with a poor sense of above ground direction. And don't think for one moment I'm leaving out the troll bags and your tube worms."

Thorin frowned deeply, unsure of if he was teasing any longer, "You are aware I do not actually have tube worms? Your singular focus on it is beginning to concern me."

Bilbo's nose crinkled he grinned so big.

"Perhaps my reviews for your novel will not be so positive."

"That's just the beginning, you see. At first you're quite awful. Horrid really. Excessively rude. Extensively gruff. Absolutely outstandingly intolerable and-"

"Bilbo."

"…dyspeptic."

Thorin tried not to smile, honestly. He had never willed himself to be angry before and it not come with near immediacy. Bilbo's eyes softened and he lowered the tilt of his head to get a better look at Thorin's half hidden face in the night.

"Then you get better. Like any good hero does. Like the best heroes do."

"Better how?" Blue eyes ticked up, the color deeper in the low lighting, matching Bilbo's necklace. Something there, a raw need for buoyancy above all of this sorrow, urged Bilbo to reassure Thorin that he was not damned, no matter the odds.

"Slowly. For all heroes are wounded deeper than their battle scars."

"You have never seen battle."

"But I have seen its results. I have seen you all. How Dwalin and Balin reach to each other, and to the young ones. How Gloin obsesses over his family and how Bifur twitches at sudden sounds,
always then looks for Bofur's hat and Bombur's beard. How Gandalf surrounds himself in the Shire where foulness so rarely ever comes; he lights our dark skies with fireworks to drive away the night he fears will fall indefinitely." Bilbo ducked to find Thorin's face again.

"I see you. How you pull away, which is perhaps what a King does, I'm sure your lots in life weigh different than those of us common. But it seems your eyes have changed, even just since the trolls. I think you see you do have friends. I think you care so deeply you scare yourself. You're self deprecating and brave and your brashness, I think, is from growing up without the chance for much true friendship after everything, then separating yourself as you went. It isn't the same, not exactly, but I have many acquaintances and very few friends of Shirefolk. Perhaps, just by very loose definition, Ham Gamgee fits the bill of friendship. I recognize reclusiveness, and it is a different kind of armor you wear to hide. But it is getting softer, I hope."

"I do not hide and I am not soft." Thorin cleared his throat as he had earlier and tried to square his shoulders in resistance.

"I was told you fixed Ori's quill today."

"He is our scribe, he requires a quill."

"I am also sorry I missed you playing Bofur's flute."

Thorin had nothing to say to that.

"You gave me a mushroom."

"You told me to say thank you."

"Do you do what I say now?"

"More than I'd like to admit" The king grumbled.

"Also it was a mushroom." Bilbo stressed.

"You obsess over them."

"None of the others noticed I liked mushrooms," he said quietly. "You see more than you realize too. You're a good dwarf, Thorin. Just Thorin. A good dwarf indeed."

The corner of Thorin's lip tugged in such a way Bilbo knew he had hit a fragile spot.

"I took to heart what you said of your Old Took. I do not want to end this and be seen as anything but myself. I do not wish to be untouchable before I am no longer me. Before the gold sickness comes upon me. I would be a fool to think it will not."

Bilbo rocked on his big feet, "May I give you one more long winded story for the night?"

"I suppose so." As much as it was Thorin's way to be difficult, as we have said, it was Bilbo's way to go on and on, until he ran out of air and eventually, he assumed, died of it. The plight of a good story teller, he liked to tell himself, though perhaps not a good editor.

"My mother told me once I was destined for great things. Well.. she told me this often, actually, but it was in such a way I imagine most mothers say such things to their children. Even when their offspring are silly little creatures just made to be grocers."

He winked at Thorin and tapped the side of his nose, "I can't imagine saying half the niceties of
mothers because even when they are at their most adorable, children are still such wretched little fiends."

"Fili and Kili burned down a stable."

Bilbo snorted, "Color me unsurprised," then continued his story, "The day Belladonna Took-Baggins died she said it to me in such a way this time...it was different, something more final. Not a compliment in a motherly moment so much as a vital truth she wished to get across. She said, 'You are something special, Bilbo. You must know that.' I said 'I'm not, truly, mother.' Because to be told one is great is to be told one is responsible, often for things they do not yet understand, or may not want to begin with. In response she said 'Oh, but you are. You will be something grand in the world, I've always known it.'"

Bilbo went silent, he had been going somewhere with that but in the moment his mind had skittered off and couldn't remember where, instead he was caught just tracing the ghost memory of her hand in his

"She was right, Bilbo Baggins.." Thorin said softly, shaking Bilbo back to himself and what it was he was attempting to say.

"I do not know if she was or she was not. I think it is difficult to know your own place in the world. Just as it is difficult for a needle to know where it is, or what it is part of, when making an embroidery. It just knows it is a needle, and it is where it is at that moment because it is doing something it must be meant to be doing in order to make the whole of something grand. It cannot know what that whole picture will be until its string is ended and even still then.." He eyed Durin slowly making his way back, flickering in that occasional ghostly way he did to cross long distances quickly.

"What I want you to know is: I think she would have said the same to you, Thorin Durin Son or Son of Thrain or Oakenshield or King Under the Mountain or whoever you choose you are. Because, it is your choice. Belladonna would have said you were something special, and not because you are a king. But, because you can be so much more than what history or anyone, including yourself, has written off for you before you have even done it."

Bilbo licked his lips, the sliver of moon catching the movement, "What is the word.." His eyes closed thoughtfully for a few seconds, thinking with a serene expression before finding what it was he looked for, "Mazarbul."

Thorin shifted and inhaled at the sound of Khuzdul, uncertain how Bilbo made it sound so delicate. He was hardly surprised he knew this word by now, and once again could not find any anger beneath his mental doldrums at the slight of law. He did not bother even searching for the outrage this time. He could not, not when every hard angle and chipped edge of Khuzdul was made soft and smooth like beach stone.

"That which is written' is the exact translation into Common I believe. You have not been written, Thorin Oakenshield. For all that the elves believe it with their foresight and hindsight they think they have from Thror, and Thrain, and whatever history they choose to point to: you are still writing, you are still being written. You are yet to be a past tense. The story of Thorin Oakenshield is not over until Thorin ends it himself."

Thorin's throat was thick and he swallowed around emotions he could not begin to sort.

"What of the story of Bilbo Baggins?" he asked, his voice more rough than he'd have liked.
Bilbo shrugged.

"Perhaps we shall grow old, then together at the end we can compare chapters. Statistically speaking, I'll die first, so you'll have to write my last chapter. I'd appreciate you to work on your story telling skills. You're awful at it and I'd like my ending to be memorable, if a little mad and exaggerated. Also, you will have to come to me as I am going this awful long way for you and it's only fair. Also—also, I will be grisled in old age and you will be very much the same as I am looking at you now. Taking or not my knees will be quite shot by then."

Thorin did not know the life span of Hobbists but he imagined just by stress alone he would not look very much the same however many or few years down the line they were planning. But, the idea warmed him through, even if the talk of Bilbo's eventual death made his heart ache in unreasonable ways.

"I think I would like that. To grow old would be a gift, to grow old with you I think would be an honor. Until you make me mad again. I reserve the right to change my mind."

"Shall I have Balin add it to the contract?"

Thorin's responding laugh was deep and throaty. "Aye, we'll add it later."

This seemed to please the small male who began tapping upon the banister with a smile. Thorin imagined that was the end of their conversation until Bilbo turned to him sharply enough the dwarf leaned abaft. There was a look in his eyes that said he had made up his mind on some unannounced matter.

"Will you bend down please?"

Thorin was too confused to not do just that. Bending at the waist, he folded his hands his back out of the way of Bilbo who had lifted up at the same time. For one brief moment Thorin thought he meant to kiss him. *(And that was just a foolish and completely unwarranted notion, he scolded himself.)* He did not, as expected, kiss him as his cheeks were taken into his hands so very gently. Hobbit callouses were even soft, the difference between soil and stone, not the deep rough pads of miners and mountain people.

His nimble fingers traced Thorin's cheek bones and the edge of his beard then found purchase just behind the bolt of his jaw. The other hand held purchase on his shoulder, steadied the stretch onto his tip toes. Thorin, King Under the Mountain, a veteran of wars and battles, dragons and orcs, found then he had forgotten air, all that air was, and all he knew of breathing it. It had all thinned to nothing, so much like being in the deepest roots of the caves of Erebor, or the very tip of its lonely peak. Those places where one must force the air into their lungs or pass out entirely.

Then, just as he was sure he would suffocate, instead of a kiss but, yes, very so much worse, a small bump then a pressure came against his forehead in that ancient dwarvish tradition. The tradition, the language, Bilbo somehow, without fail, managed to softened in ways Mahal's children could not succeed and none had ever hoped to know from anyone outside of their own since the beginning of their time.

Thorin's eyes jumped up, head still bowed, and against that ingrained need to lash out, to distrust, he let that gentleness ease him, he pushed into it until the tips of their noses brushed. The king's hands followed Bilbo's; first brushing the soft corners of his elbows then following lines he could not see past lashes on apple cheeks, blurred in their nearness. One hand touched Bilbo's shoulder, close to his neck, twining an errant curl, his other cupped the whole side of the halfling's head, the odd thin delicate ear warm against his palm. Bilbo sighed then, just as he had for the Misty
Mountains, Moria, for all of Imladris. All of those ancient marvels which stole Bilbo's heart at first sight. But here between them it was for Thorin, Just Thorin, and Thorin felt as if the whole of Middle Earth flooded from that single breath into his lungs.

"I need you to know I am here to see you through this."

The king had never known sweeter words to be strung together in any age or tale or history.

Bilbo eased down then, too soon, and his lips lifted the gentle swells of his cheeks, arcing his eyes, his crow's feet crinkling, the tips of his ears flushing pink as when he was most pleased with himself.

Thorin felt his world turn upside down and did not know how to right it, did not know how to find mooring in the dizziness blooming from where Bilbo had pressed them together. He touched at Bilbo's necklace again with his ringed hand, not willing to relinquish contact entirely yet. The stone was unnaturally warm, but as was the bare skin beneath it and Thorin's fingers buzzed at the contact of both until a large figure, hulking and hazy, flickered into his peripheral. On reflex he jerked his hand back to release the stone and the image immediately puttered out. Bilbo looked at him oddly, his eyes glancing from Thorin's hand to the empty air beside him with a curious expression.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes, the light is playing tricks on me." Thorin brushed the skin beside the stone, illogically avoiding it now as if it had something to do with his exhaustion induced hallucinations.

"And here I thought dwarrow may have superior night eyes. I can see quite well." The halfling keeked down at the thick hand on his chest, bemused at its continued presence.

"All species are obviously inferior to hobbits."

"You would do well to remember it." Bilbo tugged at his tunic to right it and grinned, "I meant to ask," he took half a step back from the king, "What of our map?"

"Our map?" Thorin's mind reeled a bit to catch up to the swift shift in conversation. "Is it our map?"

"It's a map for dwarf kind and I am, as of late, an honorary dwarf. So by this association it is our map."

Thorin let out an amused scoff but allowed him the belief. "Elrond says tomorrow will be the night."

"He's certain?"

"He is."

"Well, that's good then. We can get on our way sooner rather than later."

"I thought you liked it here." The king's hand itched to reach across the distance between them now, as minimal as it was he realized how long it had been since anyone, other than Dis, had touched him in any gentle way and now he craved it with such a sudden lonesome ferocity.

"I do," Bilbo nodded, "and perhaps I will vacation here on the way back and later in life. But, we are hardly vacationing right now are we? We have a map to read, mountains to cross, and wyrm to slay. Or have you forgotten?" Knuckles rapped lightly on Thorin's forehead.
"I have not forgotten."

"Good. I'd be cross if you had. Now, you should get some sleep, Thorin. This is place for rest and you do not get that nearly enough. Tomorrow we shall have a map and we will see what it is we are to do next."

Bilbo's eyes turned soft, almost loving, very similar to how he watched the princes, and he touched Thorin's cheek again, "You will get some rest?"
The king hid his need to burrow into the touch by bowing his head in agreement, his nose glancing off the delicate inside of Bilbo's wrist.

"Good." Bilbo pulled back and smiled with an adoration Thorin was sure he did not understand how he was at the receiving end of. "Goodnight, then, Just Thorin."

"Goodnight, Bilbo."

The halfling gave him a little salute and began to tread down the flight of stairs off their platform.

"Bilbo."

"Yes, your majesty?" He was far enough down the steps that he was hardly there any longer, and Thorin stared at the small slice of white fabric of Bilbo's shoulder he could see stark against the shade.

"You are not common." The hobbit must have tilted his head, for a gold curl fell into the streak of moonlight. "You said that the lots of kings are much different than those of you common. There is nothing common about you, Bilbo Baggins."

Thorin did not wait for Bilbo to respond, just turned his back away. It was minutes before he looked back and Bilbo had gone quite silently into the night without his ever hearing. Thorin stayed there for a long time before following Bilbo's instructions. He did not take the map back out again this night as he would have any other night multiple times. Instead he found himself humming a tune of his mother's of which he had not thought of for a very long time and focusing on the lingering feel of Bilbo's head pressed against his.

❧❧❧

Back in the guest houses, to Bilbo's luck, every last dwarf had fallen asleep piled all around the living area. Bilbo checked the fire and fixed a few blankets over shoulders then retired to his room to wait for Durin's return again from where they had split after Bilbo left Thorin's side.

He was near dozing in the vanity chair when the spectre appeared finally, sitting on the bed in his lounging clothes with his beard in one large braid down his chest, his feet bare again.

"Evening." Bilbo yawned into his sleeve.

"It seems Gandalf believes, and Elrond agrees, the sword to be of the King of Angmar."

"Angmar?"

"Yes."

"King of Angmar…why does that sound so familiar?" Little hands lifted to the ceiling in a very large stretch by Hobbit standards.
"I wouldn't know. He must have been after my time. I know of no Angmar nor a King of it."

"Strange... but that was the spirit not the Necromancer. Why raise him of all people..." Bilbo rubbed away a tear that had risen from his yawn.

"You are exhausted, Bilbo."
"I'll sleep in a moment, scoot over."

The king did so with no comment. "Did they say anything else?"

"They are calling the White Council to order."

Bilbo groaned and hoisted himself into the bed. "How long do we have?" He scrabbled over Durin's shins to get near the open window.

"They did not say, but I assume they will arrive promptly. We should leave as soon as possible."

"The map is to be read tomorrow evening."

"I can read the map if we need to."

"Hmm..." That was not ideal. "We'll figure it out in the morning."

The halfling's whole body disappeared beneath pillows and blankets. "I'm certain the Council are of the ilk which must have their secret meetings by the light of an eerie moon. Which is most ridiculous of them but most convenient for us because we can have breakfast before bolting at least."

Durin's hand slid down the length of Bilbo's back, tucking the blanket under him receiving a little hum of thanks and his back pressing against his thigh. The Hobbit slipped off into a restful dream of pleasant books with worn edges, the sun gold through the windows of Bag End, and the feeling of holding hands with someone very precious. He could not see who though, not through the haze of blue that immersed his vision when he tried to look.

The next morning found Bilbo and Durin walking the courtyard adjacent the guest house. They felt the need to stay near now thanks to Elrond's concerns and precautions. He had not planned ahead for an escape from Rivendell of all places. Bilbo stole a cursory look to the main balcony where a few of the dwarrow lazed in the sun.

The Hobbit was growing discontent waiting out the hours just hoping they had time. He had wanted to avoid reading the runes himself (via Durin) but as the day went on it seemed less likely that would be his luck. It wasn't a row with the dwarves he was particularly looking forward to and wished to skip entirely if at all possible. If they had just one more day! But he had heard horses entering Rivendell in the wee hours of the morning, before the sun was but a glint on the horizon. They could only assume the Council's arrival had already begun.

"The Council would not hold Thorin against his will would they?" The thought struck him suddenly.

Durin's deep responding hum was dubious at best.

"Outstanding," Bilbo grunted none too subtly and stomped his feet a little harder.
Midmorning came and went with nothing but anxiety to show for it. The proximity to the guest house at least seemed to have ensured their court was one of the less populated around. Whether the lack of elves was due to the minimal number of guests overall, or because of the type of current guests Bilbo couldn't say. Either way it was convenient for his occasional boisterously announced complaints.

There was enough traffic to and fro though that when a particular set of steps walked by him then stopped and changed direction Bilbo did not concern himself. The pace was much longer and much slower than even Durin's and it followed them long enough Bilbo's hair started to raise to alarm before he realized the reason why. He had barely registered it was the foot falls that had been out of place when a deep voice much too close and much too joyful was saying, "Durin the Deathless! Is that you?"

Bilbo full stopped, his heart skipped several beats, and his whole stomach fell from his body straight out the soles of his feet.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know if anyone watches CinemaSins but when I wrote the bit with Mazarbul being said in conversation my brain went "Roll credits!" Lmao

Also!

Come visit me on Tumblr/IG for my inspiration stuff and also I have started drawing art for Mazarbul I will post these two locations as well!

https://stairwellwit.tumblr.com/

https://www.instagram.com/ebolamola/
Author's Note: Apology Art

Chapter Summary

This is a piece of art I did for Bilbo telling Thorin about their soon to be novel. This is me trying desperately to get back into the swing of drawing. It was fun!
I'm posting it as an apology for my long posting delay.
If everyone likes it hopefully I'll be able to do more and post some more of it between chapters as we go (if I get the inspiration/talent lmao)
Thank you everyone for sticking with me! I just wanted everyone to know I am still around it's just been a hectic couple of weeks!
I will be back soon!
Hey!!!! Holy shit?! The last two weeks have been like pulling teeth I swear but you all are so supportive and amazing and have helped keep me afloat!!! This chapter and the next have fought me tooth and nail. I never thought this would be the hardest two chapters to write but holy hell, this has been a challenge! But that's okay, the challenge makes it worth it!

Also I was AMAZED at the responses to my drawing!!! I'm super self conscious about sharing my art and I could not have predicted the amount of positive feedback from everyone. Thank you so much! I definitely will try to draw and post more, I already have little sketches made up!

As usual, I will reply to all of your comments! And if my updates get a little slow here and there do not worry I have this story mapped through to the end and it will get completed. Just life gets in the way of punctuality sometimes.

I think that's all! Much love!

-S

There was a point in his childhood when storytime in the Baggins' home became almost exclusively cornered by *Bilbo and Doolin's Grand Dwarven Adventures and Equally Important but Substantially Smaller Hobbitly Tasks and Errands*. (Bilbo had been a wordy young child and it had only gotten wordier from there.)

These yarns were great wondrous tales of battling goblins, fending back orcs, and conquering such wars as The Battle of Cotton Garth, where he and Durin fought gallantly against the pigs invading Grandfather Cotton's garden. (Only three watermelons were lost that day! A great victory indeed.) Or the Skirmish of Meat Loaf Mound, where Bilbo succeeded in saving Ham Gamgee's meat loaf sandwich from some very rude Buckland boys in a chilly mid Autumn engagement.

By ten years Bilbo had braved many wars and many more tasks set upon him by the Great Queen Belladonna. Such undertakings as running to the market, a horrid venture as the road was riddled with fiends and foes. Sweeping the porch! What curse was within that dust! Such horrors he saw for such a small boy! and he told them all in great detail each night to his mother's great amusement, and father's constant mild confusion. But there were always those certain tales his mother told with such passion and beauty that even chatty little Bilbo would curl up and quiet down for them.

The vaguest promise of such stories would send Bilbo rushing off to his bedroom with all the speed of a flash bang and dragging Bungo along behind him. His sleeping gown would be dawned in no time and he would burrow into bed to rest his curly head upon the round softness of his father's belly. (A proper hobbit belly, of which Bilbo was losing now quite rapidly.) Belladonna would follow at a leisurely pace and tug over her properly named Storytime Stool to begin once her boys were settled and ready to listen.
Belladonna had a large repertoire of stories to choose from but Bungo and Bilbo both shared the same favourite and more often than not the hobbit maiden would start without bothering to ask which it was they wanted to hear. Undoubtedly it would be *Tuor and the Exiles of Gondolin*. Which of course must always in the end include the great slayers Ecthelion and Glorfindel.

Now, for all that Ecthelion was claimed the most fair in the land it was of Glorfindel's golden beauty that Belladonna would wax poetry on for long stretches, until Bungo very loudly cleared his throat and got Bilbo giggling. At which point Bella would kiss Bungo's temple and say, "But I still like you better, my dear."

Then she would start again just where she had left off, making point to give Glorfindel all the glory she could and then some. (As if he needed help!)

Each time they would reach the flight from Gondolin and Idril's Secret Pass where the House of the Golden Flower protected the rear of the refugees Belladonna would scoot to the edge of her seat and draw the shapes of the scenery over Bilbo's head. Her voice would raise in her own excitement.

"Here they would reach Cristhorn the Cleft of the Eagles which was a frightful awful place. So high it was that not spring, or summer, nor even fall ever kissed it. Its peaks only ever knowing the biting cold of snowy winds year after year. This was not a place one wanted to be but needs must sometimes, and this certainly was such a time. Through the pitch black of the pass they ran fumbling and groping as best they could. The moon had not looked upon that path in such a long time and there was nothing but jagged un forgiving stone on one side and a deathly fall on the other. But they tried as they might, hurrying through grievous wound and aching terror. And then! the balrog appeared!" Bilbo would gasp loudly then each time, as you are supposed to do anytime a balrog appears; real or fiction.

"But from the ranks came Lord Glorfindel! And scared though he was Lord Glorfindel scaled the rocky mountain side directly to the demon, chasing the only light in the Cristhorn; that of glowing belly and fiery whip. Together they waged a war dance, two great beings clashing there on the slick stone far above Thorn Sir's waters. The whip cracked, claws sparked from armoured helm. Long they battled and the people ran below, embers showering down upon them and lighting their foot falls in a burning rain. Until finally Glorfindel bested the beast! In one last effort, whilst the two balanced atop a craggy peak, with his left hand he drove his dirk into that great furnace of a belly. But the balrog would not go without prize. As it shrieked it grabbed with its only remaining hand the golden locks of the great warrior, and together they fell twain the cloven mountain into the River Thorn Sir below.

But his sacrifice was not in vain! For during this the Thornhoth eagles had come! The greatest of which was Thorondor, and with him he brought his eagle lords. Their beaks of steel and talons like spears, tossing the enemies from towering places. It was Thorondor then who after the battle gathered Glorfindel's body and brought him from the trenches to the Eagle-stream where Tuor allowed his body to be rested and those of the Golden Flower wept tears that may never dry, for they loved their Lord so."

Then Belladonna would say, “The end.”

But this very much was not the end and Bilbo knew it. So he would stand up to demand that Glorfindel return post haste or he would have many words to say on the matter! Bungo would then tickle him until he was a mess of giggles and ready for Belladonna to tell on.

“Or at least it *should have been* the end for Glorfindel, but it was not. Years later, Glorfindel returned! From the Halls of Mandos he was judged pure and great and washed of his first life and
re-embodied. He was gifted powers little hobbits cannot properly imagine, magic not unlike our ridiculous Gandalf and the other Maia. Then back he was sent with order to protect Arda from the darkness dwelling in the corners of the earth.”

Belladonna would then take a moment to tell of seeing Lord Glorfindel once from a distance. She had been hiking in her youth along the East-West Road close to the patrolling edge of the Dunedain routes near Weathertop. There she had spotted him atop his great white steed among the Rangers and elves.

Here again she would begin to fawn over the elven warrior until Bungo urged her on into the next stretch of the tale. It would go much like this through the rest of the night and most often much past any respectable bed time for any respectable Hobbit. But even Bungo didn't mind a bit of respectability set aside when it came to watching his wife's eyes light up when she spoke.

(Little Bilbo would watch this back and forth between them and wonder, and not for a very long time since he'd grown up, if he would ever look at anyone half the way his father looked at his mother.)

While this went on, Belladonna's grand story nights, Durin would take to strolling the peacefulness of Bagshot Row and marveling in the flowery air and rolling hills, not a sharp edge in the whole of The Shire. It was rare he left Bilbo's side at any lengthy distance. But he walked these nights to allow his hobbits to bask in their family, alone, without his presence to distract Bilbo from his parents' attention. For all that he loved Bilbo he felt he could easily steal time from his mother and father and tried desperately to do no such thing.

But it was perhaps because of this that he never heard the story of Tuor and the Exiles of Gondolin.

Now, it would be entirely preposterous to say he did not know of the fall of Gondolin. In fact, he would be quite pettish to hear it said otherwise.

He knew the story! How could he not?

Durin was there in the world at the time of the Stone City's completion and he was still there at the time of its demise. And while they were not particularly near one another, he knew of the flight of the Gondothlim and the City of Seven Names.

Some of the gnomes had even ventured through his Misty Mountains, though he never saw them. Their wanderings were well into his end years, when he was stricken finally with the results of his extensive age.

So yes, Durin knew the tale of love between The Blessed and The Silver of Feet, of the balrog and the Thorn Sir's running black, and the cairn of never fading golden flowers guarded by Thorondor's gaze.

Durin knew all of this, though he could not say that had he cared much at the time. Gnomes were not his business then, for all he did not rejoice at their losses, and mostly blind and bed-ridden these were the last stories he wished to go to rest with.

So instead Durin's Folk had filled his chambers with songs of his birth and rule, tales of dwarvish honor, and prayers to Mahal for his passage into his Halls. All of this warmed his heart and made him joyful and he held on for a long time just to hear his children sing. Finally, when he felt his time had come, he had them take him one last time to look into Kheled-zaram to see his crown of stars, to see his magnificent mines, and the glory of his life.
And then Durin had died, peacefully and surrounded by the children and mountains he loved.

What Durin did not know was that long before his own reentry into the land of the living, other pieces had been picked back up and placed into play. If he had stayed for Belladonna's bedtime stories he may have managed to be less surprised by all of this on principle. He may have foretold the likelihood of some undead elf ambushing him in the middle of Rivendell and scaring his Hobbit half to the grave.

And half to the grave was right.

Had Bilbo been a less worldly hobbit he would have fainted right on the spot. If not from fright then surely from the sight before him once he had turned to face their assailant. As it was, he did feel a bit dizzy, but he quickly decided that had something to do with the magic wafting from the elf before him. For a moment he felt ignorant that he had not noticed it before the elf had yelled at them, but the more he felt the more he realized it was not ignorance but trust that made him miss it. It was so intimately similar to Durin's own magic that it was almost impossible to notice unless one was looking for it.

Beside the subtle differences each of their magic fell nearly in line with each other, curling gently like vines in an embrace. No wonder the elf could see Durin, if their magic was so well tuned.

Bilbo was so momentarily lost by the whole situation that he had nearly forgotten what they had been doing, until the old dwarf whapped the back of his head which had Bilbo nearly biting his whole tongue off.

He had been staring. He hadn't realized he had been staring. It was very rude and he very much hated making a fool of himself in general, extra so upon first appearances. But one must take into account that between the initial vomitous fear of being found out, then being stared down by a massive elf who stood twice Bilbo (and still perhaps another half hobbit atop that), then realizing who that elf was. Well could you really blame a bit of mindless gawping?

Of course you couldn't. Not when in front of him stood the Lord of the House of the Golden Flower; all was just as his mother had said. Golden hair and a strong jaw, honey eyes and playful quirk to his lips which left him unrealistically pretty in that way all Eldar tended to be (especially those of the First Age that seemed even a bit more untouchable than the younger generations). His state of dress though was humble and sweet, which only made Bilbo understand why those of his House must have loved him so. He was not decked in jeweled garb or shining armor, but instead his worn brown trousers were rolled to the calf with a plain tunic half tucked into a belt, and most endearing of all (to a hobbit at least) was that his feet were bare and dirty as if he had been walking the grass more than the paths.

Bilbo could hear his mother swooning in hysterics somewhere in the back of his mind. He couldn't say he wasn't doing the same.

"It is you? Is it not, Durin King?"

The voice, now that it wasn't giving him a heart attack, was smooth with a mix of languages and centuries that left it very much a standalone accent.

"Aye? Who are you?"

Durin had crossed his thick arms and leaned back in that regal way Bilbo had seen from he and
Thorin when they were being particularly stand offish. Bilbo smacked the king's elbow.

"That is Lord Glorfindel! Of the House of the Golden Flower! Of Gondolin! The Balrog Slayer!"
He cried in disbelief at his ignorance.

"Laurenfindel? I thought you were dead."

Bilbo groaned. He had spent the better half of two days getting the alive dwarrow to play nice with Elrond and now Durin chose to be catty. He was quite rung out from babysitting the mouths of ancients and royals.

Luckily Glorfindel just laughed and did not seem the least bit offended.

"I was dead, until I wasn't! I thought I had stolen the Deathless title from you but it seems you have deigned to take it back."

"Glorfindel the Deathless doesn't roll off the tongue as well as Durin does."

"Indeed not, my king. Now, who is your friend who feels of magic and hidden things? Both of our names are already said and already well known and it would be rude to leave him out. Also I am quite curious and it has been a long time since I've found anything curious at all."

The Hobbit blushed immediately and tried to speak with as much dignity as he could muster. His father would never forgive him for being so silly about a person that he forgot how to properly introduce himself.

“I am Bilbo Baggins. Well met, I hope, Lord Glorfindel.” He put his hand to his heart and bowed low.

“Well met, certainly! No lord title is necessary. It's so formal and I believe we are to be friends. That is if that would please you, Bilbo Baggins, as it pleases me.”

The warrior bowed back with a flourish that had Bilbo stepping out of the way for its grandness.

“Of course!”

For someone who had gone his whole life very much alone, other than a very dead dwarf, Bilbo had gathered a staggering number of living friendships in a very short amount of time. He was having trouble keeping track! But he figured it was a good enough problem as any to have.

Bilbo rocked on his feet as Glorfindel popped back up, "Speaking of friends, do you two know each other at all?"

Part of him was giddy at the prospect of the two knowing each other. The other part was rallying to give Durin a what's what if he had never spoken of such an acquaintanceship in all their time.

"Not exactly." Durin confirmed.

"Mutual admirers, I'm sure. But we have never met in person. I am glad for the chance now."

"Which brings to reason: How can you see me?"

"Really, old dwarf?” Glorfindel's laughter seemed unable to run out, “You yourself just pointed out: I have been dead."

"Yes. And I remember word of it in detail. I was not pleased to hear of it for all our peoples were
not the best of friends. You were a great warrior, or perhaps I should say you are, as you are here before me now. But, I was not aware you had returned."

"Yes you were." Bilbo snapped and Durin frowned down at him, thoroughly affronted.

"No I wasn't." The dwarf puffed up his chest indignantly, which said he was right and nothing short of end times would convince him otherwise.

"I told you that." Bilbo insisted.

"I don't recall." Now his nose went up and Bilbo wondered if Thorin's snootiness was proximity catching.

"I told you! Mother used to tell that story all the time. The story of Gondolin and of the Balrog Slayer returning from Aman."

Durin gave him his shoulder with a huff and gruff throaty sound.

"You must have told it wrong-"

"Excuse me-"

"Peace! Peace! No matter the tale! I thank you for what you say of my skills." Glorfindel called end to the disagreement, a sun kissed hand held out at them, his eyes arched with amusement at the display.

"A better compliment I could not have asked for in our former life, my friend, so I will take it in the wake of both our untimely deaths-"

"Durin was two thousand years old when he died, it was hardly untimely." Bilbo cut in with all the blandness of unseasoned pork, succeeding in making Glorfindel glow with further mirth and Durin to sigh loudly.

"Untimely is the death of any great leader. But as for your original concern, I am here and very much alive, as I am sure Bilbo has told quite well. It takes a very specific type of magic from the Valar to bring us back to this realm. Or half back in your case, I suppose. So yes, of course I can see you. Though I've never seen this exactly."

He shoved one hand through the cold pocket of air of Durin's gut making Bilbo shriek horrifically.

"Stop that, you trifling creature!"

The king tried to smack him away on reflex but his hand glided right through Glorfindel's forearm. The elf's responding guffaw was louder even than Bilbo's own outburst.

A sneaky look to the balcony revealed a small line of dwarves had gathered to watch this nonsensical encounter.

Bilbo could only imagine what this looked like: a mighty elf half bent, prodding the air beside him and Bilbo's assuredly disgusted expression.

"Maybe we shouldn't be out in the open.."

Quickly Bilbo eased Glorfindel's arm away, a slightly nauseated look at having to remove a hand from his friends innards (a friend that to him had always been very much solid) and started to tug him away from the prying eyes above.
The warrior allowed himself to be lead, hunched to half his height, nearly eye level with the Hobbit until they were hidden in a tight cropping of flowering trees.

"You can't tell anyone, please."

"Who would I tell?"

"Anyone? Everyone?"

Glorfindel shrugged as if that wasn't entirely off base.

"As you request. Though it would make a good tale to tell. I'm sure it would rile your company, and Elrond for that matter. So rare do I get one over on him." He lifted a hand in dismissal, "Another age perhaps."

"I'm sure your luck will improve." Bilbo checked to see that they were completely hidden and out of sight from the Company's eyes.

"We can only ever hope." The warrior agreed then followed with warning, "But, if you don't already know: I cannot hide it from Lady Galadriel, either my own personal knowledge or the knowledge in general. She and the Council of the Wise have come and there are very few things that go beyond her sights. Have comfort though, she will keep it to herself unless she sees threat."

The blond paused to reconsider and Bilbo started to speak only to be interrupted.

"Except from Olorin, perhaps. They seem to share information freely, more-so than with the others."

This time Durin opened his mouth but Glorfindel paid him no mind either.

"I would never speak so of the Lady, but of Olorin I have no problem saying: I think he has more than just friendly feelings toward my Lady of Lorien. Such an odd couple that would have been. I suddenly wonder if Celeborn knows-"

Bilbo, quite beside himself at this point, made a sound like a teapot hissing which Glorfindel still continued to talk over until the halfling waved his hands and hopped into Glorfindel's much higher line of sight. The elf looked down finally.

Bilbo eyed suspiciously him until he was sure the warrior was done interrupting and sorted his jostled clothing.

"Are you quite finished?"

Glorfindel lifted a shoulder, his old eyes alight with mischief and Bilbo sighed heavily, his hero worship was flagging into the territory of 'why are all ancient things ridiculous'.

"You're a menace aren't you?"

"I wouldn't know, I'm sure. I quite like me."

"It's never good to be one's own biggest fan."

"Is it not? Let's agree to disagree."

Bilbo tugged at his unruly curls and came to terms again with the fact that he would have no hair left at the end of this.
"On a serious, less disturbing topic than wizardly love lives. The whole Council of Wise is here? Right now?"

He thought perhaps they would have a bit longer in the day before they had all arrived, or at least held their meeting. How was it these magical types moved so swiftly? He had plenty of magic about him and a good jog still got him nowhere and often did him in. He was beginning to feel cheated somewhere along the line.

"The white wizard will be here by sundown. Elrond spoke to the Lady this morning of a map and the dwarrow. There are runes to be read tonight when Saruman arrives from what I heard him say. But that should be the whole of them. Cirdan I do not believe is attending. He has not left the Grey Havens since the surrendering of Narya and I do not think he will do so either now."

Bilbo frowned at this news. Ideally running off in the middle of the day was not the best plan. Chances were it would cause much more attention than at nightfall, as sneaking was always much simpler with a little night about. He supposed he needed to stop wishing in total ideals and worry about what was happening, not what he would have liked it to have been.

"Yes, we need to go," Bilbo agreed with the king beside him who wasn't doing much else than cursing long, hard, and inelegantly in Khuzdul. He did not need a translation to relate to the assessment. The halfling was not looking forward to the rest of this journey if even the places of rest were going to turn into stressful things such as this.

"The Lady Galadriel, you say she will know without a doubt?"

Durin looked around as if he expected the White Lady to lunge from any which way at that very moment and gobble him up.

"Her sight is unprecedented, even often above the Istari. If anyone outside of myself was to see your secret I would believe it the Lady Lorien. What is your rush?"

"We are on a quest with that map Lord Elrond spoke of and they will try to stop us."

"Really? Elrond told me it was a vegetable investigation that Olorin was leading."

Bilbo chewed on one of his nails, which was a nasty unacceptable thing to do, but he did not have his pipe to chew and the impropriety of both acts were nearly equal and the same anyway.

"It is a concise and comprehensive compilation of indigenous foliage and herbaceous vegetation..."

He corrected absentmindedly, the forefront of his thoughts running away, trying to remember all they had explored the day before and how they could get away without anyone seeing. A secret way-

The gears of his mind turned and clicked into place. Perhaps this meeting was more than just fortuitous.

"The truth is," He looked up and Durin gave his little ward a look of disbelief, "we are on a quest to reclaim Erebor from the dragon Smaug."

"Thorin is going to kill you."

Bilbo paid him no mind. “The company, including Gandalf, knows nothing of Durin or the mission he and I have been given by the Valar. We also have it under their high authority to keep reservations on the Wise of this world.”
Glorfindel's sharp eyes slit curiously. “What is your mission?”

Durin and Bilbo looked at each other, “Durin is here to save his direct legacy from their former fate of extinction. The other mission- well- We haven't really figured out. Yavanna implied it would become somewhat clear within the Misty Mountains, but she could not tell us more.”

The great elf seemed to mull this over for a moment, “That is an interesting story. You do trust Olorin though? As I trust my Lady of Lorien.”

"I trust Gandalf, yes, even for all of his meddling. I do not know the white lady nor the white wizard. I do not wish to at this time and no time soon either." He added quickly, "No offense to your lady. I'm sure she's lovely. I'll reserve my judgement on the other."

"Lady Galadriel is the loveliest lady of the land, for certain. But more than that she is fair and kind. Saruman is temperamental at his most agreeable. He would be best to avoid in general for all."

"Encouraging."

Bilbo could live with Gandalf knowing. At least if he did then he not have to not tiptoe about this the entirety of the trip, as Bilbo was sure he was doing a less than graceful job at hiding it anyway, and could only assume that it would not improve in lieu of these soon to be events. He trusted Glorfindel's judgement of Lady Galadriel, and Lord Elrond was of no concern he was sure. So that left Saruman and Cirdan. The former he knew nothing of, the latter was the same.

"Anyway, that is about the whole of it. Durin is attached to me and has been my whole life and together we are to save the line of Durin and retake the Lonely Mountain. Oh. And also there is a war and other such things on the rise. Things I will gladly share with you if you agree to help us.”

The great blond's eyebrows rose to the golden circlet Bilbo had just taken notice of, “And how would you have me help you?”

"If the circumstances were not so I would not ask it of you, since I hate asking favours of new friends, but can you get us from this place discreetly?"

"Of course! I'm an old professional at smuggling. We have no Secret Path of Idril here but I'm certain I can find a stealthy little away for Bilbo's Company."

"It is Thorin's Company."

Glorfindel placed a giant hand on Bilbo's head feigning ignorance, "Is it?"

"I used to like elves." The halfling sighed, knocking away the elf's hand.

"You used to like dwarves."

"I don't like anyone anymore!" Bilbo cried in dismay.

"Did he ever like wizards?" Glorfindel asked and Durin shrugged, "I think for a few moments. Last Thursday-"

"No. No-no. You two aren't allowed to talk anymore."

Bilbo waved a hand in front of Durin's face as it was the closest to him of the two.

"You would keep us, dearest oldest friends, from speaking."
"You're not friends, you've never met before just now. Stop it." Bilbo fluffed his curls back into place, "Now what is the plan?"

Glorfindel's hands came astride his hips thoughtfully.

"Before we continue, I must ask. What's in it for me? Other than the ire of Elrond Peredhel. Which, while I do thoroughly enjoy, is hardly justifiable."

Bilbo's shout was only minimal, he would like to point out, "You already said-! What do you want?"

The elf's fingers tapped his belt. "I'm not sure. I'll have to think about it."

Bilbo threw his head back, "Yavanna save me from the duplicity of elves. Whatever you want other! than my necklace. You can have it. Would you like my fourteenth share of the treasure?"

"I have no need for treasure." The warrior waved this off. "What I want is a piece of the action."

"A piece of the action?"

"As a warrior my goal is always peace, but I do grow bored and I would like a piece of this journey. If the Valar have brought back Durin the Deathless and seen it fit we have met at this stage in your quest, as well as not hidden him from me as they have from the Istari, then this must be something worth experiencing. Also it will save your conscious, as it will no longer be a favour but a trade."

"Fine. A part in the journey. Shall I make us a contract?"

"A fine plan, Master Hobbit!"

Bilbo patted for his tiny notebook before the elf changed his mind again and pulled a page out to began scribbling:

I, Bilbo Baggins, allot Glorfindel, Lord of the House of the Golden Flower, all due right to journey with my person as guide, guard, and adviser during my contract fulfillment to Thorin Oakenshield & Co.

As such, Glorfindel is also required to give his word on honor to protect first and above all else, including myself, the Sons of Durin.

Signed,

B. Baggins Esquire

29 May T.A. 2941

It was in no way as flashy or intricate as a dwarven contracts went but in the moment it would just have to do. Glorfindel put his hand out and read over the paper then took the pencil, pinching the tiny utensil between his fingertips and crouched to use Bilbo's shoulder to sign his name in the remaining bit of space.

"A fair deal, indeed, Bilbo."

"I'm glad. Now, what is our plan?"
The next hour was spent plotting their escape. A plot which started with burgling a map from one of Rivendell's libraries.

Bilbo didn't feel particularly good about that, but seeing as they would be leaving without Gandalf now and many paths into the Misty Mountains were nothing but deceit, round-abouts, bad ends, and trickery, the map was very necessary.

Their second decision was that Glorfindel would not be joining them, not right away at least. His presence with them would bring unwanted attention and his disappearance would raise quick alarm. Bilbo also didn't know if he could persuade the dwarves to openly welcome Glorfindel into their ranks. It would just be easier to force him into the Company and give them little chance but to accept it. Easier to ask forgiveness than permission and all that. The elf would meet them in two days time in a cave near a pass that Glorfindel said was in good use and the only way from Rivendell direct, and most assuredly the one Gandalf meant them to take. He claimed it quite safe and well away from the main goblin pass, a fact which Durin was sorry to inform him otherwise, as they had business in Goblin City and the High Pass was as unwell as the rest of the mountain now. It would continue to be so unless Gandalf convinced one of the giants to plug up the problem as had been the practice in the past.

After this point they were once again without a plan, other than let themselves be captured by goblins and wasn't that just insanity on its own. Bilbo and Durin knew little of what the Goblin City meant, and Bilbo was trying not to worry about the changes he had made by inviting Glorfindel of all persons on this journey. But little was to be done about it now. He just hoped that by tying Glorfindel to the boys and Thorin above himself it would leave he and Durin to accomplish their own business uninterrupted.

Once their planning was done and they had made their way back into their courtyard they said their farewells for the time being. Durin was to follow Glorfindel across the maze of Rivendell to their exit and return to Bilbo to lead the way under the guise that the halfling had scoped it out the night before.

"He can travel half a mile from me before he can go no further. He is bound to the stone." Bilbo tapped at his necklace to remind Glorfindel, then lifted to bump his head against Durin's lowered one in a quick goodbye.

"Come get me when you are ready."

"Tread lightly, my little hobbit."

"I know no other way!"

Bilbo spun and jogged off to the guest house and did not miss the irony that the hardest part of running from Rivendell would be convincing the dwarrow to leave it.

Chapter End Notes

Little things!

Gnomes - another name used for the elves, especially of the First Age
On the topic of Durin's death - In case there is any confusion! Durin the Deathless did not die of the balrog. Not much is really said of his death other than the fact that he was Really Outrageously Old. Over ten times older than the average life of a dwarf and that he finally died of Old. Lmao.
Durin's Bane is actually named for Durin IV who died after mithril-miners woke the balrog in T.A. 1980.
I just wanted to put a warning, since there are multiple reuses of names throughout Middle Earth and I know the movies never specified which Durin that particular balrog was named for.

I think that's all! <3
An Aside to Escape Amain Again

Chapter Notes

I'm alive! What's up everyone! I missed you!
I've been reading the comments and crying as usual! Hopefully I'll get to reply to those this weekend.

Life updates if anyone wants to know!
I'm getting a Lord of the Rings tattoo on Sunday! It's based off the story of the Fall of Gondolin and I'm dying over it!
Also part of the reason I've been in the wind is that my sister, our friend, and I are starting a podcast, lmao. So that has been in the works, and if you ever wanted to hear three women from the Midwest of America attempt to unlearn all the lies we were taught in history class, well, it's going to be a mess.

Anyway! This chapter and the next is the transition into the Misty Mountains and guys, I CANNOT WAIT to write the Goblin City chapters!!!
SOON!!!!!

MUCH LOVE!
-s

PS
I found the tool on my word program to replace everything at once with another word.
So I'll probably be going through and fixing the spellings for everyone to their correct format! <3

The scene in the courtyard had been baffling, just to use a word – a supremely lazy word, to be sure. Had Bilbo been there he would have used something along the lines of 'utterly perplexing' or 'inexcusably inexplicable and unfathomably peculiar'. But Bilbo was not, and as Dwalin was a royal guard, not a scribe, novelist, or even particularly good at epistolary composition (much to Balin's deep suffering), well, baffling was just well enough for him.

You see, we know what was happening below at that time between one Lord Glorfindel, one Mr. Bilbo Baggins, and one unseen King Durin. But, even to those there and in the know, it was an odd meeting to behold. Now just imagine the view from quite a long way away!

Baffling indeed.

It did not take long for the Company to realize that, while they had leapt immediately to the balcony in readiness to save their resident hobbit against any backstabbing elf, rescuing wasn't quite necessary, no matter the volume of Bilbo's shriek.

The dozen dwarrow exchanged a very confused lot of looks at this time, hoping, against odds, that at least one of them knew what in Durin's beard was unfolding before their eyes. Not surprisingly, not a single one of them had any explanation for why their burglar was heard screaming and now had a death grip on the celebrated Balrog Slayer in the courtyard, dragging him off by the arm with
a very severe expression upon his little face.

“T-that is Lord Glorfindel, isn't it?” Ori spoke first, looking up to Balin who nodded slowly in reply.

“Aye, that would be him.”

In truth, exactly none of them had ever seen the Balrog Slayer in person. But, his reputation preceded him, and there was no one else in the whole of Arda that large or that golden, and there was no mistaking who that particular elf was.

“Do they know each other?” Ori asked again.

“How would Bilbo know The Balrog Slayer?” Glóin snorted, turning back through the archway into the living area. “Surely they just met.”

“They seem awful familiar. Seems to me like he knows him.” Nori spoke in that tone he adopted when he merely wanted to be difficult. Dwalin sighed, it was a tone he knew well.

“And why would he not mention that?”

“Why would he?” Kíli shrugged, following Fíli off to the far end of the room.

“Maybe they met yesterday.” Ori gently offered up as he rejoined his ink and pen at the letter desk.

Glóin dropped into a seat with a weighty huff, “I ask again, why would he not mention that?”

“Oh, who could get a word in around you last night?” Nori hopped up to sit on a high table, “If I had to hear about one more gown or swatch of velvet I was going to lose my dinner-”

“Oi!” Glóin shouted, tossing a small pillow across the room.

Dwalin, at this point, tuned out his noisy cousin, as he had had much practice doing in years past, and attempted to diagnose the Bilbo problem as he saw it. A diagnosis which had not progressed in any such way but a slight ache in his jaw from where he had been grinding his teeth over it.

Honestly, Dwalin had never been very good at puzzles, and their hobbit was proving to be a wallop of one. You see, puzzles had always been Balin's forte, he was their look out man after all; not because Dwalin didn't have sharp eyes, in this they were near matched. But Balin won out because Dwalin was of the act first sort, often putting back his critical thinking for quick immediate instincts. On the other hand, Balin's brain worked as quick as, if not quicker than, his speedy reflexes. He often need not pick between the two.

Dwalin could see it in his brother's eyes that he had his own questions, but Balin had been at Thorin's side these last two days; pouring over the map and performing damage control on the king's temper.

They had yet to converse on what it was either of them had found out, and the map was to be read this night. Dwalin didn't know how much longer they would be staying once that mission was accomplished. A chunk of him, the laziest chunk, wished to just claim ignorance on the whole Bilbo-Bifur situation and pretend it had never happened.

Around him, as the Company was quarreling and griping, Dwalin contemplated that, yes, it may just be best (or at least easier) to not bring up what he had seen with Bifur at all.
The longer he thought on it, the less impressive it was, what he had seen. The exchange between them had been very brief, and Bilbo's voice was not necessarily confident, as if he knew the words but was not used to speaking them, and was maybe unsure of his translation. In the moment of fear and surprise it had seemed a far more monumental event compared to hindsight.

Dwalin was beginning to think he was hardly gifted at all. Not like he was in Sindarin. In fact, comparing his abilities in the elf language - his flawless accent and grip on grammar and etiquette - his Khuzdul was disgracefully dismal.

So did that truly warrant his concern? Bifur did not seem to think so.

Thinking back again, Bifur had also been very short in his speech to the hobbit. Dwalin had not seen them speak since, or even be anymore chummy than before their flight into Rivendell. The night before, Bifur and Bofur had gravitated to Bilbo, but that was nothing unusual from around the campfire on the road.

Mayhaps Bifur and Bofur had been teaching him, but that didn't seem likely. They were all very much on top of each other at all times, and he had never seen them sneak off or holding quiet conversations that could have been misconstrued as secretive.

Dwalin searched around the room until he landed on Nori over Glóin's bouncing red hair. Whilst traversing the Ford, before the orcs, Nori had spoken to Dwalin of how Ori had never heard Westron until he was nearly sixteen, at which point he fully immersed himself in the language, refusing to speak to anyone in the house that wasn't speaking exclusively in Common. As the scribe had a mind for language, it had been a quick bound toward fluency.

Bilbo, Dwalin knew, had been riding almost singularly with Bofur and Bifur the last month.

Had he just picked up enough basics to scrape by with the old warrior?

It wasn't entirely unlikely, as before the grotto they had all heard him use small unimportant bits of Khuzdul, so he had some amount of familiarity to it. But there was none of his knowledge that Dwalin, or the rest of the Company, seemed to be overtly concerned by.

Even Thorin seemed content to let it slide, which surely smoothed any of the possible worries from the others as well.

Then there was also the other small thing that had been on the back burner of his mind: those little axes Bilbo threw with very decent precision.

He had seen them up close when the elves had dropped off their pony packs, and well, they may have had their own hobbitly charm about them, but Dwalin had worked with weapons his whole life. He could see the shape of dwarven design in the base build of those axes.

Were all of these little clues to do with why Gandalf had picked Bilbo specifically for this venture? If so why not tell them?

From the corner of the room Dori now had joined in with Glóin, shouting at an obnoxiously cackling Nori. Balin's amused eyes watched through his plumes of pipe smoke, always ready to step in to diffuse the situation if need be. Dwalin rubbed his hand over his eyebrow as a tankard nearly flew into the hearth. He should not have bothered to think a question he knew the answer to: We would have refused.

He exhaled around the glaring truth of it. If Gandalf had given them word of a hobbit burglar with intimate knowledge of dwarrow, ready to join them on a holy venture with no question – they
would have all taken the long way around the Shire and never gone near it again.

Somehow, in their minds, it was better to have an unwitting, uneducated hobbit, rather than one that may know anything of their kind which may have actually proved helpful, if inappropriate.

Even the stony guard was seeing the foolishness in that now.

Dwalin's mind was such a jumble he was nearly sick from it as he leaned against the balcony archway and watched more projectiles thrown around the room. He was dwarf enough to admit he did not know the best course of action here.

Finally, one broken end table and a spilled ink jar later, Balin called end to the argument, though Glóin's cheeks were still pink and Nori still looked like a cat with a canary, and again the topic circled to how it was that Bilbo spoke to Glorfindel with such familiarity. Without a doubt Dwalin knew if there was ever a time to say anything now would be it.

His brother was there, Thorin and Bilbo and Gandalf were not, and they were to have very few chances as such along the rest of their route. Also if there was to be a majority vote to toss the hobbit out on his ear, he would rather it be done when Bilbo was near his home, rather than East of the Misty Mountains.

With one last look to Bifur again, then the courtyard where Bilbo and the Noldori had disappeared, the guard steeled himself trying to look aloof and unimpressed, as he was told was his natural look, and waited for an opening to sneak his concern into the conversation casually.

When the chance came, he lurched, perhaps too quickly, to voice his opinion.

(As has been mentioned twice, if not thrice, dwarves are incredibly unsubtle. But their unsubtly is so unsubtle that the unsubtly of it can be mentioned hundreds of times and its intensity never quite properly described.)

"Are we acting surprised by anything he knows?" Dwalin said, "He knows Khuzdul, doesn't he?"

Everyone turned to look at the tall dwarf at once. Apparently his timing wasn't as well as he supposed, tossed in between the very small break in noise, but it was there now, large and glaring in the spotlight.

Óin was the first to recover, his horn clanking against the back of his chair as he turned his head, "I've noticed that as well. I thought we were just ignoring he knew Khuzdul."

Bombur's soft baritone added from the fireplace, where he had taken to roasting nuts for the road, "Yes, I thought we just agreed he was an exception to the rule. What with the contract."

Bofur shrugged, "He only knows a few odd words anyway, not even complicated ones. Mostly just places. He seems to recognize a few curse words." He laughed at the last thought of Bilbo's occasional exasperated looks when one of the dwarrow shouted something particularly unseemly.

Glóin's cheeks again began to warm up, having just started to settle from the previous argument, "He shouldn't know any!"

Balin lifted his hand for peace before the shouting could begin anew.

"He knows some, yes. But, we can hardly expect our people to be here since the Age of Trees and a few words not to have escaped our mouths for others to understand. Especially the names of places, as Bofur has said."
Dwalin could tell that even as his brother said this he was not revealing the full extent of his worries to the Company.

“I do not think-!”

“Ha! No you don't, hardly at all!” Nori cut Glóin's complaint off with a very hearty laugh. The room filled with exasperated groans and loud insults.

It was obvious now that Bilbo's knowledge had not been as ignored as Dwalin previously thought. Glóin, at least, seemed to have been holding in his outrage for this very opportunity. Though Dwalin had half a mind to think that his cousin just wanted something to yell about.

He had seen the red head teaching Bilbo about appraising the worth of silver, and it was the hobbit that Glóin shoved that picture locket of his wife and little Gimli at first, quite literally any chance he got.

“No,” Dwalin coughed to bring attention back to himself, as they were getting off topic again. He did not miss the sharp look cast his direction from the whittling toy maker in the corner. “He speaks with Bifur. In the old tongue.”

Again every bearded face swiveled at once, this time to look at the axe laden warrior who focused solely down at his little block of wood with no indication he was paying anyone any attention at all. It seemed he and Óin shared the trait of selective hearing when it served them best.

“I've not seen them talk.” Bofur folded his hands into each other, then rested them over his stomach in a similar manner as he was wont to do when holding his mattock. Dwalin thickened the mental line drawn through the option that Bofur had anything to do with the hobbit's linguistic abilities.

“How do you know this, Dwalin?”

Balin's full attention was focused on his taller brother, that familiar calculating look in his eye now that he was able to put together what he had observed at the elven dinner table and Dwalin's odd behaviour toward Bifur.

“When we fell into the entrance into the low cavern, before we left through the scission in the wall – into the path – I saw them speaking. Bilbo spoke the same Khuzdul as Bifur. Shortly, at least.”

“Is that true?” Bofur was now nudging his brother, sounding specially left out, prodding him until Bifur huffed and shrugged away his brother's hand.

“Are you listening? What are they talking about?”

The old warrior set aside his wood, raised his right forefinger, then his left, *I am listening.*

He then proceeded to make them all wait while he put away his utensils before he began speaking and motioning (in a very blatantly annoyed manner) for Bofur to retell in their modern language.

“He says Bilbo spoke it, Ancient Khuzdul that is, but he must think of the words with great care, and speak them slowly or he'd stumble over them. It was only a few words, since we were in a rush. He is not very good. He doesn't know how much he knows, or how much Modern Khuzdul he speaks. He said one sentence of Modern tongue to him with fluency, but with an equally horrid accent.”

Bifur dropped his hands to his lap and Bofur glanced to the princes, who looked at him, then each
Balin quietly took in this new information, along with the apparent friendship to Lord Glorfindel. For all that he wanted to trust Bilbo entirely, he would now reserve that until he had all of the facts.

Fíli watched his tutor's face closely, reading his thoughts nearly as if he had said them aloud, not liking the implications.

“Balin,” the fair haired prince spoke up warily, “he means us no harm. He has done nothing but help.”

“But to what ends, Fíli? I do not think he wishes to harm us. But to what ends does he help us? What is he not telling us?”

The old dwarf squinted into the small fire beneath Bombur's cooking pot, tapping his pipe against his chest. “Your uncle listens to him with a quickness I've never seen of him. Not even with Frerin or your mother. I would dare say even his father.”

“Are we to tell Uncle that his trust is so rare it is now cause for suspicion?”

Kíli's head bobbed in agreement with his brother, “Fíli and I trust him.”

“He does have a way with the line of Durin doesn't he?”

The boys frowned in sync, “Maybe Durins just have a good judge of character.”

“I am not diminishing his character, Fíli. I merely wish to know what it is he keeps from us, and why he is here. I think it is time for the true reason. I do not think he is here against us, but I want to know his goals do not prevent the great lengths we are going to for our people. There is more than just Erebor and treasure at risk here.”

Fíli's furred shoulders lifted and fell back, his chest out, mimicking the stance Thorin took in front of royal audience with near exact precision.

“I know well what is at risk here well, Balin, it is my future legacy of which you speak.” Fíli reminded. “What you are asking is unfair. You want him to spill his secrets, yet we are made of secrets.”

The young prince swept a hand over himself and motioned to the members of the Company.

“We came to him for help and we have yet to tell him what it is we require burgled, or why. We came into his home, ate his larder, slept in his beds, then took him from that home. We have brought him this far, through trolls and orcs already, and will much further still take him into the Wilderlands. Then we plan to send him into a dragon's lair, and you wish him to divest his life story? For what trade? We do not tell him our own tales. He has been with us for a month and he has not asked or pushed us for answers on anything. He does not flaunt his knowledge, if he truly has any, and I think it should go without mention that he has saved us twice from those aforementioned dangers.”

Something bold grew in Fíli the longer he spoke. This was not the youthful cockiness of a boy playing prince, but that of a young heir to a great throne.

“Why must all folk only help us to an end of their own?”

“Fíli, this is the way of the world-” Balin began gently only to be boldly prevented again by the
youngling's voice. He obviously was not posing a question to be answered.

His voice rose now, addressing the room as a whole, taking the floor with more natural skill than Thorin had ever possessed.

Balin glanced at Kíli's worshipful expression from where he had sunken back and was suddenly reminded the throne was not meant to be Thorin's in his youth. Frerin was meant to rule.

Of the two, it was Frerin who had been naturally commanding and held a political social ease. It had been Thorin that had always followed after the other, watching his brother's born confidence with an adoring gaze.

When his time had come to rule, thrust at him with no true preparation, Thorin was kind at heart, but often it was only his temper from which he had learned to demand attention.

Fíli rarely showed any anger at all, and now was not different. He only needed his person and a scant shift in his voice in order to rule full focus. One would think they were in a royal hall, rather than an elven guest room.

“Bilbo spoke to me of the ways of the world as he sees it. He spoke truth to me that there is darkness always edging in on us, all of us, not just upon the dwarrow, or the elves, or men alone. He said it would be in our best interest to make nice with these elves over dinner, to set aside our hatefulness and see what difference it could make. We have been treated well and fair for our manners. We cannot hide from the world forever. Compromise must begin somewhere, and why not with us? The world has the wrong image of us, so is it not our job to prove them wrong? We are a great people.”

At this there was a resounding agreement from each dwarf in the room, a rumble of stomped boots and fists pounding tables.

“I think it is time Middle Earth knew this. Nothing Bilbo has said to us has been damning or of ill intent. I am inclined to give him the benefit of his few secrets.”

Murmured tones of agreement bounced around the room. Balin looked into the prince's eyes that were suddenly decades older than the child that they had left the Blue Mountains with. As his tutor, his family, he felt pride warming his chest despite the possible severity of the situation, and that it was he with whom the prince was disagreeing.

“It does seem that Bilbo has much council to give on dwarven things.”

“I do not think it is dwarven things for which he gives council. It is life he gives council on. It just happens his audience is dwarven.”

“Well said, Prince Fíli.” Balin bowed a bit and Fíli eyed him cautiously as he raised back up. He knew better than to assume that meant Balin was truly backing down.

“Leave him be, Balin.”

Before the scholar could reply it was at this moment that the entrance opened and in came their little burglar, his ears surely burning from all they had been speaking of him.

The hobbit smiled as he leaned back to push the door closed behind him with a breathless, “Hello, everyone.”

He then proceeded, curiously, to begin counting everyone in the room.
It was at this time, also, that if Balin had listened to Fíli he would have stayed silent and let Bilbo be.

Balin did not let Bilbo be.

Not even for a moment.

Dwalin was rolling his eyes even as Balin turned from Fíli and looked at their Mr. Baggins, thinking, *I should have kept my mouth shut.*

“Bilbo, we need to speak.”

“Balin,” Fíli warned, taking half a step to move in front of Bilbo until Kíli grabbed his hand to soothe him.

“Yes, I agree.” Bilbo said, none the wiser to what it was that Balin meant, as he made his way to where the boys had discarded their packs the night before. “Where is Thorin?”

“He went to speak with Gandalf.”

A very annoyed sound came from the back of Bilbo's throat.

“Of course he is with Gandalf. Only the second, perhaps third, most inconvenient person he could find to be with at this time. I know I have asked before but: Is he ever not being difficult? Even when he doesn't mean to be.”

Small hands began packing the princes' satchels. The boys did nothing to stop him, but watched on with puzzled faces.

“Bilbo.” Balin spoke more firmly this time.

“Yes, yes. We can speak on the road, we need to leave.”

“Leave? Leave why?” Fíli looked to Kíli as if he would know the reason.

“We have a mild problem and leaving is in our best interest.”

Balin crossed his arms, his pipe had long gone cold and he was too focused to re-light it now.

“What of the runes?”

“What about them?”

Bilbo finished with the boys' things and moved to grab Nori's bag next, nearly dropping it from the surprise weight. He shot the dwarf a look and tugged out a candlestick.

“Really?”

He placed it back on the table and the rest of the bag was dumped into a pile on the floor to pick out the actual provisions stuffed among the stolen goods.

“How his this helpful, Nori?”

The star haired dwarf shrugged and Dori's glare could have killed him if it were a physical force.

“What about the runes, he asks. We need them read, Bilbo, and that cannot be done until tonight.
Why would we leave before we get the help you demanded we get?” Balin shook his head, “As much as I did not wish to admit it before, asking the elves was the correct course of action.”

“We know they are moon runes, and we know the moon of which we are to read them under. That was the important part. And, luckily for us, the moon hangs everywhere, not just in Rivendell.”

Bofur reminded softly, “None of us read ancient moon runes-”

Óin’s horn raised, “We need those secrets-”

Glóin said, “What sort of joke is this-”

Balin halted all of it, “It was you who insisted we allow Lord Elrond to see the map in the first place, and now you are taking it back?”

“Yes, actually, that was Gandalf who insisted, I just agreed. And I would still agree if the White Council were not meeting this night.”

“Who is meeting?” Kíli cocked his head.

“The White Council. It is a meeting of wizard and elf. Those ancients who see it their job to watch over our world.”

“And they wish to stop us?”

“We are threatening to wake a dragon upon the world again, of course they want to stop us, and-”

“Gandalf betrayed us!” Dori cried suddenly, grabbing at Ori’s parchment. He ignored the squeak of protest, and rolled up the paper into a protective tube, tossing it into his own bag in a fit. This sent a buzz of alarm around the room, other dwarves now scurrying to stuff their bags.

“No- No! Gandalf did not betray anyone! I quite imagine he isn’t allowed to tell us this information, lest he be in his own brand of trouble. They are also here on the matter of the Necromancer, and the curse on Greenwood, that the Brown Wizard spoke of. It is not just us, but I imagine if it is between detaining some dwarves and a single hobbit, or battling a Necromancer, we may be the easiest, and therefore first, concern they look to dissuade.”

This all seemed to make enough sense to the majority of the Company who doubled their packing with a gusto. Balin was not so convinced yet.

“So we must go without out map then?”

“No, not necessarily, no.” Bilbo grumbled, for he truly did not want to say it, and Durin was still not yet there to make him feel stronger about the reveal.

“So what would you have us do then, Master Baggins?”

Bilbo dropped his arms to his sides and closed his eyes to the vaulted ceilings above, a bit more dramatic and Bungo-esque than he would have liked, but, rip the bandage off, as his mother would say.

“I can read the runes.” He said, perhaps a little quickly and muddled together.

Not muddled enough it seemed, for the dwarves clearly understood. The air burst into noisy chaos, Khuzdul and Common flying every which way. It wasn’t until he opened his eyes though that he realized they were all shouting at each other, for some reason, rather than Bilbo. Even Bifur was
waving wildly and the usually calm Bombur was smacking his ladle against a side table.

“I-I can read them!” Bilbo yelled over the cacophony. “I cannot translate them!”

All fell quiet again and Balin's eyes narrowed, “Explain.”

“I can sound them out.”

“You can sound them out.” Glóin said, waggling his head in a way that Bilbo found no appreciation in at all.

“Yes. I know what the old Aulean symbols are only by sight and sound. I can sound them out, but I do not know what it is I am saying, unless it is simple repetitive words. So, with that I won't be any help but... If I spelled it in Westron, or read it aloud, then Bofur could translate it?”

Bilbo looked at the miner desperately hopeful. He knew he could have Durin translate it directly into Westron, as he had been doing with all of the Khuzdul along the journey, but judging by the tension in the group (which he realized had been there before he arrived for reasons he was not certain) he thought this may be the better solution.

Bofur shrugged, as usual all calm and sweetly collected. He trusted Bilbo, regardless of why or how he knew Khuzdul at all.

“Of course I could.” He agreed breezily.

“Oh good.” Bilbo sagged in relief. “Now that that's settled-”

Glóin's voice boomed and startled Bilbo's little body into the air.

“We are just going to let him read our words!”

Two big feet stomped two times each and their owner pointed at the treasurer, “The rest of the map has already been read to me! You were going to tell me what it said anyway! And if you truly don't want me to read it – Well! Then-” He stumbled to think of a threat. “You all can wait for Saruman the White to read them for you while you're all in some wizard jail until you're too old to move! Bofur, Kíli, Fíli, and I will go to Erebor and Rule Under the Mountain without you!”

Ori discreetly scooched from Dori's side over to Kíli's and Bilbo glanced over, “And Ori as well.”

While their elder brother sputtered loudly Nori grinned broadly, hopping down from his table, “I may as well come too. I'm not going to let Ori have all the fun.”

Óin sighed and stood up, groaning as if it were truly an effort, “Can't let them go without a healer then.”

Glóin at this point was a very fetching shade of crimson and Dwalin did not feel as guilty as he thought he should, grabbing his pack and walking by he and his brother.

“I can't leave the boys, Balin. They'll get themselves killed.”

Bifur stood next, pounded his chest twice, then walked to Bilbo and said something while patting the little hobbit's sternum.

The small male looked genuinely lost, but smiled nonetheless and patted Bifur's hand back.

Following suit, Bombur gathered himself up and joined the others. When Balin looked around only
Glóin and Dori still stood apart from them, staring at the old scholar for guidance, of which he suddenly had very little.

Balin had always been the look out man, but he had not seen this coming and, despite it all, he began to laugh. Deep, full, belly laughs came to him in great waves.

He bent forward at the middle and laughed at the sheer ridiculousness of this little hobbit plowing into their Company and taking it over as if Thorin were not even a fixture or concern. The king's opinion had not even been mentioned.

“Fine, laddie.” He said, unfolding himself and touching his handkerchief to his nose. “We will do it your way.”

He wiped the remaining moisture from his eyes and then gave Bilbo a very serious look. “But I have questions, and I will have your answers.”

Bilbo tried to swallow around the dryness of his throat and fiddled with his necklace, “Of course.”

He could not deny that this had gone quite a bit smoother than he had expected. Not perfectly, but the majority of the Company was readied, and they had all taken his side over Balin's quite quickly. The gravity of which he was sure he did not fully understand and did not have the time to dissect.

Bilbo turned around, half to hide his nerves from Balin, and looked to Fíli, readying to send him off for their mislaid king. But, just before he asked, he thought of the conversation the night before and changed his mind on messenger.

"Kíli,” he said instead, “please go fetch Thorin, and do not alarm Gandalf. Tell your uncle you want to spar or he needs to eat lunch, which I'm sure he's missed. Something along those lines to get them apart.”

"Right!" The dark haired prince went rigid with a salute, then sprinted from the room, his eagerness to help bright on his face.

Across the sprawl of Rivendell Kíli found the wizard and Thorin under the shadowed protection of a garden wall.

"Uncle!” Kíli cried happily, rounding the corner where Gandalf and Thorin spoke with tempered tones.

"You've missed two meals in a row, and Dwalin is claiming he can best you in a spar!” He wasn't sure which lie to go with so he used both for good measure. "Hello Gandalf!"

The old wizard smiled at him, "Kíli, are you enjoying your stay Rivendell? I heard of your ventures with Elrond's sons yesterday from Master Lindir." 

There was a twinkle of mischief in the wizard's eyes and the prince grinned and blushed under the attention.

"Just a bit of fun, you of all people would understand, I'm sure. Can I steal my uncle? Please?”

Kíli looked at Thorin and twitched a bit. His uncle was watching him with a mellowed look, one Kíli did not expect.
It was nearly what he would consider sad, but he could not fathom what he had done to make his uncle feel upset about. Then again, he never quite knew what to do on the rare occasions that Thorin's face went tender. He did not know why, but it made his chest ache in odd ways to see him as such. There was much to their uncle he and Fíli did not now, dark stories kept from them, or romanticized until they were more palatable, and to watch how easily all liveliness could slip from Thorin's eyes left Kíli hollowed and helpless. Though this particular expression did not hold the same emptiness he was used to seeing.

He thought of Fíli asking if Thorin's trust was so rare it was suspicious. Was tenderness so rare it was only to be read as despair or oddity?

How difficult it must be to exist with others only thinking you know how to be jagged and rough, like stones who had never known water.

Gandalf saw these expressions, and knowing they were not for him to be witness to, bowed his head, the tall point of his hat bending to one side with the motion.

"I suppose I am done with him for now, dear Kíli. Do not forget to bring the map this evening. Tonight is the night, Thorin! Perhaps bring Bilbo with you. He seems most excited by the prospect of moon runes."

"I will ask the halfling." Thorin conceded.

"Very good. Enjoy your lunch and your exercise." The wizard waved over his shoulder.

Kíli returned the motion, watching the wizard walk away and nudging his uncle along in the opposite direction until he was certain they were out of ear shot. Only then did he speak.

"Bilbo says we are leaving." He kept his voice low in case of nearby elves.

"Leaving?" Thorin's soft expression went shadowed again, worn frown lines falling back into familiar place. Kíli noted that, at least, it seemed he was simply confused and not angry.

"Yes. He's in a right fuss about going and Balin was arguing with him on the matter, but the Company decided Bilbo was in the right. He sent me to get you and said to not alarm Gandalf."

"What is happening now?"

Thorin knew full well Bilbo would not uproot the Company on a silly whim, so something must be in the works. Of course they could not have a merely simple, productive stay with the elves.

"Something about a White Council?" Kíli said, unsure still of what exactly that was.

Thorin's face snapped sharply down to his nephew, "Gandalf said nothing of the Council being here."

"Yes, Bilbo implied Gandalf was not in the authority to give out that information."

"As usual it seems Bilbo is ahead of the curve. He was spying on Elrond and the wizard last night."

"Really?" Kíli's voice pitched high.

Thorin looked at the youngling, his eyes glinting in the sun. He always got a certain enthusiasm when he thought Thorin was confiding something with him first out of everyone, before even Balin
or Dwalin or his heir. He could not deny him the bit of gossip, not when he had spent the morning thinking of he and Frerin, and Kili's eyes were so wide and effervescent.

“No, they were speaking a strange language I've never heard before. Bilbo did not seem to have issue with it, and was very intent on gathering their words in secrecy.”

“Oh.” Something anxious passed over Kili's face.

“About strange languages Bilbo knows..”

“Khuzdul?” Thorin deadpanned.

“Yes!” The brunett looked up surprised at his uncle's indifference. He had expected a snarl at the very least.

All Thorin had to say was, “His accent is horrible.”

For a moment Kili just opened and closed his mouth, then the whole strange morning came tumbling out of his mouth in a flurry.

“I- We- Balin and Fili were arguing about Bilbo's knowledge on dwarven things. Dwalin says he can speak with Bifur. I- I thought Fili was going to pull rank on Balin! Then Fili gave this amazing speech about dwarves deserving attention for being great! Then everyone but Glóin and Dori stood up and joined Bilbo's side over Balin's!”

"Mahal.." Thorin pressed two fingers to his temple, rotating them against the headache threatening to come to light.

"He's staging mutinies now." It was far too early in the day for this amount of excitement.

Kili snorted beside him, "It was very impressive.. Fí and Bilbo both, if it means anything."

Thorin's blue eyes caught the sun between the split of his fingers, nearly white from the light, a small ghost of a smile at his lips.

"Balin is a worrier by nature. He has raised certain concerns with me already, though I see he has decided to take matters into his own hands. I suppose it would be asking too much for our Master Baggins to have a solution for the runes of our map?"

"Well, about that... Bilbo said he can read them - that is to say - he said he can sound the runes out and Bofur can tell us what they mean." To Kili's continued surprise, Thorin sighed in relief and pressed his hand over his breast pocket where the map lived.

"That is fortunate."

“Y-you're not angry?"

“Do you think so little of me that I could only possibly leap to rage?”

Kili's neck and cheeks turned red under the thin brushing of his beard.

“I- I didn't-”

Thorin watched him stutter and trip for a few seconds before he took pity. The poor boy stopped
and dropped his head in shame until Thorin gripped the scruff of Kíli's neck to bump their foreheads together, forcing the prince to look at him. The king realized he had not done this for a very long time to either of the boys. Again he was reminded that the night before Bilbo had been the first person he had traded the adoring act with for a very long time.

“I am joking, Kíli. Calm down.”

“Oh..” Deep brown eyes went crossed looking up at him.

“In truth,” the king pulled back and left his hand on Kíli’s shoulder a moment longer. “I am not pleased at this sudden development, and I will have choice words of all languages for Gandalf, whenever it is he appears again. But this is beyond us now. We must adapt and persevere, as Mahal made us to do. As for our Master Burglar, I have my own theories. But there is a time for everything. And now is not the time to stay and fight on this matter, but to make our escape instead.”

The king turned them in the direction of the Company's dwelling, and Kíli did not mention that Thorin sounded very much like Bilbo when he said such things.

By the time Thorin and Kíli finally arrived the Company was packed and loaded. Bilbo was placed a healthy distance away from Balin, half hidden by the pile of packs belonging to the boys, Thorin, and himself. Kíli immediately ran to join Fíli, Ori, and Bofur's small group nearby.

"Master Baggins says we are to leave, Thorin."

Balin eyed his king for any signs of agitation, of which he found decidedly little. So little, in fact, he wondered at first if Kíli had even told Thorin anything of what had transpired at all.

"Are you back to formalities Balin?" Thorin asked, taking his bag from the hobbit, who seemed unusually unwilling to make eye contact.

"We've had some recent discoveries on our burglar, I'm not certain how I feel."

Thorin looked at the dwarf who had been his confidante for nearly his whole life. There was no hatefulness in his tone, just worry, concern, a lifetime of political war which left him reserved from acting too briskly on problems he could not solve with immediacy.

"I'm sure." Thorin hummed, watching Bilbo's cheeks lighting with a blush, either from anger or embarrassment. Perhaps both.

"I've been informed the White Council is meeting?"

"Their last member is to arrive at sundown." Bilbo nodded.

"You know this for fact?"

"I do."

Thorin wished to make the other look up at him, at least for a moment. This was a far cry from the hobbit of last night who had spent the better part of the evening calling him names, intolerable and hero among them, all with a readiness to hold his gaze. He found himself hoping Balin had not shifted something in Bilbo to keep his friendship from them now.
“You are certain you can read the map?”

“Yes.”

“You understand we will speak of this later.”

“Understood.”

"Then there is nothing else to be said now, lead the way Master Hobbit."

From his pocket Bilbo pulled his stolen elf map and Durin gripped his shoulder, pointing the way to their escape.

It was on this day, in the late cool air of the 29th of May, the Company of Thorin Oakenshield made their flight from Rivendell on a secret path of Lord Glorfindel's making.

Chapter End Notes

Little things:
Originally Tolkien had Dwalin as their lookout man! But he later changed that to Balin's title. So I just kind of wanted to hearken over to that and give Dwalin's sharp eyes some due! That's kind of why I pick him to catch little things at times!
As Thorin and Balin were to have dinner with the Company that night, and the elves mostly avoided the guest house, the missing dwarrow did not go noticed until the Council of Wise had long gathered and no map arrived on time.

Thorin had been told where the meeting room would be and had agreed to it with surprisingly little confrontation. But here they were, the moon high in the sky, and no dwarf, map, or hobbit within sight.

If Gandalf hadn't looked so put off Lord Elrond would have assumed this was some personal touch of his meddling. But the grey pilgrim looked prickled and discontent, for of this turn of events he had no part.

Mithrandir had come to the meeting under the weight of guilt as it was. He did not feel any pride in keeping the truth of this meeting from his friends, and he felt even less pleased with himself for the specific deception on the part of Bilbo Baggins.

While, yes, he did know that the little hobbit was excited to see the runes, it was not the reason for asking Thorin to bring the fellow along.

The truth was this: he knew no one in Arda but the Lady Galadriel could break the code of secrets surrounding his chosen burglar.

Gandalf drug his fingers, the nails chipped and caked with dirt, over the stone table, little wakes of blue left behind in his tracings.

*Help may come from the weak when the Wise falter*, Bilbo had said, and it had not stopped echoing in Olórin's ears since. A constant pendulum circling in his mind, never landing on a satisfactory explanation.

Specifically, it was the way in which Bilbo said 'falter' that gripped and clung oddly at all of Gandalf's thoughts. He had not meant it as a stumble or a misstep, he said it with all the leaden avoirdupois of 'betrayal', and though he spoke vaguely, Gandalf did not think Bilbo was being hypothetical. This faltering was not of future tense, this was immediate treachery in their midst. Bilbo was warning him.

So, which Wise had faltered?

He – Gandalf - had not, Elrond would not, and Galadriel could not. The other Istari who did not sit upon the Council had never shown any such predisposition to sway from their duties. The Blue Wizards were long wandering the world, content with each others company. Radagast did not have a foul bone in his body. Círdan, if speaking in technicalities, was still part of the Council, but he had all but exiled himself to Mithlod. He had not wandered further than the mouth of the Lhûn in
an age, and likely would not until the last of the eldar had sailed.

So that left..

Opposite from Gandalf, across the table, sat Saruman the White. His layered robes white and clean, every bit of him immaculate. He even made the way in which he slouched in his annoyance with the distinct aura he had much better things to be doing seem regal.

(For a split moment Gandalf spared a thought to watch Lord Elrond and Lady Galadriel glide about the room as if on air and was curious why it was every Istari, the direct magical messengers to the Vala, had such poor posture. He was sure Bilbo would blame it on wizardly brooding.)

Curunír, his fellow wizard, had always been proud, self satisfied, but it had never worried the pilgrim before the days of recent.

Even at the conception of their Council, when Galadriel had pressed for Mithrandir's leadership and Saruman had sharpened as if personally slighted at not being firstly elected. This was a grudge he still held over them both, he knew; even centuries later, after Olórin had refused the placement and Saruman had been put in the role in the end regardless.

Old creatures held their anger in different ways than mortals, and Saruman's grudge seemed of little importance. Gandalf had merely felt that was just who Curunír was. He was wise, talented, powerful, and occasionally spiteful – Gandalf could hardly begrudge him his confidence or his paltry faults.

Now though, as darkness creased the edges of their maps, folding away the goodness in the world and leaving them very much boxed in, Mithrandir had to question why it was the wisest of the Istari ignored this all yet. Speaking and acting as if nothing was happening at all.

Eventually, after another hour of no dwarrow and Saruman's verbal accusations against their handling of the situation at whole, Lindir was called to go look for the King, his halfling, and scholar on the chance they were merely turned around in the many halls of Rivendell.

Waiting commenced again, as Lindir did not return in a timely manner, and when he did finally appear he looked somewhat rattled. The dark haired elf, who was never one to stumble over his words, stuttered a few syllables out, looking slightly panicked in the process.

“What is it, Lindir?” Elrond asked patiently, after several moments of the elf's pitiful rambling.

“The dwarves, my lord.”

“What about them?” Saruman snapped, the air sparking and crackling about him.

“They are gone.”

"Gandalf."

Saruman's heavy gaze bore across the stone table as Lindir tried to leave without too obvious of a rush.

“I know nothing of this.”

“Why would I believe that? Always you must meddle, Olórin.”

“I fail to see what it is I gain by their not being here.”
The Council leader's smoothed hair seemed to lift, responding to the staticky shift in the air as his annoyance grew.

“Did you think these schemes of yours would go unnoticed?”

“Not forever, no. Though I had hoped for a little longer before being entirely found out.”

The two elves turned at once to hide their amusement from Saruman's possible recognition, lest they be scolded as well. Gandalf swayed under the stormy eyes of his fellow Istari, holding his darkly stained hands palm up in pacification.

“I am simply doing what it is I think to be right, my old friend. Is that so wrong?”

“When there is a dragon to be loosed, yes.”

“This dragon has long been on your mind.” Galadriel crossed the room to stand beside one of the decorative pillars, she had a way of making the moonlight look dingy and unwashed. Oh, how Gandalf adored her, and all the goodness she stood for.

“That is true, my lady. Smaug holds no allegiance. If he should find cause to side with the Enemy – a dragon could be used to terrible ends.”

“What enemy, Gandalf?” Saruman suspired. He had been fatigued to this Council meeting before it ever began. “The Enemy is defeated. Sauron is long vanquished, never again can he regain his full strength.”

“Does it not worry you that the last of the dwarf rings should simply vanish along with its bearer?” Gandalf leaned into the table. “Of the seven dwarf rings, four were consumed by dragons, two were taken by Sauron before he fell to Mordor. The fate of the last dwarf ring remains unknown. That ring which was worn by Thrain. The last I saw him he no longer had it. Someone must have it now.”

“I am sure he misplaced it somewhere along with his mind. It does not matter, without the Ring of Power the seven are of no value to the enemy, you know this. He needs The One.”

A lustful gaze passed over Saruman's face, one Gandalf may not have noticed at any other time if Bilbo's voice not been loud in his thoughts.

His brother, his fellow protector, suddenly terrified him deeply.

“That ring was lost long, long ago.” Curunír continued, “Swept out to sea by the Anduin.”

“We do not know for sure that is was swept to sea. If we gather our strength now, while it still lies hidden away, we can master the Enemy.”

“I do not believe the One will ever be found again. It will sit in the depths until the end of times. I still do not follow your need to stir such things about. We are at peace. For four hundred years, we have been at peace.”

“Are we? Are we at peace?” Gandalf looked at his brother in amazement. For how could he say such things? Peace? If they were at peace, Gandalf had not noticed.

“Trolls have come down from the mountains, raiding and destroying. Orcs attacked us upon the front doors of Imladris. They came into the valley with no fear.”
“This is not a prelude to war, Gandalf. Isolated instances of foolish inbred creatures is no proof of war. You are always looking for trouble where none exists.”

“Let him speak.” The Lady Galadriel's voice glided like so many melodies across the room. Gandalf lowered his head in thanks to her.

“There is something at work beyond the evil of Smaug.”

Gandalf steepled his fingers, glad his beard covered the way his throat bobbed in apprehension.

“There is something far more powerful. We can remain blind to it, but it will not be ignoring us, I promise you that.” Gandalf touched at the wrapped sword his his lap and thought of Bilbo, his confidence and strength in adversity.

“A sickness lies over Greenwood. It is said.”

Gandalf's voice tapered. Saruman eyes rolled beneath his peppered brow, rotating one elegantly pale, pristine hand in the air, “Now is no time for dramatics, Gandalf. Don't stop. Do tell, please, what is being said? I await with bated breath.”

“The Woodmen of the North speak of a Necromancer living in Dol Guldur.”

Lady Galadriel turned from where she had been observing the garden.

“A sorcerer who can summon the dead.”

“That's absurd. No such power exists in this world.” The white wizard waved his hand again. “This is a mortal man dabbling in black magic.”

Gandalf gripped the sword in his lap, “And so I thought too, but Radagast has seen-”

“Radagast?” Saruman's whole being shifted in condescension. “Do not speak to me of Radagast the Brown. He is a foolish fellow.”

“He is odd, I will grant you. He lives a solitary life.” Gandalf chuckled awkwardly.

“It is not that.” Saruman's tone took something similar to that of the gossiping hobbits about the Shire on market day. Ready to nitpick their neighbors and insult their teeth, the size of their garden, and unbrushed feet. The grey wizard did not think Saruman would enjoy the comparison as much as he.

Their Council head continued on insulting their fellow Istari's hygiene, seeming no longer concerned or remotely attentive to the fact or matter of the Necromancer or even dragon.

Gandalf did not dare interrupt, though, allowing the other to rant to his content for the time being, until a tiny hum prodded the back of his mind. It was followed by a gentle glow, like that of a small flame within a white paper lantern.

'You carry something.'

The Lady Lorien's voice filled his mind with gentle curiosity.

'It came to you from Radagast.'

'Yes,' Gandalf agreed, careful not to look at her quite yet and risk alerting Saruman of their secreted conversation. 'He found it, in Dol Guldur.'
'Show me.'

Up from his lap Gandalf brought the sword. Elrond's eyes flitted from it to the other members of the council. Of this he had not spoken to them, thinking it was Gandalf's to show and explain. But its very presence gave him an ill feeling.

“What is this?” Saruman's eyes became lidded, annoyed but interested as Gandalf pulled away the leather wrap to reveal the blade.

“It is a Morgul Blade.” Elrond now approached the table, though he was loathe to be near the thing. He had already inspected it the night before, and did not care to see or touch it ever again. “It is the blade made for the Witchking of Angmar. It was buried with him when Angmar fell.”

“That is not possible.” The White Wizard straightened his posture, “A powerful spell lies upon the High Fells of Rhudaur and they cannot be opened. What proof do we have this came from Angmar's grave?”

“I have none.” Gandalf yielded.

“Because there is none.”

The other Istari summoned his staff and tapped the ground, punctuating each of his next points as he spoke.

“Let us examine this. We have an orc pack – a single orc pack – which has dared to cross the Bruinen.” TAP “A dagger from a bygone age has been found,” TAP “and a sorcerer who calls himself a Necromancer has taken up residence in a dilapidated old fortress.”

Two more severe TAP-TAPs swept across the night into the quiet hills of Rivendell startling several mourning doves into the air. “Have I missed anything?”

The other wizard shook his head, unable to deny or add to anything Saruman had noted.

“This list you have is not so very much at all. My concern is of this now missing dwarvish company you have scrounged into being. I do not condone this quest. You worry of the missing dwarven ring, lost by the gold crazed Thrain, and you are taking Thorin into the depths of dragon sickness. I imagine I do not need to make mention of the lack of logic in that. I do not pretend to understand your reason for raising their hopes on this Gandalf—”

Again the faint paper lantern glowed within his mind, and Saruman's voice faded into the background.

'Why did you bring the little one, Mithrandir?'

Gandalf stared down at the blade in the center of the table. Its darkness stark against all the love and peacefulness held within Imladris. He wished it had stayed buried, but evil seemed never to know when to die, or when to stay dead, in this world.

'I do not know.' He responded honestly, “I have found it is small things and ordinary folk that keep darkness at bay. Bilbo Baggins? I think it is perhaps I am afraid, and Bilbo gives me strength. He is small, but he does what he thinks is right, not for gain, but simply because he thinks it is best. Help shall often come from the hands of the weak when the Wise falter."

'He said this to you.'
'He did.'

He felt a gentle musical humming through his mind which tingled his scalp pleasantly.

'Your company is safe, my friend. They are at the base of the Misty Mountains, do not have fear for them.'

'You knew they were gone before we arrived.'

'I did.'

There was a very light feeling of amusement and Gandalf could see a very faint shift of the Lady's lips from the corner of his eyes; he tried not to return his own smile too readily.

'Do you know what it is the map reads?'

'I do not, but the Company will know soon.'

'How?' Gandalf nearly choked on the word to keep himself from speaking it aloud. This was good news of the highest sort, but he could not imagine how it was they could manage.

'Durin the Deathless is with you, Mithrandir. He walks among your Company.'

Gandalf's eyes widened. Luckily, at a moment, the Saruman had focused his attentions on a less than pleased Lord Elrond, and his very open expression went unnoticed.

The ancient magic that would catch the breeze, the curious things his little friend seemed to know with no reason or explanation, the ease with which he accepted the dwarves. Many things began to fall into line.

'Bilbo..' Even in his mind it sounded as if the breath had been struck from him.

'The Hobbit.' Galadriel looked at Olórin, her delicate chin dipping subtly.

'Bilbo is Durin the Deathless…'

Gandalf did his best to house the surge of sudden apprehension, and no small amount of relief stacked on top, from showing on his face. His dear friends were safe for now from Saruman's prevention, but what now did this twist of fate bring upon the Lord of Bag End.

'He is his keeper.' Galadriel cryptically corrected. 'We have been here before, but we do not realize it. He is here to fix something that was wronged. They are going to the Goblin City.'

'What could Bilbo possibly need from the Goblin City?'

The paper lantern in his mind went abruptly sallow, sickly and foreboding. Across the room Galadriel stopped moving and the constant light about her seemed to dim. Gandalf's eyes lifted, he could feel the answer before she said it, could nearly see the burning golden circle in the catch of candle flame reflected within Galadriel's eye.

'One to rule them all, Mithradir.'

Miles away, at the base of the Misty Mountains, tucked into a ground level alcove near the beginnings of the route into the High Pass, the crescent moon shone with not a cloud in the sky.
Bilbo held Thorin's map and very much tried to look as if he knew what he was doing, and that he wasn't just staring at it while Durin explained what to do.

He was excited, though, sure that. Such a map this was! and he hadn't had chance to touch it yet.

It was old and well worn, thick pulpy parchment with dark ink sunk into it. Oh, it was deceptively simple, but only an untrained eye would believe that. To anyone who knew anything, and Bilbo prided himself on knowing many things, it was beautifully made. And the artistry! Like all dwarven crafts it was immaculate.

Durin waited until he thought Bilbo was done fawning over the map to point where the runes would be. (He would never pass up a chance to see the hobbit's resounding approval of his children's crafts.)

"Now, all you should have to do," the old king's voice rumbled Bilbo's back, "is hold it up when the moon shines, just as Elrond did. The light will come through, react with the magic and ink, and illuminate the runes, then I can read them. Just repeat exactly as I say."

Bilbo nodded and, when he was ready, held up the map into a bright beam of moonlight. Behind him the others who had not gotten to see the runes yet gasped in various degrees of excitement and awe.

Durin then leaned over Bilbo's head, hands pressing down on his shoulders, and began to read the words slowly and deliberately; making certain it was clear so Bilbo could copy his pronunciation as he went.

Bofur stood to Bilbo's right, listening carefully to each word, ready to act as official interpreter. It took a minute or two, as Bilbo was so unpracticed in speaking Khuzdul at any length. By the end of it his tongue felt awkward and silly. So much so that at first Common even fell clumsily out of his mouth, as if his tongue no longer knew what it was to be doing at all in any language.

"That is all." He said as Durin patted his curls.

"Your accent is awful." Bofur smiled at him, as if that wasn't an insult.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. It says: Stand by the grey stone when the thrush knocks, and the setting sun with the last light of Durin's day will shine upon the key-hole."

Bilbo automatically glanced straight up the warmth of Durin at his back. He forgot himself, not thinking how odd a motion it was to do when no one else could see who it was you were looking up to, but he wanted to know when Durin's day was, as he had never heard of it in all of his time.

Above him Durin shrugged unhelpfully. Apparently he had not made that holiday for himself.

Bofur, who was still placed to Bilbo's side, looked up and behind them, searching for whatever it was Bilbo was looking at, but there was nothing there to see, not even a bug or a leaf. Before he could ask, though, Bilbo had already turned to look at Thorin again.

"What is Durin's day?"

"You don't know that one?" Gloin grumped and Bilbo scowled, copying his accent flamboyantly.

"No, I don't know that one. You're welcome for reading your map by the way."
He had half a mind to throw the paper at Gloin if it wouldn't be an insult to the map; instead he shoved it out into Thorin's general direction.

"It is the first day of our new year." Thorin answered, taking the map and holding up to the moon one last time, as if now that it had been read he would see the translation for himself. "When the last moon of Autumn and the first sun of Winter are in the sky together."

"That's very specific." Bilbo frowned.

"Yes, and time is running out quickly. We must make it to the Lonely Mountain by end October."

"And we have no wizard now."

"Gandalf will come back. This is his volley and he won't run from it. He is probably more dedicated than ever now that no one wants him to do it."

Bilbo said, wiping his hands down the front of his vest, "Well. Job well done, everyone. Now that that's all said and done. It's late we should all be getting some rest probably. I'll take last watch as is usual."

One furry foot kicked out with enough force to spin him away from everyone in hopes to make a quick escape, willing that no one remembered the promise of questions and answers. He made it three steps only to be caught by Dwalin as he passed.

"Nice try."

The blond slumped so heavily even his curls seemed to go lax in disappointment.

"Bilbo, you said we would have answers, and now we would like them."

"I've just read your map for you! Doesn't that allow me a pass?"

"That is what we need to speak of, Bilbo! Your unwarranted, illegal knowledge of our people."

"Illegal! Illegal where? Where is it illegal?"

"Everywhere!" Gloin demanded, knocking over and extinguishing one of the candlesticks Nori had managed to pilfer even after Bilbo had cleared his pack in Rivendell.

"I hardly know of any Shire laws that state such a thing."

"It goes against our laws!"

Bilbo sighed heavily, "Am I on trial, Master Balin?"

Bilbo's shoulders set, he was not going to wriggle out of this it seemed, so he must face it head on. He knew what gravity a true trial could hold among the dwarrow and he was not beside calling the bluff.

Behind him Fili made a sound near growling, "Balin. Do not."

"This is not a trial. But it is something I need to know for the safety of the sacredness of this journey, my friend."

Through all of this Thorin was silent. He leaned himself against the wall allowing the interrogation to play out around him, all the while watching Bilbo with a critical eye. He had missed the earlier
disagreement, and his only information had come from the excitable Kili, which had been very many words with very little explanation. He was willing, for the time, to let this proceed as it had left off, if only to bring himself to speed on what it was the rest of his Company seemed to have unearthed on the burglar.

“Does it truly matter?”

“Yes.”

"I will curse of dwarven stubbornness until the day I die, and then probably a little more after that for good measure. I told you before, I've studied. You did not seem angry at my knowledge these last weeks, of names and landmarks. I sang a song, yes, but it was in Common, is that not allowed? Is this because of the moon runes? There are books you know. If one knows where to look."

He brushed his thumb across his nose. Bilbo knew full well that there were no books on Moon Runes anywhere near the Shire, or more likely anywhere at all for that matter, but he hoped no one else knew that.

"Dwalin says you speak Khuzdul fluently."

Bilbo turned a glare upon Dwalin who had released him to cross his arms across his chest in mild discomfort. There was a frown upon his lips that was oddly apologetic.

"How would he know?"

"I saw you speak with Bifur." He grunted and shifted, progressively more put off as this went on.

He had meant for this to take place within Rivendell without Thorin. His friend was not decidedly violent, but the last thing they needed was the weight upon his shoulders to increase, or for him to lose trust in the wizard. Most of all Dwalin did not wish to break the tentative...something (friendship?) going on between his king and the hobbit.

"I-" Bilbo wheezed at the physical prevention of his unscreamed scream.

"I barely know anything. I'm not fluent by any means, not even in minuscule measures, in any version of the dialect. A few words and sentences, mostly places and curses and a few odd exclamations. I'm sure I sound very much like a great idiot when I speak the few things I can say. And apparently my accent is horrible."

“It is very bad.”

“Yes, thank you again, Bofur.”

Everyone watched him with varying degrees of disbelief, but he wasn't lying, truly he wasn't. He only knew a few sentences in whole, and those he mostly knew from Durin's story telling. When the king would get caught up and lapse into Khuzdul at particularly exciting parts. Everything else Durin translated on the go, just as he had the map. Had the Company started spewing Khuzdul at him that very moment, without Durin, he'd haven't the foggiest of what was being said. Unless it was about biscuits, beards, or a bit of cussing.

Balin looked at Dwalin who shrugged, "They did not speak extensively. Bifur spoke, Bilbo replied one short sentence. As Bifur already said."

"How do you know these ways?"
"I-" Bilbo wrapped the length of his necklace around his fingers too tightly, mulling how exactly to phrase what it was he wanted to say, or not say.

"I was raised by a dwarf my whole life, along side my parents. Then once my parents died-"

He swallowed the gross feeling of lying, even if it wasn't technically a lie - barely a fib even. Speaking naught of it had been difficult, but this tiptoeing the edge of full divulgence was gritty and uncomfortable.

“After my parents died, it was just me and an old dwarf in Bag End.”

This seemed to stop everyone in their tracks, their complaints frozen mid-word.

Bilbo knew he could not hide the sincere adoration in his voice for Durin. He loved the old dwarf king, more than anyone alive, he could not hide that if he wanted to. That he spoke in such a way, and also slotted a dwarf into category with his parents, must have stumped the dwarrow entirely.

A few watched him with a new softness and understanding. Thorin's expression was unreadable, the boys looked like they were buzzing in elation at this news, and at the end of the day it was those three which he needed on his side. He had two of three at least, it seemed.

"Who is this dwarf?" Balin finally asked.

Bilbo very nearly sneered but held it in at the last moment, "Beg pardon?"

"What is his name?" The scholar felt a pang of guilt for pressuring Bilbo in such a way. But he was quite able to set his fondness on the side when necessary.

"His name?"

"Yes."

“I'm not telling you his name. That is mine. You cannot just demand such a thing, you know how sensitive names are to your people.” Bilbo prodded at his sternum possessively. "No, you do not get to ask me that."

He could feel the eyes around him, bulging at his sudden burst protective agitation. Balin left that be and chose a different course.

“And where is he now? We saw no proof of dwarrow in your home.”

"Yes, and you would know wouldn't you? As you all trounced in with no manners or respect for my dwelling at all.”

There was a series of uncomfortable coughs, and the sound of scuffing boots.

Bilbo fisted and stretched his hands, lifting onto his toes then back down again, attempting to release his growing vexation.

“My dwarf has long since been to rest within the stone halls of the Father and the Great Smith.”

Durin's hand brushed through the curls at the nape of his neck and the king's pride bright within his person.

At this announcement none spoke and Balin looked over the little hobbit with a wondering gaze. The majority of the Company had wilted, it was never pleasing to hear of a death of their kin,
especially from one who seemed to love them as family.

"Thank you, Balin."

Thorin's voice broke the stilted silence, his boots echoing in the alcove as he walked. The exiled king placed himself only a meager step away and looked down at Bilbo with intense focus. Bilbo, to his credit, did not shy away, but there was a gentle tremor in the corner of his mouth that betrayed his bold stance.

"May I ask you something?"

Thorin tried very hard to ignore that familiar itch of pique picking at the skirts of his mind. What he had to be angry at he could not pinpoint, there was nothing, he did not think. It seemed to be more of a default, a response to his uncertainty of how to handle the increasingly odd situation of Mr. Bilbo Baggins.

"If you truly must."

Bilbo's lips were twitching into a somewhat anemic smile. He knew where this was going before Thorin spoke and he felt suddenly very much ready to sleep for three days straight.

Why this had never been something he and Durin had preplanned he did not know. Partly it may have been that at times Bilbo very much thought this quest would never come, at other times, when he pictured it, hiding Durin from the dwarves did not seem like it should be much different than hiding him from the Shire his whole life.

He had been very wrong, but he could not change that now, and Thorin was eyeing him with too blue eyes, wanting surely to know how he foretold more dangerous things than how to read runes.

"You said Azog rides for us. For me. How do you know this?"

Bilbo sniffed and brushed his knuckle against his twitching nose. Yes, that had been precisely what he was expecting.

"You know I could lie to you?"

Thorin's eyes lifted from where they had been focused on the corner of Bilbo's lips. Something in his face crumbled, withered at the mention of Bilbo's offered deception.

"You could."

"I could tell you I've heard it in the pubs and taverns. That the Dunedain tell tales of the North. Which is true they do, and I imagine you would believe it. I could tell you they've spoken of a great pale thing on a great pale warg that misses one arm chopped about here." One finger traced a line across Thorin's arm. "That this thing rides into battle pale as the stars then rides out red as a blood moon. I could tell you he leaves fire and pain and death behind. That he chants the day he will act his vengeance for his arm stolen."

Thorin swallowed, his throat clicking audibly in the hollow cave. The rest of the Company had gone very much forgotten to him, if the sheer candidness in his reactions was any tell at all.

"I could tell you these things, and of the Rangers and their stories and you would believe them."

"I would. So why do you not say them now?"
He asked it with more desperation than he meant to show. He blamed it on still being softened from the night before. He had confided very intimate things to Bilbo, the halfling had equally confided in him, and he did not want to – could not – betray that trust. He also knew yelling would get him no where with the halfling.

Thorin needed to know how Bilbo knew these things, the details he should not know were more extensive than he had thought. Balin's story had not included Thorin's reaping of Azog's arm, they had never spoken of Azog's white warg.

"I do not speak such things because I would be lying to you, and I do not feel like lying to you, Thorin."

"How do you know The Defiler still rides." Thorin asked again.

"I won't lie to you, but I also will not tell you. Not now." Bilbo shifted just enough for his shoulder blades to brush Durin's torso. "You trust me, yes?"

Thorin's quickness to answer startled himself, "I do."

"Then trust me that I will tell you when you need to know. If I speak too freely things may unfold incorrectly and I will not know what to do. I barely know now."

Thorin's thick brow fell low, carving deep shadows into his face.

Óin spoke up, startling Thorin into remembering his Company was just there, at his back. The healer said what it was they all were thinking, what Thorin had begun to suspect when they had spoken that night in Rivendell and had been tumbling over in his mind since.

"You are a seer…"

Bilbo laughed with no joy, "Not as such. Wouldn't that make life convenient?"

He said this as much, if not more so, to Durin than the others.

"We are playing a delicate balancing game and I am finding more scales than I was previously thought I was given."

Without thinking Bilbo lifted his hand, the tips of his fingers reached toward Thorin to a rope of a gray sparked braid, pinching it by its cinched metal to untangle it from where it had caught on a piece of scale mail.

He thought nothing of it until he heard a gasp from one of the boys and realized what he had done. As quickly as he could he pulled his hand back to himself. Thorin tried to ignore the beating of his heart, tried not to let the force of it waver his voice.

"I do not know who it is you are siding for."

Bilbo touched Thorin's chest, above his heart, carefully avoiding his hair this time, then his hand retreated to touch that stone at his neck.

"My concern first and foremost is the Sons of Durin."

Thorin it seemed did not know what to say to this, and Bilbo felt a curious lash of guilty pain from the ancient soul at his back.

"It has and it will always be Durin's Sons."
He repeated, then looked around the Company, taking special care to catch each and every pair of eyes in the alcove.

"I will see you to the home that was stolen from you. All of you. And I will see a Durin on the throne of Erebor again. That is my lot in life to carry. The origin of the reason does not matter, for the goal is very much unchanged. You will have Erebor back. You will know home again. Even if I must die getting it for you."

Bilbo looked up at Thorin last again, holding his eyes the longest.

Blue searched his face, roving every swell, every curve. What he found, Bilbo did not know.

Much like their conversation the night before the throneless king was silent and uncertain. There was a fumbling air about him, something a far cry from royal splendor, as if he had un-known his entire life in that moment and was now completely raw to a world he had not fathomed before this.

The rest of the Company stayed equally silent, not a single further question was voiced, and many had wet looking eyes in the dimness of the night, the moon having fallen quietly behind thick clouds.

There seemed to be nothing else to say now, and if there was Bilbo could not rightly conceive of what it would be. So again he excused himself from the center stage of the dwarves.

"I will take last watch, as is usual. Wake me when it is my time."

This time not one of the dwarrow spoke out as the small creature walked through their ranks to the wall where he had placed his things.

Bilbo curled into himself on the rocky ground and fell into a fitful sleep, his back pressed to Durin's side. The next morning he would try not to examine his dreams of an empty Bag End filled with never-ending caverns and the foreboding cooing calling him from their black cores.

Chapter End Notes

GUYS
I'M SO EXCITED FOR THE HIGH PASS AND GOBLINS

End Notes

Come visit me on Tumblr/IG for my inspiration stuff and also I have started drawing art for Mazarbul I will post these two locations as well!

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