Skin Deep

by Konori

Summary

When Gandalf walked up Bagshot Row one morning, Bilbo Baggins knew the mad wizard was trailing adventure and peril behind him as he usually did. What Bilbo didn't expect was to be handed off to a gaggle of thirteen Dwarves on a suicide mission to reclaim their mountain from a dragon half a world away.

It's rather difficult to keep secrets when you're living in each other's pockets after all.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Prologue

If anyone outside the Shire were to ask, Bilbo Baggins of Bag End was a typical Hobbit of the Shire. A respectable gentle-hobbit that conducted his business in Bree fairly and with no small amount of good cheer. As was with all Hobbits that visited Bree.

Within the Shire, any Hobbit would say he was amongst the most respected of respectable gentle-hobbits if not a bit… odd. How he was off was a mystery for no one could say precisely why he was odd. For all intents and purposes, Bilbo Baggins was a prime example of a good Shire raised Hobbit. He ate seven meals a day, and he socialized with his neighbors and relatives on both sides of his heritage save for the Sackville-Baggins of course, dreadful folk indeed for they have had their eyes on Bag End for years.

The only things blatantly odd about him was how young he looked, no older than a tween some would say, despite having lived in Bag-End some absurd amount of years, just like the Old Took and his line he was in longevity, and unmarried at that! He could often be seen reading about the world beyond the Shire, and then there were the many walking holidays he took where he was gone for weeks, only to turn up again as though he never left. Why the most outlandish thing about him was his lack of healthy Hobbit roundness! These quirks were indeed odd, but everyone in the Shire would agree that those small things were not the cause of his oddity. No, it wasn’t truly apparent in anything he did or said to anyone until after the events of the Fell Winter, and even then there was no apparent cause.

They just felt it in their bones, the older Hobbits would say, like an itch under their skin, the younger ones would claim. It was like watching a thundershower on the horizon, the Thain said, the potential for danger is there, it could shift and head your way instead, but you know it can’t harm you because it is going the other way.

“Oh, of course, that doesn’t mean the lightning can’t strike you despite your distance,” he amended.

Many Hobbits agreed. Bilbo Baggins had a feel and voice about him that exuded power and age, but it rarely showed itself, as if it lay sleeping. It would come at odd times, that feeling. Some would say they felt it while they happened upon him telling Fauntlings tales of the world beyond the Shire’s borders as if he had gone out there himself. Others would say it happened when he would tilt his head as though considering a cut of meat with his sharp summer green eyes as he bandied with Lobelia Sackville-Baggins over the inheritance of Bag End. Like a hunter peeking open a sleepy eye to see the potential meal it might partake. Needless to say, Lobelia would make a quick retreat when leveled with that look.

Regardless of any odd feelings, rumors or what have you, most of the time it was ignored because Bilbo Baggins was an upstanding member of the community. Few knew why he was odd, and the majority of the Shire left it alone. Those who knew, two of which have long been dead and three, possibly six, others who still live, one Hamfast Gamgee, Gandalf the Grey, and Lord Elrond of Rivendell and most probably his children, had sworn to never tell a soul of this knowledge.

For you see, Bilbo Baggins, Hobbit of the Shire, was also…

A most unusual Skin-Changer.
Bilbo Baggins sits on his bench outside his comfy smial, pipe in hand smoking Old Toby as he was wont to do most mornings. The sky is blue, sun shining, and a cool breeze flows around Hobbiton this early morning. As the breeze ruffles his hair, the contented look upon his face shifts into a small frown. He inhales deeply through his nose, and his small frown morphs into a scowl. For on the wind brings the scent of magic and the roads beyond the Shire. Only one being in all of Middle-Earth, that he knew, holds such an essence.

“What is that daft old wizard doing here now?” he grumbles to himself before closing his eyes and taking a long drag from his pipe.

He knows the wizard will make his way to his smial at his own pace as he was inclined to do. Cracking open his eyes, he opens his mouth and lets loose a perfect smoke ring before closing them again and tilting his face up toward the sun.

The shuffle and clack of the wizard’s feet and staff meet his sharp ears from around the bend as he takes another drag and let loose another smoke ring. What he does not expect is the smoke to turn back around and pelt him in the face as the shuffle and clack stops in front of his gate. With a small cough, he opens his summer green eyes and gives the wizard an unamused stare. Twitching his nose and inhaling deeply, he catches the scent of deep mountain earth before he greets the wizard as he was taught to.

“Good morning.”

“What do you mean? Do you mean to wish me a good morning, or do you mean that it is a good morning whether I want it or not? Or perhaps you mean to say that you feel good on this particular morning? Or are you simply stating that this is a morning to be good on?” the wizard asks with no less pomp than usual.

Bilbo raises his brow at the wizard’s high-handedness.

“What are you on about, you daft old fool?”

A smile spreads across the wizard’s face.

“By the Valar, you haven’t aged a day, Bilbo Baggins! It’s been too long, my friend!”

“And you still look as old as ever, Gandalf. It’s been nearly eleven years, yes. Hard to forget your stench though,” Bilbo mumbles with a smirk.

Gandalf huffs as though affronted.
“You try traveling across Middle-Earth, Master Baggins, and see how well you smell upon your return!”

“I’ve done that, remember? Several times in fact, and usually trailing after you on one of your ventures,” he states flatly before taking another drag from his pipe. “Especially after the Fell Winter, I might add.”

“Ah, well yes, you have indeed. Most eventful those were! More so than I can say about my recent endeavors,” Gandalf mutters, his tone slick with secrets.

Bilbo stares hard at the wizard before leaning forward and inhaling harshly through his nose.

“Well, I never—” Gandalf begins to fret before Bilbo shoots him a stern glare, eyes flashing golden in the light of the sun.

“No,” Bilbo says with a finality that brooks no argument as he stands from his bench and ambles over to his mailbox.

“I haven’t even asked—”

“And you needn’t have to, Gandalf. The last adventure you swindled me into helping you with involving Dwarrow was quite enough for me!”

Shuffling through his mail, he trots up to his door, fully intending on leaving the meddling badger to his devices without him.

“To think that I should live to be ‘Good morning'ed’ and sent on my way by Belladonna Took’s son, as if I were selling buttons at the door after all we’ve been through! You’ve changed, and not entirely for the better, Bilbo Baggins,” Gandalf grumbles with admonishment.

“Now see here, wizard! The last time was the final straw! I’ll not be target practice or almost turned into a fancy fur lining for Dwarrow again!”

“My dear boy, it was all a misunderstanding. Certainly—”

“Most certainly not, Gandalf! The only Dwarrow who had a lick of sense and forgiveness was Fundin!” he huffs, pushing open his door, but pauses at the threshold, his father’s good manners scolding him something fierce. “However… You are welcome to stop by for supper tonight, for old time’s sake.”

Gandalf’s frown turns into a sly smile as he says with amusement,

“Well that’s decided! It will be very good for you, cooped up here as you are! And most amusing for me!”

Bilbo rolls his eyes fondly and waves the wizard off as he enters his smial. As the door shuts behind him, he sighs and heads toward his pantry. Dealing with wizards always left him a bit peckish afterward.

Unknown to him, Gandalf was up to his usual tricks after the door had closed. Using his staff, he carved a small rune upon the door, and with a smirk upon his face and a satisfied nod, he exits through the gate and heads to the Green Dragon to inform the others of the night’s plans.
Aware of how the big folk tended to eat, and after a snack himself, Bilbo heads down into Hobbiton to purchase more food for the night’s meal. Four fish, extra vegetables and the needed spices later, he gives a satisfied nod and heads back to Bag End. As it is still early, Bilbo shuffles around his smial, picking up odds and ends gathered during his early adventures with the wizard. More than likely, they will reminisce about them after supper in front of the fire with a fresh pot of Old Toby to keep them company, he thinks, looking upon the map he used to mark all the places he had been. Glancing over to the mantle above the hearth to the smooth, round shaped rune stone upon it -with only hints of the blues and greens it once shown with- seems to sparkle back at him in mirth despite it being long dead. He smiles and continues his cleaning.

“Back together once again,” he says wistfully.

Sometime later, seeing the sun nearing the horizon through the window, Bilbo heads to his kitchen to prepare supper for the wizard and himself when suddenly his bell rings. Standing frozen in confusion and blinking rapidly, it is only as the bell rings again that he shuffles towards his door.

“Well he’s especially early,” he mumbles to himself with a frown on his face. “I’ll have to pull something out of the pantry to tide him over till supper is ready, mad wizard.”

“I wasn’t expecting you so early, Gan…dalf…” he says, pulling the door open, only to trail off as the being standing before him comes into view.

There was a Dwarf on his doorstep.

“Dwalin… At yer service,” he says with a slight bow, eyes never leaving Bilbo’s.

There was a bloody Dwarf on his doorstep!

“Damn that Maia to Mordor and back!”

Chapter End Notes

So first real chapter, not very long I'm afraid. As always, constructive criticism and advice always welcome while flames will be ignored like my grandmother's outdated advice on dating.

Any questions please feel free to message me, though I will not be revealing certain things about the story. You have to read to find out.

Updates probably sporadic, I do have a life ya know :P.

If any are interested in the art I've done for this, let me know, though they won't be posted till after certain reveals.
There's A Dwarf On My Front Porch

Chapter Summary

In which Dwarrow manners are questioned and Bilbo loses it... well almost.

The Dwarf – Dwalin, he amends in his head – stares at him in surprised confusion, brows raised. He stands at nearly a foot above Bilbo, with a mostly bald head gleaming in the fading sunlight showing only a hint of tattoos with a scruffy beard, half an ear, a furry pelt, armor, and what looks like a small armory on him. He would have been more intimidating if Bilbo had never dealt with Dwarrow before, he thinks.

“Well not you, obviously,” Bilbo snips then says with a nod of his head. “Bilbo Baggins, at your service. Do we know each other?”

“No,” Dwalin says with a hint of scorn as he pushes passed Bilbo through the door and stomps down the hall as he takes off his cloak. “Which way, laddie? Is it down here?”

“Is what down where?” Bilbo asks, his temper starting to flare up.

“Suppa’! He said there’d be food, an’ lots of it.”

Dwalin then proceeds to toss his cloak at Bilbo as he moves to enter the parlor. More than a little irked by this pushy lout by now, he takes a step back, the cloak falling to the ground in a heap. Both Hobbit and Dwarf stare at it for a moment.

“It seems you have dropped your cloak, Master Dwarf. Be a dear and pick it up would you?”

Both raise their heads and stare, Dwalin with a frown and Bilbo with a raised brow. This lasts for several moments before Dwalin nods his head and steps forward, stooping down and picking up his cloak. At which point Bilbo then grips the Dwarf’s arm and tugs him toward the door, because no one, not even Lobelia Sackville-Baggins, was allowed to barge into Bag End like they owned it but himself thank you very much. Dwalin gives him a very startled look which Bilbo pointedly ignores. The lout looks like no one smaller than him has ever stopped him from plowing them over.

“Now, I don’t know how Dwarrow treat strangers coming into their homes, but here in the Shire, you are invited in, or you stand outside the door until you are, Master Dwarf. Then, once invited in, you hang up your cloak and leave your weapons and boots by the door,” Bilbo says testily. “The only person I invited into my home today has been a daft old badger that calls himself a wizard named Gandalf. Your names all wrong for one, you don’t look like you’ve got a lick of magic in you, nor are you impractically tall or look so old you could have had tea parties with the Valar themselves. So I ask again, Master Dwarf, do we know each other?”

Dwalin’s lips quirk up like he’s trying to suppress a laugh after his initial shock wears off. He gives a nod of acknowledgment and steps back into the doorway.

“Yer alright, lad. Dwalin, son of Fundin, at yer service,” he says with a grin and a more profound bow.

“Fundin?” Bilbo asks in astonishment. “Fundin?! You’re one of Fundin’s sons?!”
“Aye?” Dwalin replies, his gaze once again confused.

“Well don’t just stand there! Come in, come in! I’ve been waiting a long while for one of you to come searching for me!” Bilbo says in excitement as he drags Dwalin into Bag End and to the parlor after he has left cloak, weapons, and boots at the door and showing him to a seat. “Just give me a moment and I’ll bring you a nip and drink to tide you over till supper is finished cooking. You caught me just as I was about to get started with Gandalf’s and mine.”

“Ye were only cooking fer two?”

“Well of course,” Bilbo says giving Dwalin a confused look this time. “He was the only one I invited, and he didn’t mention bringing anyone else along. Why? Should I be expecting your brother as well?”

Before Dwalin can say anything, Bilbo trots off to the pantry where he grabs a mug of ale and a small block of cheese and sausage. A quick stop to the kitchen to grab a plate and a knife and he returns to the parlor to see Dwalin looking around the room with interest.

“Here we are. This should keep you till it’s ready.”

Taking a sip of the ale, Dwalin hums his approval before leveling his gaze on Bilbo again.

“So the wizard said nothing of our arrival?”

Bilbo huffs a put upon sigh.

“Of course not. The daft old fool can’t seem to get his kicks any other way than at the expense of others.”

He smirks as Dwalin chuckles, “However I have enough in my pantry to feed two Dwarrow and a wizard, no worries.”

“Ye’ll be needin’ te make more’n that for the rest who’re goin’ te be arrivin’.”

Bilbo looks sharply at Dwalin, eyes narrowed in apprehension as what the Dwarf says hits him.

“There’s more of you?!” he hisses. “How many more are there?!”

“We number thirteen. Fourteen if ye think te include the wizard,” Dwalin says with a shine of amusement in his eyes.

“Thirteen…Thirteen?! Thirteen Dwarrow are going to be flooding into my home, pillaging my pantry, and leaving mud all over my floors?!” he snarls.

“Aye, sounds abou’ right.”

“Why are there to be thirteen Dwarrow invading my home, Master Dwalin?” he growls, teeth gnashing together in his skull.

“Gandalf sure left ye in the dark, Master Baggins,” Dwalin sighs. “It’s no my place te tell ye our quest. Ye’ll have te wait for the wizard or our leader fer that.”

Bilbo stands as still as possible and takes several deep breaths in and then out through his nose, clenching and releasing his hands in sync. His temper nearly had him there, he thinks, as he manages to keep his blood from boiling over.
“Oh, when I get my hands on that sneaky old codger, he’ll be lucky to leave Bag End with his beard intact!” he rumbles as he starts pacing, needing to burn his ire out before something really not good happened.

“How long till they will all be here then?” he asks tightly as he pauses in front of the Dwarf, temper reigned in, but surely not gone.

“Three hours at most, two oth’awise,” Dwalin answers with a shrug, eyeing him warily.

Bilbo takes another few breaths.

“Right then,” he says and clears his throat. “Right, man the door will you? Make sure they take their cloaks, weapons, and boots off and left at the door. I’m not above browbeating you all into cleaning up whatever mess you lot leave, Master Dwalin.”

“Aye, Master Baggins, I do believe ye would,” Dwalin chuckles tightly, slicing some cheese and sausage, watching Bilbo’s back as he leaves for the kitchen. “I expect an explanation te how ye knew my father afore the nights out.”

“Yes, yes, just keep them out of my kitchen and pantry if you know what’s good for you!”

“Aye, Master Baggins!”
Dwarrow... Why Did It Have To Be Dwarrow?!

Chapter Summary

In which Dwarrow like to complain, beards are used as hostages, and cutlery is tossed.

Chapter Notes

Note - anytime the Dwarrow talk in Khuzdul, English will be written between ◯ (the bigger ones though) because I don't have time to make this really authentic and figure out the Khuzdul for everything.

Also, I may at any time, rework some things in the chapters. I will leave a note on the newest chapter on which chapter I've reworked. Comments, constructive criticism, advice, or pointing out errors are greatly appreciated. Flames are ignored like my brothers' tantrums.

For the next two hours, Bilbo finds himself mixing and mashing, cutting and scraping, stirring and straining the entirety of his pantry and cold storage. All of this to make a hearty feast for thirteen Dwarrow he didn’t even know - aside from Fundin’s sons whom he had heard many stories about from the Dwarf, and a presumptuous, clot-head of a wizard. He swears that if he is not thanked for this, he’ll be slipping hot pepper seed powder into every single dish.

“Master Dwalin, when more of your… troop arrives, have some of them help set the table, then kick them back out. I’m running out of room in here, and I’ll not have them getting their sticky paws on my hard work till my say so!” Bilbo calls out as he stirs the ingredients for a Shepherd’s Meat Pie together, restraining himself from calling them a gaggle of Dwarrow.

Despite having taken off his boots, Dwalin’s footsteps are clearly heard by his Hobbit ears as he steps into the kitchen and leans against the doorway.

“Ye sure are pushy fer a host.”

Looking over his shoulder, he levels Dwalin with a look that says ‘Really? I can’t even believe you dare say that!’.

“Master Dwalin, I’ll have you know I’m a most excellent host!” he snaps, eyes seeming to flash gold in the firelight, waving the spoon in his direction threateningly. “I am not, however, such a docile one that I’ll let uninvited guests make a mockery of me and dirty up my smial!”

Dwalin raises his hands up in surrender as he backs out of the kitchen and back into the parlor, his expression troubled.

“Jus’ go easy on some of the lads, Master Baggins. Yer sharp tongue -” he starts to say before the bell rings, announcing the next ‘guest’ has arrived.
Bilbo finds himself hoping its Gandalf so he can tangle a few flowers and string into his ridiculously long beard. That or use it to yank him down to preferable height and give him a thorough tongue lashing. He was still debating the merits of both actions as he pours the Shepherd's Meat Pie into a bowl to set in the oven.

He knows the moment Dwalin opens the door for the new ‘guest’ when the scent of deep earth and Dwarf hits his sensitive nose.

“Oh-ho! Evening, brother!” comes the new voice through the parlor.

“By my beard! Yer shorter an’ wider than last we met!” Dwalin says with mirth.

An affronted huff from the new Dwarf echoes through the room before he says,

“Wider, not shorter… Sharp enough for both of us.”

Both of them chuckle and then a heavy crack nearly causes Bilbo to drop the bowl of sausages marinating in mild pepper powder, tomatoes, and sage before he scurries into the parlor after setting the bowl down to see what has happened.

“Did you break something?!” he shrills, worry for his odds and ends making him ready to snap at them both.

“No, Master Baggins, jus’ greetin’ my brother.”

Standing beside Dwalin at the door was a Dwarf closer to his height, dressed in a red coat, hair, and beard more white than even Gandalf’s that flicks up at the ends, pointed boots, and a mace strapped to his waist. The Dwarf’s eyes assess him before he smiles, though it’s more of a smirk, as though he is found lacking. Bilbo’s brow twitches in reawakened annoyance.

“Balin! At yer service!” he says with a sweeping, jolly bow -if that’s even possible.

A politician, how lovely, Bilbo thinks with disdain, even though Fundin had warned him about his eldest.

“Bilbo Baggins, at yours,” he says with a nod before giving Dwalin a pointed look.

“Aye, ye bossy creature,” he huffs before herding his brother closer to the door. “A’right, brother, hang yer cloak, an’ leave yer weapons an’ boots by the door.”

“Pardon?”

Bilbo turns and returns to the depths of the kitchen, smelling that the pie was ready to remove from the oven and set out to cool.

“Master Baggins has requested that I keep ye all in line as he prepares our meal. Seems the wizard left out tha’ there was more’n jus’ himself when speakin’ te the Hobbit. Also left out the bit as te why we’re here.”

Bilbo at this point only pays half an ear to the conversation as he continues to prepare more food. He vaguely registers the sound of weapons and boots being taken off and left at the door then Dwalin leading Balin into the parlor. Their rumbling voices in the background is a pleasant addition to his ordinarily quiet smial. He enjoys it while it lasts as the arrival of the rest of the Dwarrow was sure to be loud and grating on his ears.
Not ten minutes later the bell rings twice in a row and he hears Dwalin let out a groan. Oh dear, they must be troublemakers, he thinks absently as he slices the loaf of bread.

The bell rings twice more, and Bilbo’s brow twitches once again.

“Master Dwalin!”

“I’m gettin’ it ye fussy thing!”

He hears Balin chuckling as Dwalin practically stomps his way to the door, and judging by the creak of the hinge, yanks it open, the lout.

“Fí- Mister Dwalin?” comes a low, but young voice.

“You’ve moved to the Shire?” another voice asks, but slightly higher than the first.

_Oh… Dwarflings_, Bilbo thinks as his shoulders drop, and he tosses his head back to look at the ceiling. Dwarflings of all creatures.

“Oi! Yer not allowed in ‘ere till yer cloaks are on the peg and yer weapons an’ boots are by the door!”

“Why Mister Dwalin! Have you been domesticated at last?” the younger one sasses at the older Dwarf.

“I’ll show ye ‘domesticated’, ye cheeky little brat! Off I say!”

“Alright, alright!”

The older Dwarfling chuckles and then the clack and clang of multiple weapons coming to rest by the door meets his ears. When it continues for longer than expected does Bilbo’s brow rise in astonishment.

“Is that an armory I hear being dropped by my door?” he calls out into the parlor.

There are small laughs from the two youngsters, and when the sound ceases and the muffled stomps of the three Dwarrow heads to the kitchen, he still has yet to be answered. Turning around he comes nose to nose with one of the Dwarflings.

“Gah!” he yelps, reflex shoving his crumb covered hands into his face and pushing him back.

The Dwarfling stumbles back a step with a chuckle. Bilbo scowls at the dark haired youngster, hand clutching his shirt over his pounding heart. He’d have to keep an eye on this one, light-footed little beastie.

With an affronted huff he’s about to snip at the Dwarfling when he notices the golden-haired one, who looks older, reaching for the pastries that were to be one of the desserts. He snatches up a wooden spoon and quickly whacks the offending hand.

“Naughty little Dwarflings forfeit their rights to dessert to Master Dwalin,” he snaps as the youngling pulls back his hand quickly, rubbing the back of it with astonished eyes.

Dwalin is behind them laughing heartily as the younger one looks at him in wonder. Bilbo narrows his eyes at him and brandishes the spoon under his nose.

“Don’t think I won’t use my spoon on you if you act up, you cheeky little beastie.”
The Dwarfling just grins widely.

“I like you!” he says with a laugh before stepping back to stand by the older youngling.

“Fíli,” the golden one grumbles.

“And Kíli!”

“At yer service!!” they say as they bow low together and rise together.

“You must be Mister Boggins!” the dark-haired one says with a smile.

“Bilbo Baggins, at yours,” he says with a nod before he stares at them a moment. “How long did it take you two to get that right?”

Kíli, the dark-haired brat, grins and says,

“Would you believe me if I said that was the first time we’ve done that?”

“Nope.”

The youngling laughs and yanks Bilbo into a rough embrace, turning him around so his back is against the young Dwarf’s chest, then looks to Dwalin.

“We’re keeping him right?” he asks in all sincerity, ignoring Bilbo’s squawk of denial, and the blonde one who is more likely Kíli’s brother, Fíli, looks apprehensive of Dwalin’s possible answer.

“Table, Master Dwalin!” Bilbo snaps, leveling Dwalin with a mighty glare.

“Aye, aye. Mahal’s beard, Kíli, ‘e’s not a pet ye get te keep,” Dwalin sighs before gripping Kíli’s shoulders and starting to drag him and, consequently, the Hobbit toward the dining room. “Come on, give us a hand. The sooner it’s done the sooner we eat.”

“Aye Mister Dwalin!”

“Unhand me, heathen! I can’t get the rest of the food ready if you’re clinging to me like a limpet!”

“Sorry, sorry Mister Boggins!” Kíli says with a grin as he releases Bilbo.

Bilbo rolls his eyes at the young Dwarf’s enthusiasm as he sets his clothes right. It was either going to end up being annoying, or uplifting, he thinks.

“Oi! Watch it!”

“Not my fault yer head got in the way.”

He heaves a long-suffering sigh before he continues viciously mashing the potatoes. If he weren’t so opposed to eating humanoid creatures, he would consider having Dwarf stew for the foreseeable future. The noise dies down in the dining room until Dwalin starts herding the boys back into the parlor. Bilbo moves in, flitting about between the kitchen and the dining room to fill the table with all of the dishes.

“But I’m starving Mister Dwalin! Just one bite! No one will know!” Kíli whines. “It all smells so good…”

“Aye, I’m hungry too, lad, but Master Baggins said we wait. An’ I’m sure the Hobbit would notice
“even a crumb outta place,” Dwalin grumbles.

“Mister Boggins is such a small thing. It’s not like he could do anything.”

“Wait till he manhandles ye, lad.”

“I heard that!” Bilbo snaps, popping his head through the door into the parlor. “And that’s Mister Baggins to you, Master Kíli!”

Both Dwarrow flinch, hunching their shoulders up to their ears, causing Balin and Fíli to chuckle.

“We can eat as soon as the rest of your lot get here,” Bilbo rumbles. “Until then eat that cheese and sausage and keep quiet!”

As if summoned the bell rings once again.

“That’ll be the rest of us,” Balin says from the chair he has commandeered.

“Wonderful…” Bilbo says with a sigh heading to the door. “Come on then, Master Dwalin.”

“What? Ye can answer the door on yer own now!”

“Oh yes, one lone Hobbit against nine burly Dwarrow. The odds are ever in my favor,” Bilbo says, tone heavily laced with sarcasm.

“Agreed.”

His sarcasm seems to have flown over the lout’s head. Quicker than the burly Dwarf can see, Bilbo is beside him, hauling him up off the floor where he sits and shoves him to the door, passing the astonished faces of Balin, Fíli, and Kíli.

“Oi! No need te be rough!”

“You’ve yet to see me be rough, Master Dwalin,” he growls as he unlatches the door. “No wonder Balin has gone white. It’s like I’m dealing with four Fauntlings in one body.”

“Oi!”

“Fíli, you must remind me of this night if I ever decide to sass Mister Boggins,” he hears Kíli whisper loudly before, with eight distinct yelps, an avalanche of Dwarrow falls at his feet through the door.

Bilbo stares at them for a long moment before the bottom of a grey robe catches his eyes outside the door. Snapping his gaze up, he meets the amused gaze of one Gandalf the Grey as he leans down to peer through the door.

“Gandalf,” he snarls, hopping over the pile of Dwarrow, that had frozen when he spoke, and out his door. “Master Dwalin, take care of them, please. I have a Maia to speak too.”

Before Gandalf can even react, Bilbo grabs his beard, keeping the Maia at eye level and drags him down the moonlit path to the gate before he shoves his face close to the old badger’s own.

“I do not appreciate you or anyone inviting those that were not invited to my home, Gandalf, especially Dwarrow. Two of which, I’m sure you knew, were Fundin’s sons! Enough Dwarrow on this side of the Misty Mountains hunt for my hide when I run beyond the Shire; I don’t need any more added to that list!” he hisses lowly, tightening his grip on the man’s beard and tugging down sharply for emphasis. “Why did you even bring Dwarrow here? What on Arda were you thinking?!
Did you even tell them I said ‘no’ to whatever adventure you lot are going on, or what I am?"

"Well, no I-"

"Of course you didn’t!”

"Now see here, Bilbo Baggins-”

“No you see here, Gandalf! I’ll not be swindled into making friends that will only turn on me when what I can change into gets out, and you know it will again!” he snarls, lips pulled back from his teeth, canines a little longer and eyes now golden and slit, reflecting the moonlight with an eerie glow. “I’ve lost enough people because of what I am!”

He sees Gandalf stiffen before the wizard lets out a long-suffering sigh.

“These Dwarrow will be different, Bilbo Baggins! If it makes you feel better, just tell them of your first and nothing more! Now kindly release my beard from your heathens grasp!” he snaps, his magic pulsing in a small warning.

The magic brushing against his skin makes him snap his hand away from the wizard’s beard.

“That’s underhanded, Gandalf,” Bilbo grouses, blood tingling through his body with adrenaline and magic, while making a show of brushing down his vest to cover the shaking of his hands.

“So is kidnapping one’s beard, my dear Bilbo,” the wizard says with a kind smile as he straightens up. “Just hear them out, my dear boy. Listening never hurt anyone, now has it?”

“You’re lucky I like you, you old codger,” he grumps. “I should feed you bland soup for doing this to me.”

“Indeed! You would break this old man’s heart by denying him your mother’s famous Took Chili! Why I can smell it from here! It’s been too long since I’ve had it.”

“And to think you wouldn’t even be having it this evening if not for Master Dwalin showing up early,” Bilbo says primly, following the man through his door that the Dwarrow had thankfully vacated.

Taking a quick glance and the pile of boots, he nods, satisfied and then confused when he counts only twelve.

“Yes, well… I had not expected him to do so. But I’m sure it’s all for the best!”

“Gandalf… We’re missing a Dwarf,” he notes as they walk into the parlor after Gandalf has taken off his boots and leaned his staff against the wall.

“Really?”

“He is late is all. He traveled north to a meetin’ of our kin. He will come,” Dwalin says from where he stands in front of all the new Dwarrow standing in his parlor.

He’s surprised they didn’t immediately head to the dining room upon smelling all of the food.

“Before or after all the food is gone?” Bilbo asks causing Dwalin to grin. “Never mind, I’ll set aside some food for him. Are we doing introductions now?”

“Might as well,” the tattooed Dwarf shrugs.
Two of the Dwarrow step forward, bowing and introducing themselves.

“Gloin, at yer service,” the red-haired one says before jabbing the older Dwarf beside him, seems he was hard of hearing.

“Eh? Oh! Oin, at yer service.”

The one with star-shaped hair is shoved forward by the one that held himself with an air of aristocracy, and the mousy, scholarly looking Dwarfling follows along.

“Nori,” the star says shortly, with a nod of his head.

The aristocrat promptly cuffs his closest ear before bowing.

“Dori, at your service, Mister Hobbit.”

“O-Ori, at your service, Mister Hobbit.”

The last three step forward next. These three were obviously workers, a bit scruffy looking, but overall look more amiable than any of the others... Well, at least two of them. One is a very… round, red-haired Dwarf with an exceedingly long beard, the second a dark-haired Dwarf with a funny hat and curled mustache, and the last, obviously older, Dwarf with an axe… stuck in his head. An axe stuck in his head! How is he even moving, Bilbo wonders.

“Bifur, <at yer service>!”

“Bofur, at yer service laddie!”

“Bombur, at yer service.”

He has to shake himself of the axe shock before he can introduce himself in turn.

“Bilbo Baggins, at your service, Master Dwarrow,” he says with a nod before pushing past them and to the dining room. “Now that that’s out of the way, who’s hungry?”

Delighted shouts spew forth from the Dwarrow mouths as they herd behind him. Piling into the room, the Dwarrow grab plates, and ale filled mugs, laughing and talking with joy amongst themselves as they fill their dishes to the brim.

“Stop pushing!”

“Oi, I claimed that fair and square before you got here!”

“Yer names no’ on it!”

“Hey!”

Bilbo imagines the lovely dream of quiet fluttering out the window as he watches the chaos and groans as food starts flying.

“Come now, Bilbo, I remember you enjoyed these kinds of gatherings on our journeys.”

“Yes, well, all of those happened while not under my roof, Gandalf,” Bilbo says flatly, giving the wizard a look of disdain.

“True,” he muses. “But at least Bag End has some life in it again, yes?”
A small smile creeps upon his face.

“True enough, you old codger.”

An hour passes, then two, during which time Bilbo set aside some food for the missing Dwarf and eats his fill as well. Only then does the company feel the need to clean up… or rather, the Dwarrow equivalent of clean.

“Could you not do that! You’ll blunt them!” the Hobbit snaps.

“Ye hear that lads? He said we’ll blunt the knives!” Bofur says playfully.

“Blunt the knives, bend the forks,
Smash the bottles and burn the corks!
Chip the glasses and crack the plates!
That’s what Bilbo Baggins hates!”

Their merry little song continues until all of the cutlery is clean and stacked on the table, all of them grinning at Bilbo as he huffs angrily.

“You lot are lucky none of them broke, or so help me, I would have tanned all your hides, older than me or not!”

The Dwarrow erupt into a cacophony of joyous laughter once again, some of them patting the Hobbit on the back with enough force to almost send him sprawling to the floor. Bilbo Baggins is not amused, not one bit. He brings himself up to his full height, fully ready to give them a mighty tongue thrashing about how to treat other people’s property when a loud pounding comes from the door. The Dwarrow are instantly quiet.

“He is here.”
Don't Insult Temperamental Hobbits

Chapter Summary

In which Dwarrow Kings need to learn some manners when dealing with Hobbits, Hobbits are masters at kicking clotheads to the curb and subtle revenge, and they finally get their hairy arses onto the road!

Chapter Notes

So a loooong chapter to get these Dwarrow finally out of Bilbo's smial and onto the road at last!

Lateness due to midterms and the general tediousness of life... dull.

Also, I claim no ownership over lines pillaged from the movie or books. If you've read them or seen the movies, you know which ones I'm talking about.

*UPDATE* So the votes are in and Nori's part was not entirely a bust, just a bit overdone. So I've gone back to his parts and edited them, hopefully keeping to the original tone of him. If not, please let me know And I'll make more adjustments. Also, I'm still editing a bit of this chapter, particularly the Dwalin and Bilbo scene in the study. I'll update that then try and crank out another chapter within the week, life and school be merciful!

Bilbo follows Gandalf to the door, curious about this last Dwarf despite his temper still barely contained beneath his skin, and notices the other Dwarrows following behind as well.

“Now Bilbo, I ask that, whatever may be said, you keep your tongue civil, if you please. I'll not have your temper mucking this up.”

“My temper mucking this up? What about your meddling?!” Bilbo seethes, his volume unconsciously mirroring Gandalf's hushed one.

“By the Valar, Bilbo, give me your word!” Gandalf mutters harshly.

“Fine! I'll keep my tongue civil, but I make no promises to anything else!” he snaps, throwing up his arms and planting himself firmly in the parlors entryway as the other Dwarrow crowd around him, Dwalin shifting restlessly beside him.

“Fair enough.”

With that, Gandalf opens the round, green door of Bag End, peering over the top to see the new 'guest'.

“Gandalf,” comes a low, rumbling voice, tinged with a hint of humor. “I thought you said this place would be easy to find.”
He sees Gandalf smile before stepping back to open the door wider as the Dwarf steps in, sweeping his arm open as a welcome to come in. How rude, this is his smial, Gandalf, he thinks.

“I lost my way, twice.”

Bilbo can see the Dwarf is tall for his race as he stares at him with keen interest, just like Dwalin. He’s ridiculously handsome despite his hawk’s nose, and has a full mane of hair streaked with silver and a surprisingly short beard, as he passes Gandalf while undoing his cloak. Oh! How lovely, this Dwarrow has some manners too! Certainly a Dwarrow worth possibly pursuing. But really, how does one get lost in the Shire? There are only two or three roads after all.

“I wouldn’t have found it at all if it hadn’t been for that mark on the door.”

A what now?

“Mark?” he asks, looking to Gandalf as he steps forward to inspect his door.

To which Gandalf hastily shuts the round door and leans on it as if to prevent Bilbo from seeing it, which the Hobbit is sure was Gandalf’s motivation, as he comes to stand in the entryway in front of the wizard, scowl upon his face. This hasn’t been the first time Gandalf the Grey has defaced his property to leave messages for visitors in the Shire. Nor would it be the last, he suspects.

“I painted that a week ago, Gandalf!”

“Yes, well, your guests needed to be able to find your door at night, my dear boy!”

“My guests? Gandalf-” Bilbo starts to snap at the wizard before the blasted man interrupts.

“Bilbo Baggins,” the wizard starts, gesturing at him as if he were some consolation prize at the Spring Festival. “Allow me to introduce the leader of our company: Thorin Oakenshield.”

At which point, Bilbo shifts to look at the impressive new Dwarf, who seems to have been staring at him –rude-, before stepping forward to meet him. Well compared to the others he can’t be any worse, he thinks somewhat ruefully. He happens to glance at Kíli, seeing the Dwarf’s cloak draped in the youngling’s arms like a servant. Did this Dwarf not notice the pegs where everyone else’s cloaks still hung?

“So… This is the Hobbit.”

Bilbo does not appreciate his tone, not one bit. Did he actually think this Dwarf would have some manners? It seems the handsomeness of this Dwarrow was only on the surface, he thinks with a scoff. Honestly, he should stop looking at ruggedly handsome faces; they get his hopes up before irrevocably smothering them when they open their mouths.

This Dwarf was going to be worse than the rest, combined, he can just feel it. It seems the day a Dwarf would have Hobbit approved manners and rugged good looks would be long in coming indeed.

“So tell me, Mister Baggins, have you done much fighting?” the Dwarf continues as he starts to circle Bilbo.

“Pardon?” he asks, tone low and very much not amused.

Oh, he was having none of this intimidation ploy, thank you very much! As the Dwarf circles behind him, Bilbo shoots Dwalin a most withering glare, to which Dwalin hastily twitches his head in a
quick negative. Well, confound it and botheration! Not only had the wizard sworn him to a civil
tongue, but now Dwalin, his favorite by far, was also denying him his right to defend himself! Well!
Well… If he cannot protect himself verbally as he usually would, he would go about it with all a
Baggins good manners with a Tookish flair!

“Axe or sword? What is your weapon of choice?”

“Well certainly neither of those, though I do have some skill at conkers if you must know. Though
I’m failing to see why that’s relevant,” Bilbo says with a Baggins’ smile upon his face.

The Dwarf, Thorin - Bilbo tries to remember -, gives him the most condescending smile he has ever
been subjected too. Ever.

“Thought as much,” he says with a smirk, turning toward the Dwarrows standing behind him. “He
looks more like a grocer than a burglar.”

Grocer? Grocer?! He thinks, fragile temper finally severing as the pompous Dwarf - whom Bilbo
decides he shall refer to as only 'the Dwarf' or variations of this - turns to follow eight chuckling
Dwarrow further into his home, filthy boots and weapons still upon his person at that! Bilbo Baggins
was having none of that!

Smile still upon his face -though from the look upon Dwalin’s, Balin’s, Fili’s, and Kili’s paling ones
say it’s probably quite feral looking-, Bilbo hooks his arm through the arrogant Dwarf’s. He
practically shoves aside Gandalf -who lets out a most surprised gasp-, swings open his door, and
drags the clot head of a Dwarf through it and out into the balmy night where he shoves him onto his
welcome mat.

“I do believe you have come to the wrong smial, Master Dwarf. The name ‘Thorin Oakenshield’ is
not the name signed upon any of the deeds to Bag End or the land upon which it sits. Nor for that
matter is ‘Gandalf the Grey’,” he says, tone steely, though the smile has not left his face. “If you
have, in fact, come to the smial of Bilbo Baggins, then please ring the doorbell, and kindly wait for
me to welcome you in under my hospitality if you agree that we are both above uncalled for
animosity. Until that time, please feel free to enjoy the night air, though I overheard Master Balin say
it might rain. Good evening!”

With that, Bilbo shuts his round, green door in the stunned Dwarf’s handsome face. Wiping his
hands on his pants, he turns and is met with stunned silence.

“So, his dessert is up for grabs if anyone is interested,” he says casually, hooking his fingers in his
vest pockets as he meets the eyes of twelve very flabbergasted Dwarrow.

“Bilbo Baggins!” Gandalf starts to thunder, the shadows expanding around him as he appears to
grow larger. “You-”

“Kept my word,” Bilbo says sharply, consciously ignoring the wizard’s ire as the hair on his neck
stands on end.

After seeing it so often directed at him over the years, and though he has some immunity as not to be
so easily cowed by this particular display, it’s still not easy to feign apathy against it.

“You had me swear to keep my tongue ‘civil’, which I did. You didn’t have me swear not to kick
him out if he barged into my home as if he owned it.”

The wizard still looks as though he would like nothing more than to change Bilbo into something
most unseemly.
"For Valar’s sake, is he any more important than the Dwarrows already invading my smial?!"

"He is Thorin, son of Thrain, son of Thor! King Under the Mountain, Bilbo Baggins!"

"Oh goodness that changes everything!" he exclaims, one hand clutching his vest, the other hovering over his mouth, eyes wide. “How terribly rude of me! I should have let him grab his cloak before I showed him out! Valar knows what he may catch in such nice weather we are having right now!"

"I will have none of your sharp tongue, Bilbo Baggins! Confound it; Thorin is a King!"

"Yes, well we’re not exactly under a mountain for him to be Kingly under right now, are we. You lot are in my smial,” he says dryly, face slipping into one of apathy as he inspects the dirt under his nails. My, he would have to get them clean quite soon, he thinks.

Gandalf throws up his hands in irate exasperation, muttering what sounds like some very not nice things in another language as he stomps off further into the smial toward the smoking room.

"Be sure to close the doors if you plan on being in there for a while!” Bilbo calls after him.

His answer is the slamming of the main door followed quickly by the second.

He turns back to the gobsmacked Dwarrow still standing in his entryway. A long, tense pause hovers around them all before Bilbo has had enough of it.

“Well he’s in a bit of a strop. He probably won’t be joining us for at least an hour then,” he muses aloud. “So about that dessert..."

That statement seems to open the floodgates so to speak. All as one most of the Dwarrow start yelling or talking, all but two.

“How dare ye, Hobbit! That is our King!” Gloin shouts in outrage as he tries to get passed Dwalin, who holds him back.

“You can’t just throw him out like some... some vagabond, Mister Hobbit!” Dori joins in.

“Aye, but Thorin had it comin’ I say. ’Sides, I think that was quite humorous really. Are we keepin’ ’im?” Nori says, surprisingly, pointing at Bilbo. What is it with these Dwarrow and wanting to keep him?!"

"<Thorin’s our King, Nori, whether he deserves it or not... Though I agree about the Hobbit. We are keepin’ him, right? Do ye think he likes flowers?>” Bifur growls out, though what he says, Bilbo has no idea.

"Fíli... Mister Boggins just tossed out Uncle!” Kíli tries to whisper, but his excitement makes that impossible, though why he would be excited about his rude Uncle -which is surprising information-, being tossed out like a pushy snob, Bilbo will never know.

"Kíli, that’s not something to be excited about,” Fíli says in exasperation.

"Now see here, laddie,” Bofur says. “He may ‘ave been rude, but ye can’t just throw out a King.”

“Oh do shut it, you lot,” Bilbo snaps, quite thoroughly done with all this Dwarrow drama.

“Technically all of you are uninvited guests, and I’m well within my rights to tell you all to bugger off and toss you out just like I did your King. The only reason I didn’t was that none of you insulted me to my face, -though I’m quite certain you were thinking some insulting things about me- and my
father would be rolling in his grave if I had without provocation.”

“That’s not true Mister Boggins!” Kíli interjects.

“Shush, Kíli, I’m not done berating you lot!”

The Dwarfling hunches his shoulders up to his ears, and oddly enough, Fíli does as well. Looking at the rest of them, they too, surprisingly, seem more than a bit ashamed.

“Sorry, Mister Boggins,” he mumbles.

With a huff, Bilbo continues, “That being said, how on Arda you lot expected me to know he was royalty is beyond me. Yes, he walked into my smial like some majestic sod, but do I look like some kind of soothsayer?”

“Well, no…” Bofur says.

“Exactly! None of you said a thing about who I was unwittingly hosting in my smial, nor for that matter do I know why you all are even here! I demand an explanation!”

If possible the Dwarrow look even more contrite.

“I told ye, lad, ye’ll find out once the wizard and Thorin are ‘ere,” Dwalin says in exasperation.

“Well technically, your King is here now, so out with it,” Bilbo grumbles, shoving his hands into his vest pockets.

Dwalin shoots him an unimpressed look that says ‘ye know that’s not goin’ te work with me’, one brow raised.

“Ugh! Fine! But until that lou- King of yours rings that bell, I’ll be -”

Of course the doorbell rings right then, halting Bilbo’s declaration that since no one else was going to, he was calling rights to the Dwarf King’s dessert. Confound it.

“That’ll be the door,” Dwalin says with a smug smirk flashing from behind his scruffy beard.

“Oh, just you wait, Master Dwalin. I’ll introduce your face to the dirt soon enough,” he rumbles as he stalks to the door.

Despite his temper, he plasters on his Baggins smile as he opens the door, and then the silence starts. The Hobbit and the Dwarf get into a staring contest of sorts. Neither wishing to speak first, but both desperately wanting this encounter to hurry and finish. Bilbo’s smile threatens to become a snarl, and Thorin’s glare threatens to physically, somehow, bury the Hobbit six feet under. To all the other Dwarrow in the smial, it seems the silent battle of wills shall continue for an eternity before, through a rare display of genius, Kíli pips up and it just happens to knock them back into the present company.

“Did Mister Boggins say there was extra dessert?”

One Dwarf Se King’s stomach gives a mighty rumble and one Hobbit host lets out a sigh of exasperation and looks up to the sky as though begging for the Valar to take pity on him.

“Thorin, son of Thrain, at yer service, Master Baggins,” Thorin says with all the majestic pomp that his station can spare, a light blush dusting his cheeks as he nods at Bilbo.
“Bilbo Baggins, at yours, Master Dwarf,” Bilbo says with a huff, causing Thorin’s brow to twitch and his frown to deepen, as he steps back and pulls the door with him. “Do come in, and please leave your boots and weapons by the door, if you will. Kíli, go ahead and put your Uncle’s cloak with the others, lad.”

After Thorin has walked through the door does Bilbo shut it and push passed Dwalin and the other Dwarrow in the entryway to his parlor.

“If you come this way when you’re done, Master Dwarf, I’ll bring you your meal,” Bilbo calls out over his shoulder.

The other Dwarrow trail behind him, crowding into the dining room as he gathers food for their King in the kitchen. As he scoops up the chili from Gandalf’s particular pot, he can’t keep the smirk off his face. Upon entering the dining room, he sees the elders crowding the younglings toward the back as Dwalin takes the left side closest to the entry with Bofur across from him. As Bilbo sets the food and ale down, leaving the chili front and center, their King finally decides to join them with Gandalf trailing behind.

“Done having a sulk then, Gandalf?” he asks mildly.

“Wizard’s do not sulk, Bilbo Baggins,” the wizard huffs. “We merely take time to reorganize our thoughts.”

“Mmhm,” Bilbo hums noncommittally causing Gandalf to grumble under his breath before he addresses the Dwarrow King. “Do sit and enjoy your meal, Master Dwarf. Your company seemed to enjoy it at least. I barely had time to set aside anything for you before they were scarfing it all down.”

Glancing up, he sees Gandalf eyeing the chili in confusion as the Dwarf sits. The wizard’s eyes widen in realization, but before he can even utter a word, the Dwarrow King takes a large bite of the chili. Bilbo can’t help but grin wickedly from behind his hand as he stands behind the pompous oaf.

Thorin suddenly slaps his hand over his mouth and snatches up his ale, gulping it down in three large swallows before slamming the mug onto the table.

“I say, are you alright, Master Dwarf?” he asks, coming to stand beside him, ignoring Gandalf’s steely glare.

“Water!” Thorin chokes out as he resists the urge to fan his tongue, tears welling up in his eyes.

“It can’t be that spicy… I served you what I gave everyone but Gandalf…” he says before picking up the bowl, swiping his finger around the edge and putting it in his mouth. “Oh dear…”

With an audible pop, he removes it and makes a small tsking sound to himself.

“Seems I accidentally grabbed your portion from Gandalf’s special chili. So sorry. I’ll be back with a glass of red wine. Better than water or ale to soothe your tongue, Master Dwarf,” he mumbles as if distracted, not sounding sorry at all though only three of his guests seem to realize this, as he trots out of the dining room.

A moment later he returns with the wine, deftly ignoring the incredulous look Dwalin is giving him, Gandalf’s even more -if it’s possible- steely glare of doom, and Balin’s raised brow of amusement. Thorin nearly snatches the glass from him and proceeds to gulp it down.

“More,” he demands, shoving the glass back at Bilbo who frowns at him.
“If you had waited a moment I would have told you to let it settle on your tongue before you go swallowing it all,” he huffs before returning to the kitchen and shortly returning. “Sip this, if you please, Master Dwarf.”

When the Dwarrow King has finished the glass, he sets it down slowly and takes two deep, cleansing breaths.

“What in Mahal’s name was in that? Dragon’s fire?” he snaps.

“No need to be snippy, Master Dwarf. It was only a local spice we add to our food on occasion. Gandalf just happens to like my family’s Took Chili recipe a bit on the spicier side, as well as myself. Again, apologies, I didn’t mean to serve you that particular one,” Bilbo says in mock contriteness. “I’ll bring you the one I served your companions if you wish.”

“No!”

The suddenness of his reply causes all of the other Dwarrows to look at him in concern while Bilbo merely raises a brow.

“I mean, no, no thank you, Mister Baggins.”

“Very well. I’ll bring you some more wine. Then I hope you will tell me the reason thirteen Dwarrows and a wizard have decided to… visit my smial this eve.”

With that Bilbo walks back into the kitchen, puttering around until he hears the Dwarrow King rip into the wizard.

“He does not know why we are here, Gandalf? I thought you said he agreed to aid us in our quest!”

“Well, he-”

“Agreed to have Gandalf over for supper is all,” Bilbo says sharply as he enters and sets the wine down before the Dwarf, eyes set on the Grey Wizard. “There was no mention of you or your company joining us, nor was there any agreement on my end to aid in anything. Mentioning an adventure, to where I know not, does not mean I agreed to anything, Gandalf.”

Stoney silence descends upon the smial as the Dwarrows shift their eyes between their King, Bilbo and Gandalf.

“So where is this adventure of yours possibly taking me this time?”

Even more silence invades the smial, all the Dwarrows looking to each other with shifty, nervous eyes. Bilbo is more than fed up with this lot. Before he can say anything and wind up his temper once again, Balin speaks up.

“What news from the meeting in Ered Luin? Did they all come?”

The Dwarrows all relax as the Hobbit’s question is ignored for the time being. Oh yes, Bilbo was more than fed up with all this evasion. To which Gandalf notices, and before Bilbo can once again try and speak up, covers his face with his enormous hand. The nerve!

“Aye, envoys from all seven kingdoms,” Thorin says before taking another bite of something other than the leftover chili.

The other Dwarrows all give small cheers of delight.

Thorin inhales sharply before replying.

“They will not come.”

The Dwarrow this time groan in dismay, thumping the table or their mugs down onto the table in discontent.

“They say this quest is ours, and ours alone.”

The groans are angrier this time as well as the thumping. Bilbo huffs against Gandalf’s hand in exasperation for his furniture before shoving the wizard's hand away from his face.

“Your quest to where?” Bilbo snaps.

To which the wizard and the rest of the lousy louts evade answering once again.

“Bilbo, my dear fellow, let us have a little more light,” Gandalf says, tone a tad hard as if daring the Hobbit to deny him this small request.

Unseen by the Dwarrow, Bilbo’s eyes flash gold as he stares hard at the plucky wizard before he sniffs and stalks off to retrieve another candle. He keeps his ears wide open, however, no need to miss anything the wizard may say in his brief absence.

“Far to the east, over ranges and rivers, beyond woodlands and wastelands,” Gandalf beings with an air of mystery and intrigue as he unfolds a map he pulls from his robes and lays it before the Dwarrow King, to which Bilbo rolls his eyes at the Gray Wizard’s drama. “Lies a single solitary peak.”

He points to the only mountain standing alone on the map as Bilbo leans in closer, -the candle nearly dangerously close to the pompous Dwarf’s stupidly handsome face and he fights to keep a small grin from appearing- to look closer at the map, noting the depiction of a dragon hovering above the mountain's peak.

“The Lonely Mountain…”

Now where had he heard that name before….

“Aye, Oin has read the portents, and the portents say it is time,” Gloin says with an air of importance despite most of the other Dwarrows sighing in exasperation.

“The ravens have been seen flyin’ back te the mountain as it was foretold... ‘When the birds of yore return to Erebor, the reign of the beast will end,’” Óin says, Gandalf lighting his pipe as he speaks.

Erebor… Erebor… where on Arda had he heard that name?!?

“What beast?” he asks, apprehension of what exactly Gandalf wanted to toss him in the middle of making his voice a little tight.

“Well tha’ would be a ref' rence te Smaug the Terrible,” Bofur says. “Chief’ est an’ greatest calamity of our age… Airborne fire breather, teeth like razors, claws like meat hooks… Extremely fond of precious metals.”

“Yes, I know what a dragon is, Master Bofur,” Bilbo growls, pinching the bridge of his nose in irritation. “Now what does-”
"I’m not afraid! I’m up fer it! I’ll give ‘im a taste of Dwarvish iron right up ‘is jacksie!” Ori exclaims as he jumps up from his seat, interrupting Bilbo once again.

“Sit down!” Dori scolds the youngling as he pulls him back down into his seat.

“The task would be difficult enough with an army behind us. But we number just thirteen! An’ not thirteen of the best… nor brightest,” Balin says despairingly.

The other Dwarrows start throwing insults at Balin, who takes it all with political grace.

“’ere! Who’re you callin’ dim!” Nori cries out as the other Dwarrows continue their own assaults.

“Sorry, what did ‘e say?” Óin asks Nori.

Surprisingly it is Fíli who interrupts their complaints by smacking his hand upon the table. Really now, his furniture was not some podium to slap around, thank you very much.

“We may be few in number, but we’re fighters… All of us! Te the last Dwarf!” he says with a fierceness only found in the young as he smacks his hand on the table once again.

“And do you forget we have a wizard in our company! Gandalf would have killed hundreds of dragons in his time!” Kíli says with youthful enthusiasm.

The other Dwarrows start agreeing and look to the wizard. Bilbo can’t help but smirk. Take that, wizard, he thinks with vindictive glee.

“Oh no… I-I-I wouldn’t say tha-” Gandalf stutters before Dori interrupts him.

“How many then?”

“What?” Gandalf babbles back in confusion.

Oh yes, Bilbo thinks, stew in a mess of your own making for once wizard.

“Well how many dragons have ye killed?” Dori continues.

Bilbo really can’t suppress the mischievous grin spreading across his face as Gandalf grumbles and coughs around the smoke he so mistimed in inhaling, small puffs escaping from between his lips.

“Go on! Give us a number!”

All chaos breaks loose, as does Bilbo’s good humor. Several Dwarrows leap out of their seats to shout at Dori in defense of Gandalf as others rise to yell at them in agreement with Dori. Bilbo hangs his head back and stares at his ceiling, silently counting backward from one hundred to desperately try and keep his still short fuse from reaching the core of his will and forcing him to change skins in front of these volatile Dwarrows.

“Shazara!” Thorin roars, standing quickly from his chair.

The Dwarrows quickly become silent and fall into their seats just as quickly, all but Dwalin who calmly takes his moments after the rest have seated themselves. Bilbo grins despite his temper; he knew Dwalin was a rebel at heart despite his loyalty concealing it most of the time.

“If we have read these signs, do you not think others will have read them too?” the Dwarrow King says as Gandalf nods along in eager agreement, making it plain to Bilbo he’s desperate to move the Dwarrows’ attention and ire away from himself.
“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 lay unprotected,” his gaze upon Balin.

“Do we sit back while others claim what is rightfully ours? Or do we seize this chance to take back Erebor?! Du Bekâr! Du Bekâr!”

Staring at the back of the Dwarrow King as his people cheer and holler in agreement, Bilbo can see now why these Dwarrows would follow him. But he would not be one of the blind following the foolish. Not for a treasure hunt and a pretty face if that was all this turns out to be. Fundin’s, Dwalin’s and Balin’s former home or not, he was not going to be part of a gaggle of gold sick Dwarrows heading toward their deaths. Not if the line of Durin’s kings was still as susceptible to the call of worthless gold.

The Dwarrows continue cheering for their King as Bilbo stands back and observes with cold, hunter’s eyes.

“Ye forget! The front gate is sealed! There is no way into the mountain,” Balin says with finality.

“That, my dear Balin, is not entirely true,” Gandalf says as he flips a very Dwarvish looking key from seemingly out of thin air.

“How came you by this?” Thorin asks the wizard in reverent shock.

“It was given to me by your father… by Thráin, for safekeeping,” the wizard says as he holds up the key before passing it to Thorin. “It is yours now.”

Thorin looks at the key in awe before clenching it within his fist.

“If there is a key… there must be a door,” Fíli, the silly youngling, says quietly.

Bilbo can’t help rolling his eyes at the Dwarfling’s statement of the obvious. Gandalf only nods indulgently at the young Dwarf.

“These runes” -he points at the map with his pipe- “speak of a hidden passage to the Lower Halls.”

“There’s another way in!” Kíli grins as he grips the back of his brother’s tunic to contain himself.

Truly… leave it to Dwarrows to speak the obvious despite itself. He’ll need to teach them how to mind their loose tongues, Bilbo thinks in fond exasperation before he frowns. Confound it; the younglings were growing on him.

Ever indulgent to those of… limited wit, Gandalf merely smiles and says,

“Well if we can find it as Dwarf doors are invisible when closed.”

The wizard heaves a sigh and looks around at the other Dwarrows.

“The answer lies somewhere hidden in this map, and I do not have the skill to find it,” the wizard huffs as though affronted as he gestures at the map. “But! There are others on Arda who can.”

Lovely, Bilbo thinks with interest, a map with riddles! His fingers itch to pore over the map and find its secrets. Yet he glances at the wizard with suspicion. For all his power he couldn’t bring forth any hidden runes at will? How… plebeian.
“The task I have in mind will require a great deal of stealth,” he starts again, and at the word ‘stealth’, Bilbo freezes.

Surely the wizard wouldn’t…

“And no small amount of courage,” he continues, looking at Bilbo with that mischievous twinkle in his blue eyes. “But if they are careful and clever, I believe it can be done!”

Oh by the Valar, he was!

“That’s why we need a burglar!” Ori pips in.

“Yes, and a good one too! An expert, I’d imagine,” Bilbo growls, glaring hard at the wizard. “Which you already have.”

All of the Dwarrows look around in confusion and make questioning sounds.

“And who would that be, Mister Baggins?” Glóin asks imperiously.

“Why Master Nori of course, if half of my mother’s’ fine cutlery has anything to say about it. Which, by the way, Master Nori, you will be returning to the drawers. I have enough covetous family members trying to nick them without adding a Dwarf to the list,” Bilbo snaps.

“Here now! You accuse me of stealin’ without any evidence!” Nori cries out as Dwalin levels the thief with a steely glare.

Several of the other Dwarrows agree with the silver-tongued cheat.

“You want evidence, Master Nori?” Bilbo questions before stalking over to the Dwarf, lifting him up under his arms, and quickly and efficiently stripping him of all his mother’s swiped cutlery and leaves them on the table but for one of the knives.

“There is your evidence, and before you even try to deny it further, they are engraved with the initials B.B.T. So unless you are a Hobbit under some gruesome curse, these belonged to my mother and now belong to me.”

With that he drops the knife onto the pile and stalks back behind the Dwarrow King, ignoring all of the startled stares and open-mouthed looks of awe as he goes.

“So there is your burglar, Gandalf. I told you the last time after that incident with a tree, of all things, that I’m through stealing dangerous objects for you.”

“Now Bilbo-“

“You’re actually a burglar?” Thorin asks mockingly, not even turning to look at Bilbo.

So the derisive King has yet to learn his lesson, Bilbo thinks as he stares at the back of this overbearing lout’s head with a feral gleam in his eyes. He barely acknowledges Dwalin as the Dwarf leans over the table and covers his face with both hands. Most of the other Dwarrows start agreeing with their King, loudly vocalizing that they were either content with the number they have, while the more superstitious argue that they should find another in the town of Bree who would be better suited.

“Enough!” Gandalf snaps as he stands, the magic contained in his body reflecting as spreading shadows across the ceiling as his body appears to take up more space, causing Dwalin and the others
to lean as far from him as they can. “If I say Bilbo Baggins is our burglar, then our burglar he is!”

The shadows recede as the Dwarrows quiet.

“Hobbits are remarkably light on their feet, some more frighteningly so than most. In fact, they can pass unseen if they choose… and while the dragon is accustomed to the smell of Dwarf, the scent of a Hobbit is all but unknown to him, which gives us a distinct advantage!”

Bilbo can only stare at the wizard blankly as he sells him up like some holiday ham! The wizard settles back down onto his seat with a huff.

“You asked me to find the fourteenth member of this company, and I have chosen Mister Baggins. There is a lot more to him than appearances suggest,” Gandalf says to Thorin imploringly before snapping at the lot of them. “And he’s got a great deal more to offer than any of you know!”

That statement makes Dwalin stare hard at the wizard, which the barmy old badger ignores, eyes glancing to Bilbo who just rolls his eyes at the Dwarf.

“You must trust me on this,” the Gray Wizard implores again.

Thorin stares at Gandalf blankly for a moment before he speaks, or rather, partially growls.

“Very well. We’ll do it your way.”

“Now wait a moment!” Bilbo starts to say until he sees the lout’s hand spread as though to order him to silence. “You-”

“Give him the contract,” Thorin orders as he looks at Balin, who shakes his head.

“We’re in! We’re off!” Bofur says with a jovial grin.

Balin stands and holds out a folded parchment.

“It’s just the usual. Summary of out of pocket expenses, time required, remuneration, funeral arrangements, so forth.”

The King reaches forth to grab the contract, but Bilbo is quite done with this Dwarf’s particular attitude for the night. Stepping forward, nearly leaning over the large clod, he quickly intercepts and grabs the contract himself and a little extra.

“You Dwarrow certainly love your contracts,” he says as he steps out of the dining room into the hall as he unravels the parchment, which nearly unfolds to the ground. “Certainly outdo yourselves each time in length as well…”

Despite his apparent preoccupation, he hears the King stand and speak to Gandalf.

“I cannot guarantee his safety.”

“Understood.”

“Nor will I be responsible for his fate.”

Bilbo notices the pause before Gandalf answers, as well as the resigned tone inflecting his voice.

“Agreed…”
Stellar leader indeed, Bilbo thinks derisively. He's nothing like Fundin for sure at any rate. Fundin, who took everyone’s fate upon his shoulders, Dwarf or not, as any true leader should. For it is their decisions that decide the fate of those they are leading. Something this Dwarrow King obviously needs to learn still. Choosing to ignore everything else, for the time being, he skims through the document as he learned to do from Fundin and the Ol’ Took.

“Terms: cash on delivery, up to but not exceeding one-fourteenth of total profit, if any,” he mumbles. “Hm... Seems fair considering a dragon’s involved… Present company shall not be liable for injuries inflicted by or sustained as a consequence thereof, including, but not limited to… lacerations… evisceration… incineration?!”

He turns back to the Dwarrow, eyes wide with disbelief.

“Are you barmy lot planning to have me fight a dragon?!”

He sees the Dwarf’s shoulders twitch and can’t help the vindictive pleasure that sparks through him despite his alarm. Seems his Tookish nature had not been entirely assuaged.

“Well no, but best to ‘ave all bases covered, aye?” Bofur says jovially. “He’ll melt the flesh right off yer bones in the blink of an eye.”

“And this paragraph is in everyone’s contract?”

“Aye...” Balin says, sparing the Hobbit a concerned stare. “Ye a’right laddie?”

“Oh yes, fine… I’m used to receiving contracts where detailed ways for me to die are quite normal, actually,” Bilbo says flippanly.

“Think furnace with wings!”

“Truly, Master Bofur-”

“Flash of light, searing pain, then poof! Yer nothin’ more than a pile of ash!”

Bilbo glares coldly at the ridiculous Dwarf.

“You, sir, are a menace,” he growls, stomping forward and shoving a hand out to the King. “You seem to have dropped this, Master Dwarf.”

To which Thorin gives him a confused look and opens a hand that Bilbo then drops the Dwarvish key into. He then stalks off, leaving a very stunned Dwarrow King and thirteen gobsmacked Dwarrows behind once again.

“You’ll have your contract back signed or not before the night’s out, Master Balin,” Bilbo calls back as he heads towards his study.

Gandalf chuckles as he stands to follow after the Hobbit.

“See, what did I tell you!” Gandalf grins as he looks at Thorin. “Excellent burglar material!”

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The rustle of shuffling robes is all the warning Bilbo gets before large hands settle on his shoulders.

“You’re a lucky wizard, Gandalf,” he mumbles as he continues reading the contract in its entirety.
“Oh? What do you mean?”

“Lucky I heard you skulking about, or you’d have a few new scars added to your hands.”

The wizard chuckles and squeezes the Hobbits shoulders. The two old friends settle into a companionable silence as Bilbo pores over the document, making copious notes for Balin to change. The entire contract was utterly ridiculous and entirely in favor of these thick-headed, entitled, Dwarrow!

“Will you be joining us then?” Gandalf asks once Bilbo has read through it all, his face furrowed with concern at seeing the Hobbit’s eyes flash golden quite often while he perused the agreement.

“Hard to even have the urge to go when I’m clearly unwanted by their leader,” Bilbo snaps, tossing the contract as far from him as possible. “Doesn’t help that their King is a complete sod too… On top of that this contract is deplorable! I’m not some indentured servant to be thrown around as they see fit!”

“If you plan on coming, you need that revised… I suggest getting with Balin. He and Thorin are the ones who wrote it, after all. But do so quickly, Thorin plans to move out in the morning,” Gandalf says, trusting Bilbo’s word as to the biased content of the contract.

“He’s more impatient than he first let on… The mountain’s not going to up and walk anywhere.”

Gandalf snickers and ruffles Bilbo’s curls.

“My dear boy, I do hope you come! If only to keep me from turning their King into something unseemly!”

Bilbo grins up at the wizard, ire doused for the moment.

“I’d come just to see you do it!”

“Terrible, my boy, absolutely terrible.”

The two laugh together as they had not done for what seems like ages.

“I’ve missed you Gandalf,” Bilbo says once their laughter dies down. “Even though you’ve brought thirteen Dwarrow to my door, uninvited.”

“And I you, my dear Bilbo.”

A knock upon the study door make them stiffen in surprise.

“Master Baggins?” comes Dwalin’s voice from beyond the door.

“I’ll be out of your hair then. Dwalin seemed most interested in your association with his father if the questions he was asking me during supper are anything to go by.”

“Yes, he said as much when I told him before the rest of you arrived. Made me promise to tell him all about that before the night was out.” Bilbo agrees before calling out to the Dwarf. “Come in Master Dwalin, Gandalf was just leaving.”

Gandalf strides passed Dwalin as he leaves and the Dwarf steps through the door, closing it behind him. Bilbo shuffles the notes and grabs the contract from the far end of the desk to put them in some semblance of order while he waits for the warrior to speak.
“How’d ye get this?” Dwalin whispers as he approaches Bilbo with heavy footsteps, his hand held open to reveal Fundin’s stone which usually rests upon his mantle in the parlor.

Bilbo turns around and glances at the Dwarf’s open palm, seeing the stone he holds most dear alongside his parent’s old odds and ends.
“Found that, did you? Fundin gave it to me sometime before the Battle of Azanulbizar.” he says, reaching out to take it, but Dwalin snatches his hand back.

“My father just gave it to ye?” he asks, gaze hard.

“Well, no, there was a ceremony of sorts. Blood and lengthy Dwarrow vernacular involved you know. Of course, he translated it into Westron for me,” Bilbo says with a frown, hands clenching in frustration even though he shrugs his shoulders as though unaffected. “Didn’t he tell you about me? He said he told his youngest…”

“Told me?” he asks then pauses for a moment before his eyes widen and he continues. “Oh… Oh! Yer the wee creature he spoke of?”

“‘Wee creature’? No, never mind... Well, unless he knew any other Hobbits, yes,” he huffs. “Did he not ever mention my name?”

“No... Said te keep ye safe, he dared not. Only told me tales of ye an’ yer ability te change yer skin.”

“Shh!! Keep it down will you! I don’t need the rest of your lot barging in here to skin me alive!” Bilbo hisses, flying off the chair to smack his hand over Dwalin’s beard covered mouth.

He feels the blasted Dwarf smirk beneath his palm.

“Yes, laugh at the Hobbit who just wants to keep his skin where it should be, thank you very much,” he deadpans, removing his hand from the youngest Fundin’s face.

“So yer truly one of them? A... ye know?” Dwalin hedges, looking at Bilbo with interest.

“Yes... How much did Fundin tell you about me?” Bilbo asks cautiously after a pause.
“Well, everythin’ I suppose. It's not like I’d know if my father told me everythin’ or not. Ye weren’t around to ask,” he says with a shrug of a shoulder.

Bilbo can only sigh at this. Fundin, how he loved that Dwarf, but really, he should have at least introduced them long before he passed.

“And yer other skin is as he said? Truly?” Dwalin asks, to which Bilbo only nods with a look of distaste. “Mahal’s Beard... So he spoke true then…”

Bilbo decides that there is no need to verify anything Fundin told Dwalin, not with the other Dwarrows wandering about his smial at any rate. Fundin was an honorable Dwarf, and when he told Bilbo that he spoke to his youngest of nearly everything, then he did. There is a long pause between them, half comfortable, half uncomfortable if such a thing is possible.

“Is yer other skin really as small as father-” Dwalin suddenly starts to say before Bilbo cuts him off, seeing where the question was going.

“Yes! Bloody hell, was that all you remembered from what Fundin told you?!” Bilbo snaps. “And would you put a muzzle on it? I told you I’d rather not deal with your companions!”

Dwalin just laughs, confusing Bilbo greatly. Aside from Fundin, Bilbo has never had a Dwarf be anything but hostile just knowing that he’s a Skin-Changer. Very few in any race honestly saw him as anything but a threat despite his other skin. With that thought, he gets a bit apprehensive. Dwalin is an honorable Dwarf like his father, as far as he was told, but family always meant the most to those of Fundin’s line. Keeping such a secret from Balin must have been difficult for Fundin’s youngest.

“Will you be telling Balin of me then?” he says to break the silence, for he’s certain Dwalin is loyal to direct blood family above all others, not to some adopted Hobbit Skin-Changer he’s never met and has only ever heard about.

“By givin’ ye part of his stone, lad, my father made ye family… I’m sure he told ye?”

“All Fundin told me was that, by blood and stone, I was family. He didn’t have much time to explain about Dwarrow stones or what being adopted into your line entailed before he had to return to Ered Luin,” Bilbo says with a shrug. “When he accepted me as family, it was only a few months before Azanulbizar. He didn’t have the time to stop in the Shire, but he did… I didn’t see him again before that battle…”

Dwalin stares at him, eyes shining with an understanding none in the Shire could ever have. No one in this green land has lost someone to war in nearly two centuries. Those who came the closest were the few long-lived Tooks who had survived during the Fell Winter those many, many years ago.

“Dwarrow stones are with us all our lives ‘til death. The next in line breaks it inte smaller pieces te give te the deceased’s One, their sons an’ daughters, an’ maybe a siblin’ or two dependin’ on what the Dwarf’s Will requests done. Yer family now and I'll not be tellin’ anyone ye don’t want me to. Father asked me te let it be yer decision whenever we would finally meet. “Sides, family looks after their own,” he says firmly, holding out the stone for Bilbo to take this time.

The way he shifts his weight between his feet, though, tells Bilbo all he needs to know about just how uncomfortable keeping such a significant secret from what was left of his immediate family has been.

“But you think he needs to know,” Bilbo states as he takes back his stone.

“Aye… Thorin trusts my brother’s judgment. If-” to which Bilbo shoots him a hard glare.
“When.”

“When ye are gets out, Balin can talk some sense into the stubborn fool,” Dwalin amends with a roll of his eyes.

“It’s always when, Master Dwalin. In the fifteen years I was with the caravans, there were few journeys undertaken that, at some point, what I am did not get out.”

Bilbo heaves a sigh at this whole situation. He’d really rather not have any more Dwarrows know about his heritage, but it seems it can’t be helped.

“Well… I suppose it’s better than being killed right off.”

“I’ll not let them hurt ye, lad,” Dwalin growls with a fierce protectiveness.

“I’ll not have you defying your King and kin for me, Master Dwalin,” Bilbo snaps. “We’ve only just met, brothers though we may be! I’d rather leave and follow the company at a distance before they turn on you, as I did for Fundin.”

“Father claimed ye as Kin afore he died, an’ I claimed ye when ye gave father his dagger an’ yer promise! The dagger I now carry! He tol’ me stories of ye for fifteen years before that bloodbath. I know ye, lad! Yer my younger brother an’ I’ll not be leavin’ ye te fend fer yerself away from the company.”

“When what I am comes out, Master Dwalin, I won’t be able to stay with the company regardless of what you say. My hide would be skinned the first night, and I very much like living, thank you very much.”

“They won’t touch ye with Balin an’ myself claiming ye as kin,” Dwalin says, tone unmoving. “Ye’ll stay with the company, and ye’ll be stayin’ with us in Erebor when yer not here in the Shire.”

“I won’t be able to stay in Erebor even if we somehow take it back from a dragon, Master Dwalin! What I am is not highly regarded by Dwarrows as you well know, and you have no idea how your brother will take this revelation. He could very well march out of here right after we tell him and fib to that lout- King of yours!” Bilbo snarls.

“It’s Dwalin or brother te ye lad, an’ that doesn’t matter. They’ll not touch ye as long as I’ve a say in it.”

“You won’t be able to protect me from a mountain full of Dwarrows or the twelve that are sitting pretty in my smial, Master Dwalin!”

“Watch me.”

Bilbo throws his hands up in vexation. Fundin had told him about Dwalin’s exceeding stubbornness as well.

“Save me from the stubbornness of Dwarrows! Be it on your head, Dwalin, if they turn on you! I will claim no part in it and throw a wet rag in your face as an ‘I told you so’!”

“Then we’re agreed. I’ll bring Balin here to discuss things an’ so ye can give ‘im yer signed contract,” the broad Dwarf says, sounding highly too pleased with himself.

“Yes, fine! Let’s get this over with… And for your information, I’m not signing this confounded contract till Master Balin agrees to a revision! Even then I may not sign it!”
With that Dwalin practically struts out of the study with a laugh to fetch his elder brother, undoubtedly gleeful with his old but new brother. Bilbo, on the other hand, sits and sets his elbows on his desk, dropping his face into his hands. This would not end well, he knew it, he knows it, yet he could never steel himself against such bonds. Family here in the Shire wasn’t the same as the bonds he had made during his travels with Dwarrow, Men, and Elves alike. No… nothing but his parents’ smial is what kept pulling him back to the Shire. Well… the smial and a few cousins he could stand for more than five minutes.

“This better be more than a treasure hunt…”

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Thorin watches from his place before the hearth as Dwalin nearly skips, well as close to it as Dwalin will ever be capable of, into the Hobbit’s parlor. He can’t help but match Dwalin’s grin at his Guardsman’s good mood.

“Dissuade the Hobbit, did you?” he asks with mild humor.

Gandalf won’t be able to blame him for the small, high-strung creature not joining them if the Hobbit declines to the wizard’s face before they set out, he thinks. Dwalin only looks at him in confusion.

“Dissuade? Now why would I be doin’ that?”

Thorin frowns at his shield-brother.

“Is that not what you were doing?”

Dwalin shakes his balding head.

“No… There ye are, Balin,” Dwalin says when he sees his brother fiddling with his pipe in the chair by the fire behind Thorin. “Come, I have need of ye in the study. Bilbo has some things ’e’d like te talk with ye about concernin’ the contract.”

Stepping around Thorin, Dwalin grasps Balin’s arm with a grin and pulls him from the chair, dragging the elder Fundin-son with him back to the study, and leaving one Dwarrow King once again in a state of confusion this night. He does not enjoy the experience one bit.

“Nori,” he calls to the Dwarf who is sitting at the table where Ori and Dori are playing chess once Dwalin and Balin are out of sight.

“Aye, yer Kingliness?” Nori sasses, causing Dori to box his ear before he can escape to stand before Thorin.

Thorin frowns at him a moment before shaking his head in exasperation.

“While I trust Balin and Dwalin, Gandalf’s burglar I do not. Go find out what it is he finds disagreeable with our contract and anything else they may speak of. I’ll not have this Hobbit joining us if he’s looking to get more than his fair share.”

“’e looks mighty well off te me, yer highness… But ifin ye feel like he can’t be trusted, I’ll go have a look-see,” Nori says which a shrug before soft-footing it through the smial toward the study.

Of course the thief would know where the study is, Thorin thinks with derision. But Nori is useful despite his…occupation.
Nori creeps to the closed door of the study, very careful not to go clinking and clanging after
discovering the Hobbit’s ears were a lot sharper than he expected. How else would the little creature
have known about the silverware? He pulls out his listening horn, quietly, quietly… holding his
breath as he puts it on the door.

“Now Master Baggins—” comes the muffled voice of dear Ol’ Balin.

Well Mahal curse it, they had already been talking for a while then.

“No, no, no! You’re not getting it! You have a clause in this piece of rubbish that states; ‘Meals’
here shall mean and shall be restricted to breakfast, luncheon, and evening dinner. So-called second
breakfast, morning or afternoon tea, or late supper are not included’. Hobbits eat these ‘so-called’
meals because we have to! It’s how we’re built for Valar’s sake. Having you lot provide –or not- all
of my meals, ‘at the sole discretion of the Director’, will leave me starved before we’re even halfway
to your mountain! What good will I be to you all then?!” comes the Hobbit’s frustrated cry.

“In fact, this entire contract is utter sh!te and has me reimbursing you Dwarrow for services, items, or
whatever else rendered or not as if I were the one to put that dragon in your mountain and left him
there! And what is this?! ‘Disputes arising between the contract parties shall be heard and judged by
an arbitrator of the Company’s choosing, and all pleas shall be pleaded, shrewd, defended, answered,
debated and judged in the Dwarvish Tongue’?! How is that a fair dispute?”

‘Seven meals at least? Blimey! Where do they put it all?’ Nori thinks in astonishment, remembering
the size of the Hobbit’s pantry. Here he thought the Hobbit had prepared it all for them!

“‘e has a point, Balin. I jus’ read through this caragu rukhs ye call a contract. When did we fall so
low as te take advantage of others, brother? By Mahal, he doesn't even know Khuzdul!”

He hears Ol’ Balin heave a sigh.

“Very well, I’ll add that yer allowed te hunt or gather yer own food between designated meal times
for no longer than an hour and a half. However, it will be under the stipulation that if ye can gather
more than just fer yerself during that time, ye’ll share it with the rest of the company.” Balin states
with a sternness his political position has instilled in him. “Will ye be able te catch up te us, however?
Thorin will not wait for ye te get yer fill, not if yer going te be going off at least four times during the
day.”

“He was a tracker an’ hunter fer our father with the caravans, Balin, we told ye this.”

Wait... the caravans? But those were led by Fundin some hundred an’ forty years ago until ‘is death
at Moria! He didn't think Hobbits lived so long...

“Aye, so ye did. But he'll be unprotected while away-”

“Can you both stop talking like I’m not standing right here?” Master Baggins snaps at them. “In fact,
before there’s any more talk on adding to this…garbage...”

Nori doesn’t hear the Hobbit moving about, but when Balin shouts in alarm, and the faint smell of
burning parchment meets his nose, Nori can’t help but grin manically.

“We’re rewriting this conceited piece of tripe, Master Balin. If you have anything against that, well,
your original is now in cinders, but feel free trying to duplicate it. Hobbit I may be, but ‘like any free
being, I have my rights, and I will not be denied them!”
Truly, Nori really does like the little fellow regardless of his questionable longevity. He was interesting and fierce despite his bearing. He can just feel something dangerous lurking under that sun-kissed skin and behind those sharp, summer green eyes. Them be sharp eyes, those ones. He’ll make an excellent partner in crime, he thinks gleefully. But dear me, this position is killing his thighs…

“Perhaps I should just-”

The sound of scuffing boots echoes around him and he freezes, cursing himself in his head for even moving at all. Bilbo’s voice doesn’t return, but the sound of shuffling paper, the scratch of a quill, then the heavy steps of Ol’ Balin and Mister Guardsman heading further away makes him curse under his breath. The shutting of another door and he knocks his head on the one he’s hidden behind.

Sharp ears… terribly sharp ears… didn’t he say that himself afore he even got to the door?

Thorin ain’t gonna be happy…

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Thorin watches as Nori comes slinking back into the parlor, head angled down to the floor, in confusion.

“Well?” he asks when the thief stops some feet away from him and avoids his eyes.

“We-ll…I wasn’t able te hear much. Kinda came in when they was in the middle of it…All I heard is that Master Baggins thinks – with whatever ye and Ol’ Balin put in that contract of his - we’re a buncha cheats, Hobbits need te be eatin’ at least seven meals a day or more, an’ Ol’ Balin agreed te it. Course there were stip’lations… Oh, an’ he burned yer contract te cinders.”

“He did what?!?” Thorin snarls as his face becomes thunderous.

“Burned it te cinders, I said. Ye gettin’ on in years yer Kingliness?” the Thief has the cheek to say. “Can’t say I blame ‘im. If I ‘ad te sign something that kept me from eatin’ my three-square meals, I’d surely have burned it as well. ‘Sides, if it ‘ad Mr. Guardsman all up inna tiff, then something sure ain’t right with it.”

If Thorin’s face could darken in color any more, Nori was sure he would be spouting fire from his lips.

“The Halfling destroyed company property! That contract could have been used for another! He had no right-.”

“If we’re talkin’ bout rights, the Hobbit is well within ‘is te rip it up since it was tailored to ‘im from what I heard. ‘Sides, turns out the little fellow supposedly helped Fundin when ‘e was out protectin’ the caravans afore Azanulbizar. Mister Guardsman said his ol’ pappy used him as a tracker an’ hunter. He’s been helpin’ us long afore this. That there is right enough in my books,” Nori interrupts blandly.

“That Hobbit helped Fundin with the caravans? That fussy creature bobbing on the mat, who appears no more fierce than a rabbit? Do tell me you heard wrongly, Nori,” Thorin snaps at the Thief. “Hobbits do not live so long as far as I’ve heard.”

“No point gettin’ all growly at me, yer Kingliness,” Nori drawls with a shrug. “Look, I’m tellin’ ye all I heard. Baggins has sharp ears… heard me afore they talked about anythin’ else an’ took Ol’
Balin an’ Mister Guardsman inte another room. An’ ifin yer still thinkin’ ‘e’s no more fierce than a rabbit, yer Kingliness, I’d hate te see what else ‘e’d do to ye ifin ye go makin’ him beyond angry. Especially after seein’ the wee fellow haul ye out his door.”

Thorin snorts, his ire no less assuaged, but -despite his desire to throttle the presumptuous creature-it’s at least tempered for the moment. Longevity aside, the Hobbit could not possibly overpower any of them unless taken by surprise, which he had been. No one could say otherwise, either. Seeing Nori’s smirk, he amends that to all but this sneaky Dwarf.

“You didn’t try and get closer after that? That’s not like you, Nori.”

“Sharp ears, yer Kingliness. I believe I said it afore. ‘e’d have heard me openin’ the door even if I was sneakier than sneaky,” he grumbles. “I didn’t even hear him movin’ around in the room afore they scarpered off. Must be them Hobbit feet o’ his.”

“Which is entirely true, in case you’re wondering.”

Both Dwarrow jump in surprise, Nori whipping around, dagger drawn and slashing forward before recognizing Bilbo, who deftly steps back out of range more quickly than he should have been able to, too all the Dwarrows’ horrified astonishment.

“Hmm… I do believe I asked all weapons to be left by the door, Master Nori,” Bilbo hums as though a knife had not just been threatening to disembowel him. “For this very reason.”

Nori drops the blade as if it is scalding him.

“I almost gutted ye, Master Baggins,” Nori whispers hoarsely.

“Yes well, it’s not the first time I’ve startled Dwarrow before. Now if you don’t mind, please leave any other weapons you’re hiding by the door,” he says, stepping around the still shaking Dwarf, to stand near Thorin.

“Balin’s requested you in the study, Master Dwarf. Come along then.”

He waits until the stunned King steps forward before turning around to lead him to the study.

“You and your Company are welcome to the spare, back, and guests rooms, though you may need to employ the smoking room and the parlor to get everyone settled in comfortably,” he says before waving the Dwarf toward the study door. “If you’ll excuse me.”

With that, Bilbo leaves the Dwarrow King and cuts through the dining room into the kitchen, not realizing Thorin’s eyes only left his back when he was out of sight. Thorin heaves a sigh and pinches the bridge of his nose before rotating his shoulders, walking down the hall and through the study door. Balin sits at the desk in the room while Dwalin seems to be sulking off to the side.

“Oh, there ye are, Thorin. Was about te get ye myself. Over here then, Bilbo has requested some...changes, an’ the two of us, at least, have come te an... agreement of sorts. Just need yer approval te rewrite it, an’ then for Bilbo te agree te sign it when it’s ready again is all.”

“He still hasn’t agreed to sign it?” Thorin growls.

“He has sharp eyes, Thorin, an’ more wit than I can boast at my best. Being lifelong friends with a wizard would do that te a creature I’d imagine.”

“Aye, ye’d go mad otherwise I bet,” Dwalin says with a tight chuckle.
“What did the Hobbit find displeasing with the contract, Balin?”

“Bilbo,” - Balin stresses - “has found the contract… is insulting how he put it Dwalin?”

“Aye, among other things. I’m in agreement,” Dwalin snarls at Thorin, much to the King’s surprise.

“So I’ve heard, but that does not give him the right to freely burn what was not his. Nor does it give him the right to complain about the meals provided when we are on fixed supplies,” Thorin scoffs.

Balin frowns at him in disapproval.

“I see Bilbo spoke true then. It’s not right having Nori sneak around the home of our potential burglar when he has offered us food an’ a place to sleep despite our unexpected arrival, Thorin,” Balin sighs.

“Never you mind… Right now I’m conflicted as to whether I’m angry or just disappointed with ye right now. We both know ye had me write that contract with the intention of driving off whatever Hobbit Gandalf had seen fit to bring along. However, if Gandalf believes we require a Hobbit, at this point, as long as it is Master Baggins, I’m in agreement. Knowing what I do now, not only would we have been starving the lad, but what ye had in that contract would have been a slight against the line of Farin.”

“What do you mean a slight against your line? Can he not adapt to fewer meals like the rest of Arda has?” Thorin snaps.

“No, he can’t. Hobbits have a very peculiar structure, Thorin. Their bodies, despite their size, consume much more energy a day than a Dwarrow. Twice as many more really. Bilbo’s own heritage makes it even more so.”

“His heritage? Does that explain his apparent longevity as well? I'll not have some cursed creature traveling with us, Balin.”

“Aye, he’s a Baggins and a Took. From what he told us, Tooks are the more adventurous of Hobbits; an’ need more meals than most to keep up their energy,” Balin says, glancing at Dwalin before continuing. “The Took line also has a proclivity of bearing Hobbits who live far longer than the rest of their kin. It’s the fae blood, Bilbo has told me. But enough of that now, I dare say if Bilbo does join us, he’ll not stick around for long before wandering off to find another meal should the previous one not be filling enough. He’ll be out of yer beard more often than not, at least. Seeing as ye’ve been nothing but… discourteous to him, ye should take that as a boon.”

“Tch. At least he is not some beardless whelp we’ll need to worry over. However, that is time we don’t have to spare on one Hobbit’s stomach, Balin,” Thorin growls. “He’ll slow us down.”

“As I’m sure Nori has told you, Bilbo worked with our father, Fundin.”

“Aye.”

“Then ye know he’s a hunter an’ tracker. It’s been agreed that we’ll not stop as he fills himself. Any extra comes back to the company which will keep our supplies well stocked,” Balin says calmly. “If in the event we lose our ponies, thus our supplies, Bilbo’s expertise will be a much-needed asset. Not many of our company has or wants the knowledge of the edible plants on Arda, nor quite the stealth required to take down a deer without spooking the herd.”

“How do you know he can do this? Your father’s word? His?” the Dwarf King snarls. “What reason do we have to trust this creature aside from what Gandalf tells us and the word of your father?”
“Our father claimed ‘im as Kin afore ‘e died,” Dwalin growls. “Our father, the Dwarf ye trusted te see our caravans safely te and from their destinations, asked Gandalf te come with one of the runs an’ ‘e brought along Bilbo. Fundin, ye remember how hard it was for anyone te impress ‘im?”

Thorin only nods.

“Bilbo impressed ‘im. This wee creature with more spine than some o’ his battle-hardened warriors. How do ye think ‘e was able te toss ye out despite yer fierce bearing”? Te have the balls te burn the contract of a King?” Dwalin rumbles. “Fundin called upon Bilbo for fifteen years after that te aid with the caravans. Bilbo answered all a his calls. ‘e’s loyal, Thorin, an’ our father came te see the lad as one a his own.”

“You’ve no proof that Fundin has claimed him as Kin, Dwalin.”

“I’ve more’n enough proof! ‘e has part of father’s stone!” the larger Dwarf spits out.

Thorin’s eyes widen.

“His stone? Truly?” Thorin asks the brothers in shock.

“Aye, Dwalin found it, and Bilbo showed it te me while we discussed the contract. He’s our brother by right, Thorin,” Balin says with ease.

“And because of this, you both trust him? A... brother you have not met before now?”


“I place my faith in Dwalin’s judgment for the time being, as I was told no such tales of our Hobbit brother before now. I’ll leave the journey, should he join us, te decide me.”

Thorin heaves a sigh of frustration, looking hard at his advisor and guardsman.

“Very well, he’ll be allowed to wander, but be it on your head should he prove an incompetent burden otherwise... What else has your Hobbit deemed unsuitable in his contract?”

“Well the entire thing of course. He’s a might more discerning and knowledgeable than any but a few here. Nor is he fond of what he calls ‘Dwarvish Wizard jargon’. He’s asked for some things te be changed regarding the reward as well.”

“He asks for more than what is offered?” Thorin snaps angrily.

“Quite the opposite. He requested his share of the gold be reduced... quite significantly. It seems Hobbits also have very little need for such vast riches, but seeing as they are quite self-sufficient as a race, I can’t say I’m too surprised.”

Thorin frowns once again. This Hobbit is turning out to be more confusing than he'd first thought.

“What has he asked for instead?”

“A small chest an’ maybe a few gems if nothing else.” Balin says with a shrug. “Even that seemed a bit too much for the lad.”

“We are to send him down to find the Arkenstone beneath a fire-breathing dragon, and all he asks for is a small chest of gold and a few gems?” Thorin asks flately.
“Aye, that’s what he asks for.”

Thorin stands silent for a moment.

“Hobbits are strange creatures,” he mumbles before addressing Balin again. “He’ll have his rightful share of one-fourteenth, Balin, make sure he knows that is non-negotiable. I’ll not have it be said we did not properly compensate the burglar for risking so much.”

Dwalin huffs in mirth from his post. That he does not chuckle as he would, tells Thorin all he needs to know of Dwalin’s ire with him.

“The lad’s goin’ te be right steamed when ye tell ‘im that, brother.”

Balin only sighs and Dwalin huffs again.

“Was there anything else your Hobbit brought up?”

“Nothing more than minor things ye need not worry about. I’ve handled them.”

Thorin gives Balin a long look before nodding his head.

“Will you need my signature again?”

“Aye, ye might as well sign what I’ve finished while yer here. Will keep me from havin’ te wake ye when it’s done.”

Thorin steps over to the desk, taking the quill from Balin and signing the parchment his advisor lays before him.

“If that will be all, I’ll retire to the parlor.”

“Aye, we’ll be out for a breather soon.”

Thorin nods again, opening the door and stepping out into the hall. As he passes the dining room, he happens to see the Hobbit sitting at the table, back to the hall, eating a meal of fruits, crackers, and cheeses as he reads a rather hefty, aged tome. He vaguely registers the presence of the wizard at the table, so focused he is on the Halfling that has caused him nothing but confusion and strife this night.

“Everything sorted then, Master Dwarf?” the small creature suddenly asks, never turning to see who he was addressing as he continues to read the written words, the sound of a page-turning quietly echoing alongside the crackling of the fire.

Thorin jerks to a stop, surprise flaring up his spine at being spoken to.

“Yes,” he says shortly as his heart slows down to a normal rhythm. “How did you-”

“You Dwarrow are quite noisy, even without your boots,” is all the infuriating Halfling says as he turns to just see over his shoulder, green eyes flickering oddly in the candlelight.

Thorin narrows his eyes at their host, trying to focus on what was happening with those eyes as it resembles something he has seen before. It vanishes as the Hobbit stands, shutting his text and with it, passes by the Dwarf King and toward the study.

“You’re welcome to the rest of that,” his thin arm vaguely motioning to the food on the table.

Thorin can only stare at the strange creature’s back once again until he is out of sight. His frown
deepens as he comes to a conclusion. The Hobbit was going to drive him to distraction. Be it from his exotic looks, his sharp tongue, or mercurial moods, he does not know, and that only make him more displeased with Gandalf’s choice in their burglar. He doesn’t realize how long he has been standing there, lost in thought and staring at the point where the Halfling’s back had vanished, until Balin and Dwalin are suddenly before him.

“Ye a’right, Thorin?” Dwalin asks.

“Yes, I’m fine,” Thorin grunts out. “Has he signed it?”

Balin heaves a sigh as Dwalin makes a strangled groan.

“No, not yet. We may yet need to find another burglar, Thorin,” Balin says gravely as he heads into the parlor, Thorin and Dwalin trailing behind him. “He truly did not take kindly to yer refusal of lower pay.”

“Ah yes, that sounds like Bilbo,” Gandalf says suddenly from his vigil in the kitchen. “He was most cross with Fundin when he made the Hobbit take more than what was agreed upon many times during those years.”

Thorin can’t help but look to the wizard curiously.

“If you cannot tell by his smial, Master Dwarf, Bilbo is a very well off Hobbit. Truly one of the most wealthy in the Shire, if we are talking about material or monetary wealth. He has no need or want for any more, and only the Fauntlings to spend it on,” Gandalf says with a twinkle of humor in his eyes.

“Then why have you chosen him as our fourteenth member? If the reward holds no sway over him-”

“That is precisely why I have chosen him! Bilbo cannot be bought, which is why you must convince him to come,” Gandalf says sternly. “You must convince him, Thorin. You’ve already botched it quite terribly with your gruff demeanor and ill will. I told you before; if you can persuade him to join you, you will succeed. If you do not, you will fail. If you choose not to try at all, then I will be done with you, and you will get no more advice or help from me until the Shadow falls on you!”

“Is that a threat, Gandalf?” Thorin growls. “You are the one who urged me to take back Erebor!”

“It is a fact, Thorin. Bilbo is the key to your success. Should he decline, you will fail, and Erebor will forever be lost to you and your kin. You must appeal to his love of adventure, to his kind heart,” the wizard huffs. “Had you lot not just barged in, he would be much more amiable to all of this.”

“’ere now, wizard! Yer the one who sent us without informin’ ‘im!” Dwalin growls.

“A miscalculation on my part, I agree. I had forgotten what our last shared adventure entailed until it was too late. For that, I have apologized to my dear Bilbo, in our own way.”

Dwalin grunts, neither accepting nor discarding the Grey Pilgrim’s words.

“And how shall I convince him, Gandalf?” Thorin murmurs. “As you said, we have not given the best of impressions.”

“I’ll leave that up to you, Master Dwarf. I can’t be doing everything for you now can I?”

Thorin scowls at the wizard before retreating to stand before the fireplace. He takes his time packing his pipe, staring into the flames of the hearth. Memories of screams and fire falling from the sky dancing before his eyes within the glow. Of his people suffering and dying as they wandered across
Middle-Earth looking for a place to call their own. He begins to hum, low and deep, Dwalin’s low hum soon joining his.

He starts to sing.

“Far over the misty mountains cold,
To dungeons deep, and caverns old.
We must away, ere break of day,
To find our long forgotten gold.”

Balin, Bofur, and soon the rest of the company join him in the song sung by their people as they wandered and in the nights when Ered Luin only reminded the Dwarrow of all they had and have lost.

“The pines were roaring, on the height,
The winds were moaning, in the night.
The fire was red, it flaming spread,
The trees like torches, blazed with light.”

As their voices fade into the night, a strangled groan of frustration is heard down the hall from the study.

“Blast it and confound you, Gandalf!”

A moment passes before the soft stumps of bare Hobbit feet echoes into the parlor followed quickly by the Hobbit himself. He walks with a stiff spine and purpose as he approaches Thorin. Thrusting out the folded contract, the small creature’s nostrils flare with annoyance quite becomingly, he thinks quite suddenly.

“There signed contract, Master Dwarf,” he snips before turning with a huff after Thorin has grasped the parchment and leaving the parlor with, “I’ll need to get things in order before I depart, Master Dwarf. Feel free to leave when you deem it; I’ll be along shortly after.”

Then the Hobbit was once more out of sight, leaving Thorin standing bewildered before the fire and the rest but Balin and Dwalin staring after the Hobbit with similar looks. Gandalf is chuckling in his seat, eyes glittering mischievously in the firelight.

“It seems we have acquired our burglar, Thorin,” the wizard says with a laugh. “Best settle down for the night. I believe I overheard Bilbo offering the extra rooms and the parlor for everyone, yes?”

“Aye,” Thorin says softly, gaze falling to the contract in his hands.

“Well then, off with you lot. We want an early start do we not?”

“Aye… Alright, everyone, the Hobbit has given us leave to use the guest and spare rooms as well as the parlor if we need it. We’ll only take the smoking room if there is nowhere else. Nori, as you seem to have the lay of this burrow, guide everyone to them.”

“Aye, yer Kingliness,” which earns the thief another cuffing.
“Get some sleep. We leave at ten, no later.”

The Dwarrows shuffle about with small grumbles and groans as they follow Nori about the smial. Tomorrow they would finally be on the road to Erebor.

Bilbo shuffles his documents, preparing them to pass on to the Thain over in Tuckborough when he hears a quiet knock on his study door.

“Come in,” Bilbo calls out, eyes and quill never leaving the parchment as he drew up the papers for his Will.

He’ll need to get Balin to look it over before they set out.

“Mister Baggins?” the soft voice of Ori reaches his ears as the lad pokes his head in the door.

“Yes, lad? How can I help you?” Bilbo asks the youngling, turning around to face him.

“If it’s not too much trouble… could I… Could I perhaps stock up on parchment and ink? It’s just… the journey’s going to be long and, well, there won’t be many places we can stop on our way to Erebor and-”

Bilbo cuts off the Dwarfling’s nervous rambling with a raise of his hand and a fond smile.

“No worries my lad. I’ve more parchment, inks, and quills than I alone can go through in a year. Help yourself to anything you need.”

“Thank you Master Baggins!” Ori says with a shy smile on his face as he enters the study fully.

“Just call me Bilbo, lad. I only feel like a Master Baggins when I’m berating you lot,” he says with a chuckle as he turns back to his documents. “Feel free to any of the books as well, but please return them before we leave. Some of them are one of a kind here in the Shire.”

“Yes, sir!” the lad says with far less shyness this time around in his excitement.

Bilbo only smiles fondly, though the Dwarfling cannot see it, and resumes his work, the soft gathering of parchment, inks, quills and the quiet exclamations of awe from the youngling as he peruses the books a calming background noise.

It’s not until Bilbo’s neck protests movement, and the documents are done does he realize the time and the utter silence of his smial. Standing and stretching, the quiet sounds of soft breathing catches his sharp ears. Turning around he spots little Ori leaning against one of the bookshelves, fast asleep with one of his history books on Gondor open across his chest.

Bilbo huffs in amusement before shuffling over to the Dwarfling.

“Here now,” he says softly, shaking the younglings shoulder. “That’s no place to sleep, lad.”

Ori comes awake slowly, yawning and stretching his arms above him.

“Sorry…must ‘ave dozed off,” he says sleepily.

“So you have. Up you get, now. You need a proper bed if you’re to be traveling tomorrow.”

The Dwarfling hums in agreement, apparently still not suitably awake enough to function and get to
bed. Bilbo lets out a long-suffering sigh this time. The things he does for younglings. Good thing he had decided to pack before he sat down to work on his Will, else he would have to rush it in the morning. With some maneuvering and a great heave, Bilbo gets the Dwarfling on his feet and nearly drags him to the closest guest room through the dark halls. He thanks his other skin’s night vision as he avoids his odds and ends littering them. Sensing the presence of someone hidden in the dark of the hall behind him as he proceeds to the guest room, Bilbo pauses and waits for them to speak.

“He’s in here with Dori an’ myself, Master Hobbit,” comes Nori’s voice from behind him around the back room.

The Hobbit turns around carefully, and in the gloom, Nori can almost swear the small creature’s eyes flash that eerie glow of the great night predators. However, the moment is gone, and he can see nothing odd about them that his own Dwarrow night vision can discern.

“Mind taking him off of my hands then?” Bilbo asks.

Nori only nods and steps forward, gently lifting his younger brother into his arms, and with a nod of his head to the Hobbit in thanks, returns to their room for the night. Bilbo rolls his shoulders and then paces through his smial, checking that all of the candles had been put out as well as the parlors hearth and leaving his travel pack by the door before retiring to bed himself.

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The rising of the sun shines through Bilbo’s window the next day, rousing him as it always does. With a stretch and a yawn, he slips out of bed and into his bathroom, taking a quick bath and dressing in his leathers for travel. As he walks into the kitchen, he is greeted by Balin and Dwalin snacking on some bread and cheese, ale sitting in large mugs next to their plates.

“Good morning,” Bilbo greets them.

Dwalin grunts and continues to munch listlessly on a small block of cheese while Balin chuckles at his first younger brother.

“Aye, Bilbo, good morning,” the older Dwarf greets him with some energy that Dwalin couldn’t seem to muster.

“Not a morning fellow is he?” Bilbo asks as he passes into his pantry and grabs an apple, some cheese, bread, and ham that had not fallen into the stomachs of his guests.

“No, never has been even after he joined the Guard,” Balin says with a grin.

“He’ll be delightful morning company then,” Bilbo drawls as he goes about making himself a ham and cheese sandwich as well as his morning tea. “I suppose it’s too much to hope that your King will be any better?”

“Aye, Thorin is a mite worse I dare say.”

“Charming…”

Balin only chuckles again, and the three newly acquainted brothers eat in silence for a time.

“If you would Balin, I need you to look over some documents for me. I need them finalized before I take them to the Thain,” Bilbo requests after he has finished his sandwich.

“Of course, lad. Are they in the study?”

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“Yes, if you’ll follow me,” Bilbo says as he stands before looking to Dwalin who seems about ready to fall face first onto the table and sleep. “Is it alright to leave him here like that?”

“Brother will be fine,” The older Dwarf grins. “Besides, I think a good thunk with the table will wake him better than anythin’ else will right now.”

Bilbo only hums, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with his new elder brother as he leads the way back to the study. As they walk, they see the Dwarf King shuffling up the hall towards them. Bilbo continues on without another glance while Balin nods to his King before entering the study.

“Balin?” the Dwarf calls out.

“Just a favor, Thorin, nothing more,” is all Balin says before shutting the study door.

Barely awake, Thorin only stares at the door for a moment before ambling into the kitchen where he sees Dwalin’s head about to greet the solid table.

“Dwalin!” Thorin barks, sleepily annoyed with his shield-brothers ease at falling asleep nearly anywhere.

The larger Dwarf jerks up in alarm before seeing Thorin taking a chair across from him.

“Where’re my brothers?” he asks his King. “They were ‘ere not but a second ago.”

“Aye, Balin and your Hobbit are in the study for something or other,” he grouses, swiping some of the bread and cheese off of Dwalin’s plate.

“Get yer own ye lazy oaf,” Dwalin growls, pulling his plate away.

Thorin only huffs at him before rising and crossing into the pantry, grabbing some ham and cheese and a loaf of bread. He swipes the broader Dwarf’s ale as he sits again and takes a large gulp despite Dwalin’s growls.

“Cheeky bastard.”

Thorin grins behind his first sandwich of meat and cheese.

Sometime later, Thorin watches as the Hobbit passes the kitchen, parchments, and envelopes in hand, followed by Balin who joins him and his brother within it. He turns, eyes following the little creature’s path into the parlor and up to Gandalf who sits in the chair before the hearth, puffing away at his pipe. He watches through narrowed eyes as they converse softly before the Halfling hands the parchments over to the wizard. The wizard nods and stands, ambling over to the table by the window, the Hobbit following when he suddenly stops, head turning to look directly into Thorin’s eyes. As though caught doing something he shouldn’t be, Thorin swiftly turns himself around, giving the Halfling his back. He scowls at Dwalin who is chuckling across from him and then at Balin who is grinning.

“Thank you, Gandalf,” He hears the Hobbit say. “I’ll be off to Tuckborough then to drop these off after I’ve left the other one with Drogo. Lock up for me if I’m not back before you set off.”

“You’ve packed, my dear boy?” the wizard asks.

“Yes, last night before I retired.”

Thorin turns around slowly to watch as the Hobbit walks with the wizard to the entrance hall. Spying
the pack laying beneath the cloaks, Thorin can only gape at it a bit. It’s quite large and obviously weighty, yet the Hobbit stoops down and hefts it up and onto his shoulders with relative ease. Probably wasn’t as weighty as it looks then, he decides as the Hobbit hands a key over to Gandalf before stepping out his door. The wizard shuts it behind the small creature and makes his way to the kitchen.

“Best rouse the others, Thorin. They’ll want breakfast before we set out onto the road.”

Thorin hums in agreement, though his suspicions regarding the Halfling and the wizard won’t stop nagging him at the back of his mind. What had the Hobbit given Gandalf to look at? Why was Balin needed to look them over? These questions run through his head as he rouses his nephews and sends them to awaken the Rí and Ur brothers as well as Óin and Glóin. He enters the kitchen again when the questions will not leave him alone.

“What did the Halfling need you to look over, Balin?”

Balin frowns lightly at him.

“What Bilbo had me look over is no business but his own, Thorin. It’s private business.”

“Balin—” Thorin starts to growl before the older Dwarf interrupts.

“I’ll only say that, as Gandalf had said last night, Bilbo is certainly not joining us for the reward. Also, ye know well enough that no creature, be they Dwarrow or not, can just up an’ leave. He’s taking care of his business, and it will remain his business. That is all I’ll say on the matter.”

When Thorin looks to protest, Dwalin gives him a stern look.

“Leave it, Thorin. Ye don’t see our brother puttin’ ‘is nose inte yer business,” the burly Dwarf growls.

The Dwarf King scowls at them before looking to the wizard, who only looks away as though to tell him that he too would not be saying anything on the matter. With a frustrated huff, he leaves the kitchen to clean up in the bathroom, ordering the other Dwarrow as he passes them to eat and then get ready swiftly.

“We head out in an hour an’ half!”

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Three hours later, the company is packed, saddled, over an hour out of Hobbiton, and there is still no sign of their burglar.

"I said it. Didn't I say it? Coming here was a waste of time. I bet he didn't even sign the contract," Dori complains as the Company continues east.

"That's true enough," Glóin says gruffly.

"Ridiculous notion. Use a Hobbit? A Halfling? Whose idea was it anyway?"

“I thought you said the Halfling would be able to find us,” Thorin snarls at Dwalin.

“'e will,” Dwalin snaps right back, annoyed with Dori's and Glóin's bellyaching. “Ye didn’t see me complainin’ when ye took an entire week te get yer affairs settled. We’ve only given my brother hours.”
“Yes, that would have been rather helpful.”

Both Dwarf arrow jerk and twist in their saddles to see the Hobbit walking calmly next to Thorin’s pony, not a drop of sweat on him, his breathing calm, and a bow and quiver within easy reach upon his person. The ponies suddenly startle, and nearly bolt had the Dwarf arrow not pulled the reins with commands to halt.

“Oh shush,” Bilbo huffs. “I’m not going to do anything.”

The ponies slowly settle down, eyes wide as they all forcefully turn to face the Hobbit despite the Dwarf arrow commands. Bilbo merely holds out his hands to the ponies and waits.

“Best let them get this over with if we don’t want any more problems on the road.”

The Dwarf arrow look at him in bewilderment and confusion.

“Our burglar is a bit too quiet for most steed’s nerves,” Gandalf suddenly says. “It is best to do as Bilbo says and let them become acquainted with his scent.”

With a scowl and a huff, Thorin loosens his hold on the reins, Minty taking a cautious step forward after a moment, followed by the other ponies. The steeds take their time approaching the Hobbit before slowly pressing their noses one at a time into the Halfling’s palms. After minutes of this, the ponies begin nipping playfully at the Hobbit’s hair and clothes, causing the small creature to smile and giggle. His mirth is short lived though as Thorin pulls the reins, guiding Minty back to the front of the line, Dwalin following slowly behind him with an exasperated glance to Bilbo. The other Dwarf arrow follow suit, falling back into line and continuing on either side of the Hobbit.

“Give him a pony,” the Dwarf calls out to his company.

Bilbo shoots the back of the Dwarf’s head a startled look.

“No, no, no that won’t be necessary! I’d prefer to wa-!” he starts to say before he is suddenly lifted off the ground by two chuckling Dwarflings and settled into the saddle of the chestnut and white furred mare.

“Say hello to Myrtle, Mister Boggins!” Kíli grins.

"Come on Nori! Pay up!” Óin shouts ahead to the star-haired Dwarf.

With a grumble, the thief tosses back a pouch at the old healer.

"One more!” Kíli calls out too.

"Thanks, lad."

Bilbo looks about the company quizzically before addressing the wizard riding beside him.

"What's that about then?"

"Oh, they took wagers on whether or not you'd turn up at all, since we headed out without you," the wizard says airily. "Most of them bet that you wouldn't."

"Of course they did," Bilbo says with a roll of his eyes. "Did you place a wager as well?"

"Well..."
Another pouch of coins flies back, Gandalf deftly catching it before it hit his face.

"My dear fellow, I never doubted you for a second."

"That's hedging your bet, Gandalf," Bilbo grumps at the wizard fondly.

"Only a little," he says with a chuckle and leaves it at that as they continue on.

Sometime later Kíli sidles up to the Hobbit with a sparkle in his eyes.

“So you’re an archer too?”

“I would think one would be an archer if he decides to carry a bow and quiver, Kíli… and it’s Baggin.”

“Any good?” the Dwarfling asks with all the cheek of youth and a wild grin.

“You’ll have to find out now won’t you?” Bilbo grins back at the lad.

The pony shifts under him uneasily before he lays a calming hand upon her neck and leans to whisper in her ear. After a moment Myrtle settles and, to the rest of the company, seems to walk with a delighted bounce in her step. How odd, Hobbits, able to sweet talk ponies and all.

Confused, but deciding not to question the oddity of Hobbits at the moment, the company of Thorin Oakenshield continues on their journey east, pointedly ignoring the hard glances their King and leader would shoot over his shoulders at the Hobbit.

Erebor awaits.
That's Not How You Cook Dwarrow, Bert

Chapter Summary

In which traveling with the Company is ridiculously tedious (especially with Dwarrow Kings who have agendas against Hobbits), trolls decide it’s a good idea have a dinner of Dwarrow shish kabobs, and being chased across the plains is not Bilbo's idea of a good time.

Chapter Notes

So life has not been merciful in the least.... I apologize to all of this mad journeys followers for the slow updates, but what can you do. But here is the latest chapter featuring our favorite trolls William, Bert, and Tom! Enjoy!

That night, the Company sets up camp a bit off the road outside of Bree. Honestly, Bilbo did not see why they couldn’t have taken residence at an inn for the night. The Prancing Pony was perfectly... well not perfectly respectable, but would give them one less night of sleeping on the ground and waking with sore backs the next morning. Bilbo says as much to Balin, who merely smirks and says ‘It is as Thorin commands’. To which he rolls his eyes as Dwalin chuckles behind him, having overheard their conversation.

“Missin’ yer warm bed already, brother?”

“I’m sorely tempted to leave you here and enjoy the evening in that inn with plenty of food for supper, a warm bed, and a hearty first breakfast at sunup,” he says flatly as he sets up his bedroll, waiting for Bombur to finish cooking.

If the Dwarrow were going to live off soup the entire journey, Bilbo was undoubtedly going to be hunting more often than not, Dwarrow Kingly glares be damned. Soup was by no means filling when traveling.

“Ye get te have the younghlings then if yer abandoning us poor sods.”

“You, oh balding one, will be trouble I now see, foisting the Dwarflings on me,” he says with an affronted huff. “They’re not mine to look after.”

“I think ye’ll find the princes will be more trouble ‘n me. ‘Sides, tis only fair if ye get te enjoy a soft bed an’ I’m left here on the cold, hard ground.”

“Or I could introduce you to it and be on my way. Can’t complain or foist rowdy Dwarflings on me when you’re unconscious now can you?”

“I’m the Royal Guardsman fer a reason, brother. Care te wager on it?” Dwalin smirks.
Before Bilbo can answer, the Dwarrow King decides to butt his pompous head in and disrupt their easy banter as he comes to stand before them.

“There will be no harming the burglar, Dwalin, nor will anyone be leaving this camp unless they are on watch. I’ll not have the Halfling complaining of injuries while on the road. There’s enough of that as it is.”

With that, the arrogant sod turns and rejoins the younglings on a log nearby, Bilbo glaring figurative holes into his back. Out of all of them, he has been the one not complaining as loudly. He blinks and frowns in confusion when Dwalin’s words suddenly register.

“Princes?” he asks, looking to Balin for an answer.

“Aye, Fíli and Kíli are Thorin’s sister-sons. As Thorin has no blood heirs, he has named Fíli his heir apparent with Kíli to follow.”

“Truly?” Bilbo asks as he turns his gaze to study the Dwarflings for a few moments. “They certainly don’t act like any princes I’ve read about. Your King’s sister is who they must take after then. They certainly have more jovial dispositions than their Uncle.”

Dwalin bursts out into laughter drawing the glare of one arrogant Dwarf.

“Víli, their father, is who those hellions take after more. ‘Sides, with no real throne yet fer Fíli te inherit, Thorín’s a tad lax on the lads. Now Lady Dís, that dame is a force te be reckoned with, brother, do no’ doubt that. Though she’s a might easier to humor, less tight-lipped and with a fondness fer Hobbits.”

“I find it hard to believe you think your King tight-lipped,” Bilbo grumbles. “He’s certainly been vocal with his displeasures since he entered my smial.”

Dwalin claps a hand on his shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

“Aye, I canna disagree with that. Just wait, he’ll let up inna week or so.”

Bilbo can’t help but smirk at the opportunity to gamble and mimics his brother’s earlier words.

“Care to wager on it?”

Dwalin grins right back.

“Count me in as well, brothers. Five silver on two weeks to the day,” Balin says with a smile.

“Six on a week an’ a day,” Dwalin’s grin is all teeth at this point.

“Ten silver says he’ll keep this up till we’ve passed the Misty Mountains.”

His brothers both give him looks of reproach.

“What? I’ve had my share of dealings with Dwarrow tempers,” he shrugs, though surely the Dwarrow King will have let up on his displeasure with Bilbo’s presence before then, but after his brother's predictions, at least.

Before anything more can be said, Bofur calls out for supper, which Bilbo quickly departs from his brothers to retrieve, leaving their chuckles behind him. He huffs, they’d soon learn that you don’t get between a Hobbit and his seven meals. He’s already missed lunch and afternoon tea to get everything in order, and he was getting grumpy. There’s nothing for it, he’ll be hunting extra tonight.
“Dwalin! You have first watch, wake Fíli and Kíli for the second. Bifur, you’ll be after the lads. Nori, you’ll have the last one,” The Dwarf calls out as everyone is getting their share. The elders call out their agreement as the Dwarflings groan playfully. Bilbo ignores them all as he stares at his bowl containing the thin soup in dismay. This… this would hardly last an hour let alone the entire night before he’ll be ravenous again! How can these Dwarrow even function on this little?!

He sits himself back between his brothers with a despairing moan, staring at the watery soup with distaste.

“What is this?” he asks with some disgust, looking up and catching the eye of the wizard.

The daft old fool has that twinkle in his eyes again and his lips are twitching around his pipe like he’s trying to suppress his chuckles. The old coot is laughing at his horror. Yes, it smells good, but this can hardly be called soup. The wizard shouldn’t be taking his jollies from his distress.

“Soup,” Dwalin says flatly between sips.

“It’s what ye eat when ye travel on rations, brother, ye know that,” Balin chuckles before he takes another spoonful of his share.

“This isn’t soup. Soup is hearty and filling. This is broth. Broth, Balin. This is unacceptable. I’ve had better than this with Fundin’s caravans.”

Gandalf coughs around his pipe with mirth as Bilbo stands and stomps, well as much as a quiet footed Hobbit can stomp, back to the serving bowl and proceeds to pour his share back in. Let these daft Dwarrow and Gandalf call this a meal, he thinks. With that, he turns back to his brothers, grabs his bow and quiver from beside his pack, then proceeds into the darkness of the forest.

“Where do you think you’re going?!” The Dwarrow King snaps.

“Hunting!” he snaps right back as the shadows engulf him and the incredulous cries of the company, sans his brothers and the chuckles of one barmy wizard, fade behind him.

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An hour and a half later all of the Dwarrow startle as something thumps loudly right in the middle of their camp. All gazes dart over to see a dead buck and Bilbo stretching up on his toes, bow and quiver settled upon his back, with his arms extended as far over his head as possible. Beside the buck is a small satchel that looks to be packed to the brim with plants. With a groan of satisfaction, he shakes out his shoulders and unsheathes a skinning knife from somewhere on his person. He drags the buck closer to the fire and as he begins to skin it do any of the Dwarrow find their voices.

“What are you doing?” Kíli asks as he comes up beside the Hobbit. “Never mind that, how in Mahal’s name did you take that down in the dark of these woods and drag it back on your own?”

“Finishing dinner,” is all he says as he works, ignoring the Dwarfling’s second question entirely.

“Finishing?”

“Had nearly yer fill out there then?” Dwalin asks as he comes to stand to the other side of his Hobbit brother.

“Yes, it’s also the ‘extra’ Balin put in my contract,” he says with a shrug, elbow deep in the still warm guts of his prize. “What I don’t eat, I’ll set aside for you lot tonight unless you’d rather I make jerky out of it.”
“Jerky!” is the unanimous decision by all the Dwarrow and even Gandalf.

Not much is said for the next half hour as Bilbo enlists Dwalin’s aid with the buck. After Bilbo has taken the share he plans on eating, he sets aside what is left for the Dwarrow after cutting it into strips to be placed upon a rack over the fire when he finishes his own meal. Dwalin takes the innards Bilbo does not need into the forest for disposal while Bilbo takes the serving pot and dumps the diced meat and herbs into what is left of the ‘broth’. While waiting for his meal, Bilbo then proceeds to make a rudimentary smoking rack to place above the fire from nearby branches and rub the strips of meat with some of the plants and herbs he had gathered. Thirty minutes later, he removes the pot from the fire, putting the rack over the flames and sets the strips of meat on it.

“Um… Mister Boggins… are you sure that’s cooked all the way?” Kíli asks, his face looking a bit green as he hovers over the pot.

Glancing into the pot, Bilbo hums and pulls a piece of meat from the broth. Holding it close to the fire and examining the exterior then slicing it in half to see the partially red interior, he nods and pops it into his mouth to the horror of the Dwarfling.

“Mister Boggins!”

“Oh shush, it’s perfectly alright. I always eat meats like this… And its Bagg- you know what, just Bilbo is fine.”

“But it’s not cooked all the way through!”

Several Dwarrow look up at this, their faces in various states of disbelief and horror as Bilbo shrugs his shoulders.

“Ye can’t be eatin’ meat half cooked ye daft Halfling!” Óin roars as he hustles over to the Hobbit and Dwarfling.

As he goes for the pot, Bilbo yanks it away from him and prances out of his reach.

“No! No, it’s perfectly alright! I’ve eaten it like this for years, and I have yet to be sick from it! I’ll not have you taking my last meal of the day from me, Master Óin!” Bilbo barks at him as he continues to dance out of the way of the old Dwarf’s grabby paws much to Dwalin’s and Balin’s amusement.

It is only when Dwalin sees his brother’s eyes flash gold in the firelight does he decide to step in despite the entertainment value. Watching his wee Hobbit brother giving trained Dwarrow the slip when a handful –Glóin, Bofur, Kíli, Fíli, and Dori- decide to try and aid the old healer was the most enjoyable thing he has witnessed in a while. Not even that slippery thief, Nori, could get his hands on his brother’s prize when he decided to try his luck. Despite his fun, keeping the other Dwarrow from losing a few fingers or a hand becomes his goal when his brother’s lips start to curl up in a snarl.

“A’right lads, leave my brother to ‘is meal! Did any of ye think that this might be a Hobbity way of cookin’?”

The Company pauses, giving the gruff Dwarf looks ranging from confusion to glares of indignation –Óin-, which Bilbo uses to his advantage and swiftly climbs a nearby tree with ease, his meal in tow. See how well they can take his hard-earned rations from him now, the sods. Gandalf and Balin, of course, are chuckling like the old badgers they are while the majestic sod glares daggers at him from the ground. Sod them too, he thinks as he tucks into his soup with gusto despite the groaning of
certain Dwarrow.

“Fine! Have it yer way, Halfling! Just don’ come cryin’ te me when yer stomach is all afoul!” Óin shouts up at him.

Bilbo only huffs and continues to eat.

When he descends some thirty minutes later -as some of the Dwarrow had taken to staring at him like he was going to fall over dead, he felt a childish petulance to remain so far above their heads they had to strain their necks- he is pounced upon by Kíli and manhandled closer to the fire.

“Kíli, for goodness sake, I’m fine!”

“Bilbo, you can’t go eating raw meat! It’s got all kinds of parasites and nasty things in it!”

“It was nearly cooked meat, Kíli. Cooked meat is perfectly safe to eat since you can’t un-cook it after all.”

The Dwarfling gets this adorably confused look on his face at Bilbo’s words and the Hobbit can’t help but reach up to ruffle the youngling’s hair, but stops short.

“You really must stop looking like that. I’ll start treating you like one of my young cousins if you don’t,” Bilbo grumbles as he sidles passed the Dwarfling with the pot, grabbing one of the extra water skins and proceeds to clean it.

The Dwarfling nearly skips over to his side, a big grin on his face.

“Is that such a bad thing?” he asks, sticking his face annoyingly close to Bilbo’s, exactly like young Aldagrim, on his mother’s side, would do when being cheeky.

Seems the Dwarfling has forgotten his earlier worry over him. Shoving the younglings face away from his own with a grin, Bilbo starts to reply to the giggling Dwarf but, as usual, is interrupted by his pushy uncle.

“Kíli! Leave the Burglar be. I’ll not have you falling asleep while you’re on watch. Get some sleep.”

The youngling’s grin fades as he trots over to his uncle’s side where Bilbo can hear him give a quiet apology. He glares into the darkness of the forest, trying to bank his frustration with the Dwarrow King before slanting his gaze over to his brothers on the other side of the fire, catching Dwalin’s eye. The Dwarf looks at him in confusion until Bilbo darts his gaze over to the King and his nephews and back. Dwalin looks over to them before back to his Hobbit brother, shrugging one broad shoulder before waving him over. He puts away the pot before he joins them, sitting between them once more on his pallet.

“You have first watch tonight, yes?” Bilbo asks quietly.

“Aye.”

“Want some company?”

“I’d no’ be opposed.”

“Good, good… I need to vent.”

Dwalin grins with feral delight.
“Any night ye need brother.”

After all, what the arrogant sod doesn’t know won’t kill him.

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They have been on the road for nearly three weeks now, and Bilbo is fast approaching the end of his civility with Dwarrow Kings, promise to a certain wizard be damned. His comings and goings to fill his stomach were met with scowls and disdain. There was nothing but harsh reprimands and scorn for the littlest things and even things that were not his doing! He received glares for his sighs of appreciation for the crisp air of all things! Worst of all, his conversations with Bofur, but especially the ones with Kíli, would be interrupted with a barked command of;

“Be silent Halfling! Do you want to bring the fell things of the wilds upon our heads?”

Halfling. It’s the most insulting thing the Majestic Sod –and yes, Bilbo had decided it was now a title as well as a description for the confounding Dwarf- has consistently addressed him as since they cleared Bree. Like Bilbo was half of anything! The sod’s attitude was influencing how the others interacted with him too.

He tried; honestly he did. However, his attempts at polite conversation with the other Dwarrows was usually met with grunts or sniffs of disdain before the Dwarf would pull away from him. Being ignored by most of them he could deal with. At least the Dwarflings, Bofur, Dwalin, and Balin kept his company. Except for Ori and Nori. The youngling wouldn’t dare approach him because he was too self-conscious to even try with Dori’s disapproval of Bilbo hovering nearby. Nori was another entity entirely. Bilbo would catch the Dwarf staring at him as though he were some puzzle to suss out, and it was frankly annoying and bordering on disturbing. At least the cheeky sod wasn’t ignoring him like the others and would engage the Hobbit in conversation more often than not.

Despite all of this, it was the veiled insults and that Dwarrow King’s disrespect being mirrored by the rest of them –again, except for Ori and Nori- that was pissing him off more than anything. That he had done nothing to earn this treatment was only making it worse. So yes, Bilbo was fast approaching his limits with this Dwarrow King. What was also not helping was that his Baggins and Took blood was chafing with every barked order he stoically followed. He was not used to following such a blatantly disrespectful leader or anyone who insulted him at every turn for that matter. Back with Fundin’s caravans, the only ones who even dared try were the fresh soldiers Fundin sometimes had to bring along. Fundin or himself would put them in their place quickly enough, especially after that one disastrous journey. Fundin only ever brought along soldiers who knew of Bilbo from then on until Azanulbizar if he could help it.

Even in the Shire, despite his oddity, the other Hobbits saw him as an upstanding figure and leader of Hobbit society with title and prestige tacked on. The only one to give him blatant orders and subtle disrespect was Lobelia –which he ignored with relish- and the Old Took when he was in a mood.

Most of all, he did not like feeling he would be bombarded with insults should he even talk to the ones who called him brother and the Dwarflings he was coming to see as his own nephews in a way.

The King is the leader of this company, Bilbo, just weather the storm, it will pass, he has to remind himself when the sight of the Dwarrow King’s harsh glare greets him as he returns from another hunt. Just remember, you told Dwalin you would listen to his King’s orders for now. Otherwise, Balin will give you that silently disappointed look if you break his King’s nose... or toss him into a mud puddle... Valar above...

Bilbo is not a happy Hobbit to say the very least.
That night, the company camps just North of Weathertop. Bilbo decides to hunt after everyone has
gone to sleep and are under the watchful eye of his brother instead of the Dwarflings. It will take
longer to complete this hunt with the climb down and back taking time away from it, and he'd rather
avoid any more Kingly glares today, thanks. Once everyone has settled down after another
dissatisfying meal—in Bilbo’s opinion— the Hobbit makes his way silently over to Myrtle. Glancing at
the snoring Dwarrow—Bombur somehow inhaling the moths fluttering over his head only to exhale
them with every breath, to Bilbo’s amusement—, he pulls an apple from his vest pocket. Gandalf gives
him a small smile as he passes. The other ponies shift a bit in nervousness but are relatively calm in
his presence now. Myrtle, the darling, greets him with an enthusiastic head bob.

“Hello girl.” Bilbo says with a smile. “There’s a good girl.”

Glancing back one last time, he holds the apple out to Myrtle, rubbing her snout as she happily eats
the red fruit.

“This is our little secret, Myrtle. You must tell no one, shh-shh.”

A horrible screeching howl suddenly echoes into the night. Bilbo raises his head to stare down into
the shadowed valley, eyes once filled with affection, glinting gold in the moonlight and flinty.
Having seen how deeply the Dwarrow could sleep, he was glad Balin had convinced his King to
take shelter upon the height of Weathertop.

“What was that?” Bilbo hears the soft voice of Ori ask Fíli and Kíli.

“Orcs.” Kíli says as he looks around.

Bilbo catches Fíli give his brother a startled glance before his lips quirk up in amusement. Bilbo rolls
his eyes up to the sky in exasperation. Orcs were no laughing matter, even if the Dwarflings were
just doing so for a bit of fun.

“Orcs?! Here?!” Ori gasps as he scrambles to stand, looking around wildly.

The Dwarrow King jerks awake at the Dwarfling’s distress. At least the sod would wake if there
were any trouble.

“Come now, Ori. You know... throat-cutters.” Fíli says as he puffs on his pipe. “There’ll be dozens
of them out there. The lowlands are crawling with them.”

“They strike in the wee small hours of the night when everyone’s asleep. Quick and quiet, no
screams. Just lots of blood.” Kíli says with a grave tone.

The Dwarflings watch as Ori’s face pales before they start giggling. Bilbo watches from his place
near the ponies as the Dwarrow King stands, his face a portrait of disdain.

“You think that’s funny? You think a night raid by orcs is a joke?”

Kíli’s face falls in contrition as his gaze drops to the ground.

“We didn’t mean anything by it.”

“No you didn’t,” the King growls as he stomps over close to where Bilbo stands. “You know
nothing of the world.”
Bilbo pats Myrtle’s head one last time before shuffling around the Dwarf to stand next to Ori as Balin approaches the princes.

“Don’t mind him, laddie. Thorin has more cause than most, to hate orcs.”

Bilbo listens with half an ear as Balin tells the history of Azanulbizar. He has heard many different versions of the tale from various Dwarrow too deep in their cups as they passed through Bree over the years. But they all end the same.

"After the dragon took Erebor, King Thror tried to reclaim our ancient kingdom, Moria... But our enemy had got there first."

Thrain had disappeared on the battlefield in an attempt to avenge Thror who had been beheaded by the pale orc, Azog the Defiler. With no sign of Thrain, Thorin engaged the monster. He had been disarmed during the fight and, as he lay on the ground from Azog’s last attack, had taken up an oaken branch and used it as a shield until he was able to arm himself with his sword once more. With one last swing, Thorin had sliced one of the pale orc’s arms in half, thus defeating and killing the foul beast. As the orcs panicked without their leader and as they dragged the creature back into the halls of Moria, Thorin had rallied the remaining Dwarrow and drove the legion back.

“But there was no feast... Nor song that night, for our dead were beyond the count of grief... We few had survived...."

Bilbo looks at Balin, then to Dwalin. He and his brother's eyes shining with the endless grief at the loss of Fundin. Bilbo had wanted to aid Fundin in that battle, but he had not arrived in time. When he had overheard just where his Dwarf father had been heading under the command of Thror, he had raced across the plains of Minhiriath Cardolan as fast as his skin could go, but for naught. Several leagues and a mountain range away from Azanulbizar, Fundin’s stone had ceased glowing.

Fundin was dead.

Time didn't matter as he had wailed and howled his grief upon the green fields. He barely remembers being taken in and the time spent away from the Shire before he came out of his anguished haze. Only then was he able to pick himself back up and make his way back to the Shire, shoulders and heart heavy with despair and the pounding of mounted Rangers vibrating up his legs. He could not go to see his Dwarf father returned to stone. None but Fundin and Dwalin knew of him and his adoption into Fundin’s family. He knew better than to try and claim kinship without his father’s support despite being given his stone. The Dwarf had done his best to keep his adoption of a Hobbit Skin-Changer quiet until the Ereborians recent settlement into Ered Luin and their great distrust of outsiders. Now, there was no time...

Bilbo looks back to Balin as his brother continues, his gaze full of admiration as he looks upon his King.

“And I thought to myself then, ‘There is one who I could follow... There is one, I could call King’.”

As the King turns around to gaze upon the Dwarf who followed him, striding back amongst them, Bilbo holds Balin’s gaze.

“And the pale orc... What do you think happened to him?”

Bilbo had always questioned the Dwarf conviction that the creature had died that day. Monsters like that, it takes much more than a severed arm to kill them in his experience.

“He slunk back to the hole whence he came,” the Dwarf King growls at Bilbo as he passes. “That
filth died of his wounds long ago.”

Bilbo catches Gandalf shift his gaze to Balin. Both of their faces mirroring the thought Bilbo has long contemplated.

Azog the Defiler could still live.

Shaking himself, Bilbo pats Ori on the shoulder.

“Don’t worry, my lad. Orcs don’t practice quick and quiet. They’re roaring and screeching as they come to kill you.”

“And that’s supposed to make him feel better, Halfling?” Dori snips.

“Better than having him startle at any small sound in the night caused by a breeze, Master Dori,” Bilbo says stiffly before returning to his pallet next to Dwalin.

As he moves to lay down, his sharp ears and nose pick up the stench of blood and decay, making him pause in his descent. He can faintly hear the growls and snarls of what could be wolves, but his instincts say otherwise.

“Brother?”

Glancing down, Bilbo meets Dwalin’s gaze. He shakes his head and lays down, ignoring the scents for the time being. He would inform Dwalin when the Dwarf was roused for his shift.

Then he would hunt.

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Twenty-five days into their journey with the scent of blood and decay faintly upon the wind, Bilbo decides to ride beside Dwalin despite his proximity to the Majestic Sod. He was not going to be deterred from his favorite brother’s side just because the King was displeased whenever he caught them talking any longer.

“Ye’ve been avoidin’ me, brother.” Dwalin grumps.

“I seem to recall you declaring he would let up in ‘a week an’ a day’,,” he says loftily, discreetly scenting the wind, trying to identify what it was he was smelling.

“Aye, that I did,” his brother says with a sigh. “I dunno why ‘is ire has lasted this long, brother. Nor ‘is sharp tongue…”

“He’s a right sod is why,” Bilbo snips before he turns his head and catches Dwalin’s gaze. “I’ll not be putting up with it for much longer, you realize. The blatant disrespect he has for me is unwarranted and influencing the others. With how long this journey is to be, I’ll be cutting off beards and braids before we’re over the mountains.”

“Aye, an’ I’ll help ye do it. It must be chaffing ye something fierce havin’ te follow us quiet like. Father tol’ me about the lines ye belong te.”

“Brother,” Bilbo says with fondness. “You don’t know even a quarter of it.”

Dwalin only lets out an amused huff before they fall into comfortable silence for a time.

When it starts to pour down like the sky itself was displeased with the day, does Bilbo’s mood slip
“Here, Mister Gandalf! Can’t you do something about this deluge?!” Dori complains further behind Bilbo.

“It is raining Master Dwarf, and it will continue to rain until the rain is done!” Gandalf snips. “If you wish to change the weather of the world, you should find yourselves another wizard.”

Feeling particularly devious all of a sudden, Bilbo can’t help but engage the wizard for a bit of fun.

“Are there any?”

“What?”

“Other Maiar?”

“There are five of us,” Gandalf says. “The greatest of our order is Saruman, the White. Then there are the two Blue wizards… You know I’ve quite forgotten their names!”

Bilbo chuckles at this. Of course the wizard has ‘forgotten’. More like he never learned them or bothered to remember.

“And who is the fifth?”

“Well that would be Radagast, the Brown.”

“Is he a great wizard? Or is he… more like you?” Bilbo smirks.

Gandalf turns around on his horse and levels him with an unamused stare. The sod can just get over it, he’s bored and wet, and when he’s bored and wet, others were the collateral in keeping him entertained.

“I think he’s a very great wizard, in his own way,” Gandalf huffs at him. “He’s a gentle soul who prefers the company of animals to others -you’d get along with him I imagine. He keeps a watchful eye over the vast forests to the east, you see. Good thing too, for always evil will look to find a foothold in this world.”

Bilbo hums in agreement, his boredom assuaged for the time being having ribbed the wizard and discovering a curious topic of conversation.

“I think I’d like to meet him.”

Gandalf’s chuckles meet his ears and Bilbo proceeds to engage the wizard with questions regarding Radagast, Kingly glares be damned.

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It's late afternoon when the company reaches the Trollshaws on the twenty-sixth day of their journey. Bilbo glances around as they hike up the incline, eyeing the burned out husk of what was once a home. The breeze shifts and the stench of the foulest thing he has ever smelled blasts his senses. He sneezes violently, his nose trying to rid itself of the malodor, and pulls his pony to a halt as another violent sneeze nearly tips him off his steed.

“Ye alright there brother?” Dwalin asks as he pulls his pony up beside him.

Once Bilbo can breathe enough to answer, he gasps out.
“Something foul,” he wheezes, though from how Dwalin is looking at him, he understood none of what he said.

The rest of the company and Thorin have stopped and are surveying the area.

“We’ll camp here for the night,” The King says before dismounting Minty.

Gandalf follows suit, ambling over to the remains and observing it.

“Fíli, Kíli, look after the ponies. Make sure you stay with them.”

“A farmer and his family used to live here,” Bilbo hears Gandalf say, which only makes him more agitated, his instincts screaming at him to get the Dwarflings out of this place.

“Óin. Glóin.”

"Aye?"

"Get a fire going."

"Right ye are," the red-haired Dwarf agrees.

“I think it would be wiser to move on,” Gandalf says as he turns from the ruins and faces Thorin as he approaches him.

“We can’t stay here, Dwalin!” Bilbo whispers harshly once his nose is accustomed to the stench, having overheard Gandalf. “It’s not safe.”

“Thorin says we make camp. He’s been in a right foul mood fer days now, tellin’ ‘im te move out will be met with naught but stubbornness,” Dwalin shrugs. “‘Sides, I don’ see anythin’ te get yer trews in a bunch, brother.”

“That doesn’t mean I cannot smell it,” Bilbo snaps.

“We could make for the hidden valley,” Gandalf continues.

“I’ve told you before, I will not go near that place,” The King growls.

“Why not?! The Elves could help us. We could get food, rest, advice!”

Bilbo dismounts and stands beside Myrtle as he watches the wizard shuffle behind the King as he tries to convince the stubborn Dwarf to change his mind. The hobbit frowns as he continues to listen, seeing that Dwalin is correct about the Dwarrow King’s stubbornness. He sneers and turns back to Myrtle, leading her over to Balin as he listens with narrowed eyes as the conversation goes south. This Dwarrow King was going to get them all killed!

“I do not need their advice!”

“We have a map that we cannot read. Lord Elrond could help us.” Gandalf tries to cajole the King.


Gandalf sighs softly.

“You ask me to seek the very people who betrayed my grandfather… who betrayed my father…”
“You are neither of them,” Gandalf says in exasperation. “I did not give you that map and key for you to hold onto the past!”

“I did not know they were yours to keep!”

Bilbo turns around in time to see the wizard heave a frustrated sigh, turn with an agitated shake of his head, and stomp away from the bullheaded King. As he strides passed Bilbo all he can think is that, no, the wizard cannot leave! Not now while they are in dangerous territory!

“Gandalf! Where are you going?!?”

“To seek the company of the only one around here who's got any sense,” the wizard says grimly.

“And who’s that?”

Please, please drag him along, Gandalf, he thinks, wanting to plan with the only other being here who could sense the wrongness of the area.

“Myself, Master Baggins!” he snaps as he stalks away. “I’ve had enough of Dwarrow for one day!”

Turning back to see the King, Bilbo can only glare at the Dwarf as he watches the wizard leave with an air of defiance.

“Come on Bombur, we’re hungry.”

Bilbo snarls, causing Balin to look at him sharply. He only shakes his head. Fauntlings! He was journeying halfway across Arda with two Fauntlings leading them!

“He’ll be back,” is all Bilbo says to Balin who looks at him with doubt.

Let his brother doubt. He’s been on more adventures with the wizard than he would dare admit aloud.

Some hours later Bilbo begins to fidget. Gandalf had been gone far longer on some of their adventures, but usually never when Bilbo’s instincts were screaming at him like this. Surely the wizard knew what his absence was doing to his poor nerves, right?

“He’s been gone a long time…” he mumbles as he ambles passed Bofur who was serving the 'soup'.

Though Bilbo can say they have improved on its contents by adding the jerky he made some weeks ago, making it a bit salty and more edible, it was still less than filling. He’d still need to hunt when everyone had gone to sleep. Over the course of the month with the company, he found hunting at night when they were all passed out with Dwalin on watch helps him keep his civility with certain Dwarrow Kings. Helped, but by no means did it prevent him from getting dangerously close to pitching the sod into the nearest mud puddle face first. Fundin would have put the arrogant lout in his place long ago, and Bilbo wouldn't be contemplating various ways for the Dwarrow King to 'accidentally' trip into a ditch. The bet with his brothers and the thought of Balin's 'stare of disapproval' were really the only things keeping him from ripping into the Dwarf if he was to be honest with himself.

“Who?” Bofur asks lightly as he pours another bowl.

“Gandalf,” Bilbo says incredulously, because seriously, who else had left camp that day?

“He’s a wizard,” Bofur says in the same tone. “He does as he chooses… Here! Do us a favor, take
this te the lads.”

The Dwarf passes Bilbo two full bowls of the ‘soup’ and nods to where the ponies are being kept. With a roll of his eyes, Bilbo does as requested and leaves the camp.

Bombur, who had toddled up to the pot while Bofur was speaking to him, tries to pour more soup into his bowl before Bofur slaps at the hand holding the ladle.

“Stop it! You’ve ‘ad plenty!” Bilbo hears Bofur scold his brother.

“Aye, it’s not a bad stew, Bombur. I’ve had worse,” Glóin’s boisterous voice follows him out of camp.

“Dori could’ve cooked it,” Nori says with a laugh.

“Hilarious,” Dori drawls, and Bilbo can’t help but chuckle at the Dwarrows antics when they thought he wasn’t nearby.

Bilbo steps passed the tree line and starts searching for the princelings, careful to not spill any of their meal. He finds them standing still, staring into the woods. With a frown, he comes to stand between the Dwarflings and positions the bowls in front of them so they could take them. His frown deepens when they don’t even move, just keep staring forward.

“What’s the matter?”

“We’re supposed to be lookin’ after the ponies,” Kíli says softly.

“Ye-s?” Bilbo hedges after a pause.

“Only we’ve encountered a… slight problem,” Fíli answers, glancing to Bilbo.

Bilbo looks forward to where the Dwarflings are staring when the scent hits him harder than it did earlier. Thankfully he doesn’t sneeze, but he does have to hold back retching into the younglings bowls. By the Valar the smell is horrendous!

“We had sixteen,” The brunette says with a small whimper.

“Now there’s… fourteen.”

Bilbo starts and glances between the two Dwarflings, hoping they are pulling his ears. When they continue to stare forward, Bilbo’s shoulders drop in resignation.

“How do you lose two full grown ponies?”

Kíli’s face erupts with a deep flush before he turns away, stomping closer to the remaining ponies as Fíli sighs and turns his gaze to Bilbo before following his brother.

“My brother got it into his head that he needs to practice his archery… His nighttime archery after he’s seen yo-“

“That’s not important right now, Fíli! Daisy and Bungo are missing!” Kíli says with a petulant flail. Bilbo gives him an unimpressed look before observing the area.

“Well that’s not good. Glóin and Nori are going to have your heads for that,” he says as he wanders over to Fíli who is observing a fallen tree… a very large, uprooted tree that smells like it was doused
in whatever foul thing he’s been assaulted with for hours now and motions to it. “And that’s even worse.”

There’s a heavy silence between them for a few moments before the Dwarflings turn consecutively and stare at him. He stares at them blankly for another moment.

“I’m not going to be the one to tell your Uncle about this, so you two better start coming up with an explanation,” Bilbo says flatly.

The Dwarflings look at him as if he’s betrayed them. Bilbo only stares right back at them as prolonged exposure to doe-eyed Fauntlings has made him relatively immune. The Majestic Sod would find a way to blame this on him and, with his instincts nagging at him and the smell cloying in his nose, he was in no way going to be able to hold his tongue or his fists if the Dwarf so much as looks at him crooked. The Dwarflings were on their own on this one.

“But Bilbo—“

“No.”

“Let’s no’ worry him. As our official burglar, we thought you’d might like to look into it. I’d like to see for myself these skills Gandalf says you have.” Fíli says, eyeing him in speculation.

His stare morphs into a glare as he eyes the older prince right back.

“I’ll have you know that the contract was revised and I’m well within my rights to decline any requested service asked of me. That tree there,” –he motions with his still bowl laden hand- “was knocked over by something big and smelly and I’ll have nothing to do with whatever hair-brained scheme you Dwarflings have come up with!”

“But Bilbo! Uncle’s already in a foul mood! Are you really going to leave our hides to his hands right now?” Kíli whimpers.

“Yes.”

“Look! There’s a light!” Fíli says before slinking off. "Over here!"

Kíli quickly follows his brother and Bilbo's eyes and head roll in utter frustration as he trails after them on much quieter feet. It feels planned… like the elder Dwarfling knew Bilbo would toss them to their Uncle if he weren’t distracted. So he does things that leave Bilbo no choice but to follow after them as the mature adult he is. The things Hobbits do for younglings, Bilbo laments as he crouches between the two Dwarflings behind another fallen tree.

Out from the darkness of night, the light from a fire meets their eyes. Bilbo doesn’t think much more of it before the snorting and gruff laughter of something reaches his ears.

“What is it?” he asks the blonde Dwarfling.

It is Kíli who answers.

“Trolls!”

Then the two brats are dashing off towards the light! He’ll tan their hides himself, Bilbo thinks as he scrambles after them. Before he can reach them the thump of large feet meets his ears. His eyes widen in surprise as he beholds for the first time in his life a troll. A giant, pale skinned, flat-faced, troll. And it was hauling away his pony.
“It’s got Myrtle!” he hisses as he crouches next to Kíli.

“And Minty!” Kíli admonishes him as if Bilbo is supposed to care.

“Alright fine, and Minty,” he sighs, supposing he can spare the steed some concern as it wasn't the pony's fault his rider was an utter sod. “I suppose we should g-"

“Do something? Yes! You should!” Kíli says as he drags the Hobbit between them, grabbing one of the bowls from Bilbo’s hands.

“What?!"

“Mountain trolls are slow and stupid, and you’re so small they’ll never see you!”

“No! No, no, no, would you-"

“It’s perfectly safe! We’ll be right behind you.”

“If you run into trouble,” Fíli says as he grabs the other bowl and starts trying to push Bilbo along. “Hoot o-"

Bilbo was having none of this. Grabbing Fíli’s mustache braids, he yanks down as he snatches back the bowl.

“Ow, ow, ow!”

Placing it on the log they hid behind, he lunges up at a wide-eyed Kíli, snatching one of Dwarfling’s ears and pulling him down to his eye level as well.

“Ah! Bilbo that hur-"

“Now see here, you miserable brats!” he snarls, causing both Dwarflings to freeze and look at him with wide eyes. “I have yet to finish my own meal for the night, and with this, frankly, ridiculous situation that you two have gotten us into, I will not be partaking in a nice rabbit stew within the foreseeable future. With that in mind, you two are going to tell your Uncle just what you have let happen to the ponies, while I go scout the area before I return back to camp with information we can use to make a plan. Inform him of that too while you’re at it. Also, you will both leave the bowls on this log, and you will not get them back until your mess has been cleaned up, am I perfectly clear?”

Both Dwarflings nod vigorously within their confines and with one last vindictive tug on beard and ear, he lets them go, looking pointedly at Kíli till the Dwarfling slowly sets his bowl down next to Fíli’s as he rubs his ear.

“Off you go then,” he shoos them away with a flick of his wrist.

They dart off back to camp like the hounds of Mordor are on their heels. Bilbo sniffs with distaste and turns around. He sighs in resignation and nimbly hops over the log without the bowls hindering him this time around.

What lands on the other side is no longer a Hobbit.

What stands is a kit-fox with dark grey fur –nearly black- patterned with an unconventional display of black colored rosettes and stripes beginning at its neck and continuing down to the tip of its bushy tail.
Shaking out his dark patterned fur, he stretches out his paws, back arched, before righting himself with a twitch of his nose. Slit, golden eyes take in his enlarged surroundings with a bored air. Scouting was always a tedious venture when he knew getting caught was substantially low. Being roughly the size of a house cat would make it so. The troll that passed them hadn't seemed to be the most observant of creatures either, making this even more tedious.

His large ears twitch around, the green gemmed stud in his right ear—hidden by his hair in his Hobbit skin—glinting in the moonlight, before they focus on the trolls.
“Mutton yesterday, mutton today, and blimey if it don’t look like mutton again tomorrow!” one of the trolls growls out to his companions as the pony kidnapper approaches them, Myrtle... and Minty tucked under its enormous arms.

“Quit yer gripin’! These ain’t sheep. These is fresh nags!” the brutish troll cheers as he places Myrtle... and Minty into a pen with Daisy and Bungo.

Bilbo stops behind one of the many bushes and glances around it. Bloody hell... three, enormous trolls around a huge campfire with a large cooking pot. Perfect for cooking ponies... Or Dwarrow, is Bilbo’s morbid thought. He trots over to a low seated boulder to look around to make sure they were still occupied.

"Oh! I don't like horse. I never have," the thinner troll whines. "Not enough fat on them."

"Well it's better than leathery old farmer. All skin and bone, he was. I'm still pickin' bits of him out of me teeth," the cooking troll says.

Bilbo can't help scrunch his nose up in disgust at that, his ears falling flat against his skull. Shaking his head, he moves again to get closer to where the ponies are. The skinny troll abruptly sneezes and a plopping sound echoes in the hovel. Oh Valar above please don't tell him...

"Well, that's lovely, that is. A floater," the cook snaps as he stands, motioning at the pot. Disgusting! Bilbo has to keep himself from vomiting what little is left in his stomach and giving away his presence.

"Might improve the flavor!" Brute exclaims with a grin.

"Ah! There's more where that came from," Skinny cheers and starts snorting to produce some more snot.

Bilbo becomes increasingly sure he will hurl if Cook lets Skinny continue adding... ingredients.

"Oh, no you don't!" Cook snaps, snatching up Skinny by his nose and shaking him.

"Ow!" Skinny yelps and continues to hiss and whine.

"Sit down, Tom!" Cook growls as he shoves Skinny -Tom- away.

When Bilbo is, finally, close enough to the pen to see its very rudimentary structure, he decides it would be easy to cut through if one of the Dwarrow took a good swing at it. Fit and muscular for a Hobbit he may be, he knows better than to think he would ever have the brute power of a Dwarf. His strengths were in speed, agility, and stamina, the long fight if you will. He would have to saw through the rope, and that was time that couldn't be wasted during a rescue. With a nod, he steps back into the darkness and observes the area, eyes reflecting the firelight when he glances in the direction of the trolls.

Tom sneezes again, though by the sounds of it, into a cloth of some kind. How bizarre! Trolls have names and more manners than the Dwarrows he travels with!

"Well, I hope you're gonna gut these nags. I don't like the stinky parts," the troll must be leaning close to the ponies as he hears them whinny in fear.

The loud clang of the ladle hitting Tom’s skill echoes around the hollow.
"Ow!"

"I said sit down."

"I'm starving! Now are we having horse tonight or what?" Brute growls at Cook.

"Shut your cakehole, Will. You'll eat what I give ya."

"How come he's the cook?" Brute -Will- complains as he sits back down and begins picking his nails. "Everything tastes the same. Everything tastes like chicken."

"Except the chicken," Tom chuckles.

"What tastes like fish!"

"I'm just sayin' a little appreciation would be nice," Cook says. "Oh. 'Thank you very much, Bert. Lovey stew, Bert.' How hard is that?"

So William, Bert and Tom, Bilbo thinks to himself as he circles around the area in the shadows, trying to find his favored paralytic plants. Last he was in this area there was a bounty of them...

"Just needs a sprinkle of squirrel dung."

Bilbo gags before he can stop himself, and freezes. Honestly, he can't be blamed, Bert needed lessons in proper cooking!

"Here! That's my grog!"

"Eh-he… Sorry…"

Seems the trolls were too busy cooking to pay attention to any odd sounds. He can hear Tom whimpering as Bert rounds on him, striking him harder with that ladle once again, sending him crashing to the ground.

"Ow!"

More grunting and groaning follows and Bilbo can only assume Tom is righting himself. Hard to know since he's too busy gushing over the large bush of White Baneberry he finds. Glancing around, he becomes positively gleeful when he sees a patch of Belladonna nearby as well. Why ever had he never returned here for his poisons?!

"Ooh. That is beautifully balanced, that is." Bert says before holding out the ladle to Tom. "Wrap your laughing gear around that, eh?"

Tom loudly slurps it up.

"Good, i'n' it?" he says with a chuckle. "That's why I'm the cook."

Changing back to his Hobbit skin –clothes and all thanks to his gem- Bilbo carefully gathers up the Baneberries then scurries over to collect the Belladonna’s.

"Oh, me guts are grumbling. I've got to snaffle something. Flesh, I need flesh!" William grumbles.

"Ah! Ah! Achoo!"

Hearing how long Tom blows his nose, Bilbo can't help but be thankful he hasn't been naïve enough
to think he could rescue the ponies all on his own for years. Probably has saved him from some exponentially disgusting and dangerous situation. With a small nod to himself at the number of berries he’s gathered, Bilbo takes one last look at the trolls and pauses. There, heading right towards the troll’s camp, making a ruckus, something... or rather some Dwarrow is approaching with haste. The dark-haired brat-let pauses for only a moment at the very edge of the firelight's reach behind the trees before leaping forward with a cry.

"What have you done with him?"

"Wit who?"

"Is that a Dwarf?"

"Can we have him instead of horse?"

"What have you done with our Hobbit?" the Dwarfling snarls, eyes wide as he sweeps the area for Bilbo.

Oh, Bilbo was going to have words with that Dwarfling. Severe, scathing, and brutally honest words.

"What's he talkin' about?"

"No idea."

"Can we just eat him?"

Before Bilbo can race forward and try and save the youngling from himself, multiple battle-cries burst from Dwarrow throats as the rest of the Company -greatly reduced in armored attire- rushes from the forest and engage the trolls with fervor. Hacking and slashing, bashing and stabbing, they try to bring them down and keep them there to no avail. Stab wounds gushing blood did not slow them nor did the gouges or slashes from the Dwarrows large swords and axes. These must be more than the mountain trolls Kíli said them to be if unyielding steel is not able to bring them down.

"Get the sacks! Stick 'em in the sacks!" William roars out.

Confounded Dwarrow! He distinctly remembers telling the princelings to have the Company wait for his return! Words! He will have words for them indeed! Carefully packing away the berries into the pockets of his leather vest -though not poisonous to Hobbits, it's best not risk having them burst and leave stains on his clothes-, he assesses the situation as quickly as possible. Considering the plan he had come up with was already up in smoke, he snarls as he unsheathes one of his long daggers and makes his way swiftly over to the ponies. He had been relatively certain he was fast enough to drop the berries into the cauldron, which would have poisoned the trolls, and then, after retrieving the Dwarrows, they would set a distraction on the dying brutes as he and Balin set the ponies loose. So much for that.

He happens to glance back at the battle to see little Ori brandishing his slingshot at Tom, who had hoisted Nori up by his staff, and getting a clean shot right in the eye. The troll yelps in pain before charging the Dwarfling with a joyous snarl. Ori runs, dangerously ignorant that he is running straight at William who is bearing down on him with vicious intent. His lips thin and his gaze becomes hard as he darts into the fray. Quicker than any Dwarrow could ever hope to move, he pushes the youngling out of the way, slicing at William's outstretched hand with a snarl. The troll backs off with a roar of pain, eyes wide in surprise at the Hobbit's sudden appearance, but quickly distracted when Nori smashes his staff into the brute's side. Bilbo ignores the thief and whirls around, catching sight
of Ori, who is splayed on the ground, stunned. The Dwarfling's eyes widen as they behold him, gasping as their eyes meet. Bilbo can only assume his eyes are flashing gold in the firelight and reflecting that predator's shine from -hopefully- perfectly round pupils. He doesn't hold much hope for that considering the situation, but he can pray to the Valar they were.

Giving the Dwarfling one last glance he darts away toward the ponies once again and quickly sets to sawing the rope apart, working as fast as his blade would allow. So intent on his task he barely registers the approaching thump of large troll feet as he finally breaks through the rope and opens the pen letting Myrtle, Daisy, Bungo... and Minty free. It is in the last moment that he looks up to see a giant hand descend upon him with no hope of escape.

"Come on! Get up!" Kíli yells at Ori, who was flat back on the ground once more.

He looks to his Uncle after helping the younger Dwarf to his feet to see him staring towards the trolls instead of engaging them. Following his gaze, his eyes widen in fright.

"Bilbo!" he shouts and makes to rush forward.

"Don't!" Thorin snaps at his nephew and pulls him back.

Dwalin makes to dash forward as well with a roar upon his breath, but he too is yanked back by Thorin.

Let it be said Bilbo has not been amused with this situation right from the beginning. Now he's strung up tight by all his limbs, held between William and Bert with the real threat of being ripped in two at the forefront in his mind. He is going to flay Fíli and Kíli. Skin them, flay them, line their husks with fur, and use them as rugs for Bag-End.

"Lay down your arms," William growls at the Company. "Or we'll rip his off!"

Bilbo glares at the Dwarrow King, daring him to leave him to this fate, and nearly snarls at the absurdity of it all. He refuses to die because some Dwarfling's Uncle had a massive stick of animosity -directed at certain Hobbits, mind- shoved up his arse! If that Majestic Sod doesn't lay down his sword, he'll change skins and give that posturing clot-head something to worry about!

After what feels like a small eternity for Bilbo, Thorin shoves the tip of his blade into the ground. The rest of the Company follows his lead with various growls and grunts of frustration. Thorin's brows are furrowed in frustration, and he glares defiantly back at him. Or maybe it was directed at William... He better be glaring at William...

"I'm going to commit regicide... hope you don't mind," Bilbo says as casually as can be managed in this situation.

The Company has been stripped -sans Bilbo for some reason- and shoved into burlap sacks except for the few –poor Dwalin- strung up on the spit-roast above the fire. He now lays in a pile of Dwarrow who he would love nothing more than to do physical harm to, his brothers included. At least Balin - despite his ire- is next to him to keep him company.

"Oh! That's hot, that's hot, that's hot, that's hot!" Nori shouts out.

"Regicide. Do you hear me, Balin? Regicide. I'm going to start with the youngest."

"Don't bother cookin' 'em! Let's just sit on 'em and squash 'em inte jelly!" Tom pleads with Bert.
"Then I'll move on to the older prince. I have something *special* in mind for him, you see."

"They should be sautéed and grilled with a sprinkle of sage," Bert says, denying Tom his Dwarrow Jam.

"Is this really necessary?" Balin calls out, obviously trying to ignore Bilbo's -in his opinion- quaint conversation.

"Then finally, your King. I have extraordinary plans for him. Mind I'd rather not divulge since he's sitting, well *trussed up*, right behind us. Let's just say it involves, at some point, a pony and a...'mud' hole," Bilbo continues because sod all of these thick-headed Dwarrows, he was getting out of this alive.

If they happened to be saved in the process, well lucky them.

"That does sound quite nice."

"Untie me, mister," Bombur whimpers from the pile.

"Eat someone yer own size!" Glóin roars.

"Really, Balin, I insist you help me in my endeavor. It could prove to be greatly relaxing for us both."

"Never mind the seasoning. We ain't got all night! Dawn ain't far away. Let's get a move on. I don't fancy being turned to stone!" William snaps at Bert.

"Well that is certainly interesting," Bilbo muses.

The sound of ripping cloth echoes in the hovel and everyone, including the Dwarrows freeze.

"Well this has certainly been enlightening indeed!" Bilbo says as he shucks off the musty sack and stands, discreetly tucking away his dagger once again.

The trolls and Dwarrows are all looking at him in various states of disbelief, and he can't help but smirk as he dusts himself off.

"Here I was told trolls were the most wondrous chefs in all of Arda, yet you aren't even preparing even one Dwarf right, let alone a whole kabob of them. That seasoning? Really?"

"Who- What are ya then? An oversized squirrel?" William asks.

"I'm a burglar- a Hobbit!"

Dori is the first to come out of his stupor.

"You can't reason with them, they're half-wits!"

"Half-wits? What does that make us?" Bofur snaps back causing the trolls to chuckle.

"What about the seasoning?" Bert asks as he steps away from the spit with a grin.

"Truly? You haven't smelled them? You're going to need something a bit stronger than sage before you plate this lot up."

"Traitor!" Thorin snarls from the Dwarrow pile as the rest of them hiss and snap at him.
"What do you know about cooking Dwarf?" William asks with a snort as he continues to spin the roast.

"Shut up!" Bert snaps at William. "Let the, uh, flurgaburburhobbit talk."

"Thank you. Now the secret I've learned to cooking Dwarf is, of course to-

"Yes? Come on. Tell us the secret!"

"Yes, I'm telling you. The secret is to- skin them first!" Bilbo says with a wide grin on his face despite his nerves.

Let these daft lunatics see how it feels to be at the short end of the stick for once.

"What? Skin us?" Nori squeaks out.

The rest of the Dwarrow start squirming in their sacks. Glancing down Bilbo catches Fíli trying to scoot closer to bite at his ankles. Bilbo merely takes a foot and rolls the lad back in the other direction. Of course the brat quickly rolls back just to spite him.

"Try that again, and you'll be eating dirt, little princeling," Bilbo says as he looks down his nose at the Dwarfling, who looks up with wide eyes.

"Tom, get me filleting knife."

"I'll skin you, you little bastard!" Glóin yells at Bilbo who rolls his eyes.

From the spit, Dwalin makes eye contact with him as it turns, pointing as best he can with his arms tied.

"I won't forget that, brother. I won't forget it!" and lets out a snarl when Bilbo gives him a feral grin.

"What a load of rubbish!" William snaps, redirecting Bilbo's attention back to the trolls. "I've eaten plenty with their skins on. Scoff 'em, I say, boots and all."

From the corner of his eye Bilbo sees Gandalf scurrying up the rock face, the light of dawn illuminating his back as he climbs. Time. He just needs to play for time to let Gandalf do whatever it was he's planning. Thank the Valar!

"He's right," Tom agrees as he shuffles towards the pile. "Nothing wrong with a bit of raw Dwarf."

He snatches up Bombur and dangles the Dwarf upside down, his beard drooping comically, and holds him over his gaping maw.

"Nice and crunchy."

"Oh I wouldn't eat that one. He's infected, you see," Bilbo states as calmly as he can, picking at his nails to try and sell it better.

"Huh?"

"You what?"

"He's got worms in his tubes," he shrugs a shoulder as he continues to pick.

"Eww!" Tom gasps and throws Bombur back into the pile where he lands on Kíli and Óin who
groan in pain.

"Yes, didn't you know all Dwarrow have worms in their tubes? They've been infested with parasites since birth, you see. Terrible business, really, so not many care to cook Dwarrow. It's been a real bother for me to find anyone who has any good recipes. Making my own can only go so far," Bilbo sighs, shoulders slumping as though put upon. "I've been dragging around these Dwarrow in hopes I'd find someone. I even brought the berries you need to eat to keep yourself from catching them! But no one will help me cook them."

"Parasites?" Bilbo hears Óin ask. "Did he say 'parasites'?"

"Yes he said- No, we don't have parasites! You have parasites!" Kíli snaps at his back.

"What are ye talkin' about, laddie?"

They continue on and Bilbo, at his wits end with these half-witted bastards, slowly turns his head and looks down over his shoulder, all the ire he can muster directed at one wide-eyed Dwarfling just as the Dwarf kicks his nephew in the back. He and Óin snap their heads back to look at the Majestic Sod then back to Bilbo.

"I've got parasites as big as my arm," Óin exclaims.

"Mine are the biggest parasites. I've got huge parasites!" Kíli cries out.

Bilbo turns back to the trolls with trepidation as he hears them grunt and growl. These dumb bastards were trying too hard. Obviously they have never dealt in politics, family or otherwise.

"We're riddled!" the Dwarfling continues.

"Yes, I'm riddled," Ori chimes in as well.

As Bilbo watches the trolls look at each other, wide-eyed and more likely on the verge of getting violent, he glances up at the rock wall then back to the matter at hand. Anytime now, Gandalf...

"Yes we are, badly," Dori tacks on.

William lets go of the spit and steps towards him.

"What would you have us do, then? Let 'em all go?"

"Well of course not. I told you I need someone to help me cook them all," Bilbo says, trying to salvage the situation. Really, these Dwarrows need to learn when to keep their colossal mouths shut.

"You think I don't know what you're up to?" William says, stomping closer to poke at him with a fat finger, which hurts, thank you for asking. "This little ferret is taking us for fools!"

"Ferret?!" Bilbo snarls as William shuffles back to spin the spit, highly offended at being associated with those ankle biters. His kit-fox skin may be small, but it certainly was more noble and larger than a ferret!

"Fools?" Bert asks.

Finally, as all hope Bilbo has at keeping the trolls distracted, Gandalf appears above them.

"The dawn will take you all!"
"Who's that?"

"No idea."

"Can we eat him too?"

Gandalf strikes his staff down on the stone upon which he stands, stepping aside quickly as it splits open, the blinding light of the morning sun shining through on them. The moment the light touches the trolls, their skin begins to harden, crumbling to dust as they try to move. The trolls shriek and roar in pain as they writhe about. The process isn't quick, but when it is done, they are frozen in stone, dead. It takes a moment for the Company to realize what has happened before they are all cheering and laughing, Kíli looking at Bilbo with awe.

"Oh! Get yer foot out of ma back!" Dwalin snaps at his fellow Dwarrows upon the spit.

With a sigh of relief, Bilbo turns and stares at the Dwarrows in the sacks, confident that Gandalf would kill the fire and help those on the roast down, his poor brother was looking quite green last he looked. Now, to let them loose, or revel in their situation a bit longer? After all, how it must grate on that pompous Dwarf's pride to have to have to ask the one creature he's been actively against for help.

"Bilbo," Kíli whines, looking up at him with big brown eyes.

"Hm... No. I think I like you where you are now. I've got a bone to pick with you Dwarrow princes after all," Bilbo drawls. "I'll let the others out though... if they ask nicely of course."

"What?! Bilbo!"

"Get us out of these, Halfling!" Glóin shouts.

"What's he sayin', lad?"

"Please let me out, Master Baggins," Bombur, the kind soul, nearly whimpers. He must dearly hate being stuck in a sack.

"Brother, I don't think-"

"I'll not ask for help from the one who led us into danger!" the Dwarrow King snaps, and all go silent as Bilbo's gaze drifts over to the Dwarrow King, his face hard and unyielding as the stone they worked within, but his eyes burn with cold rage.

He's tired and hungry, starving really, and after a month of nothing but hostility from this Dwarf and those who followed his lead, then this whole situation with the trolls happened, and he was just done.

Bilbo walks over to Bombur, taking out his dagger and cutting the sack wide open for the Dwarf. With the strength few knew he possesses, he helps Bombur to his feet, then leaning up to whisper into his ear. Pulling back, Bombur nods solemnly and ambles over to Gandalf and the Dwarrows on the spit-roast.

"It was not me who has put the Company in danger, oh King," he says, tone low and laced with so much venom all in the Company feel their skin pimple as they are overcome with dread. "However, I will not waste my time bandying with one of little wit and even less knowledge of the situation. What I will do is repay your generous hospitality in kind. Not all at once, mind you. I can't possibly afford to do so you see."
Bilbo turns and walks to the pile of weapons and shuffles through it, ignoring the widening eyes and the sad gaze of one wizard as he pulls the Dwarf's blade from the collection and returns.

The Dwarrow all flinch at the sudden sound of the blade sinking halfway into the earth a mere foot from Fíli's head.

"As you have no need of my help, I'm sure you outstanding Dwarrows can use this blade to release yourselves." -his burning gaze turns towards the Dwarrow Gandalf and Bombur have released and the ones still attached to the roast- "Nor do you need the help of your fellows, I'm certain."

His mien alone left no room for doubt amongst the Dwarrow, especially Dwalin and Balin though only to an extent. The eldest of Fundin’s sons had yet to hear of Bilbo's near-legendary means of retribution from Dwalin, as told to the younger by Fundin. Still, there was little doubt amongst them that Bilbo would stop anyone fool enough to even try and help their comrades. He had a point to prove, and he was not above drastic means if needed.

With one last burning stare at the bagged Dwarrow, Bilbo takes a seat upon a nearby log and takes out his whetstone, his favored dagger, and begins to sharpen it. The shi-nk, shi-nk of the blade as he draws it across the stone echoes around the hollow as none dare to speak.

Nearly a half hour later, the Dwarrow freed by Gandalf and Bombur have all redressed themselves and returned to camp to retrieve their supplies, giving Bilbo and the bagged Dwarrow a wide berth despite the pleas from Kíli and Óin or the curses flung at them by Glóin. They knew better than to interfere in a battle of wills this volatile. Especially after watching Bilbo sharpen thirteen blades -one for each of them, Nori unhelpfully mumbled as the Hobbit tucked the thirteenth dagger somewhere on his person- and then proceed to grind his arrowheads as Dwalin had dropped them near his feet on his return from camp.

Dwalin, after getting his and his brothers' supplies ready to go, watches his Hobbit brother from a good distance away through all of this. He's not blind, nor is he stupid. Bilbo's past dealings with Dwarrow had left him scarred emotionally and physically that, according to their father, left Bilbo with a deep mistrust of unfamiliar Dwarrow and a tendency towards vicious retribution if crossed enough. Knowing this and that Hobbits were not prone to killing those they consider kin or younglings, Dwalin realizes he and Gandalf are the only ones in the Company with a chance of enduring his brother's wrath should it come to blows. The Dwarflings would be safe because they were young, though that won't stop Bilbo from giving the princes a thorough lashing. It would just be a lot less severe than what he would have to endure. He'd survive, but most likely would come out heavily injured. He had no illusions that it would not be so after sparring with his wee Hobbit brother for nearly three weeks in the dark of night. For though his brother is preferable to long ranged and stealth related combat, he's no naïf at melee fights.

His brother is unpredictable, smart, and cunning. But most of all he's relentless and vicious if pulled into melee. Speed, stamina, and unconventional strength for his size were his assets, getting under his adversary's guard before they could react and usually hitting vital spots before moving out of range. That he uses his skin to his advantage when he felt the need to, gave him a baneful edge. His brother would slaughter the other Dwarrow if he was of a mind to and none but Gandalf and -possibly- himself would be able to stop him.

"Uncle... can you just-"

"Be quiet, Fíli!"

Given this situation however and watching his brother, it seems more likely that Bilbo's retribution was going to be something he could not protect his friend and King from, nor those of the Company
who mimicked Thorin's hostility towards his brother. Bilbo was going to mete out justice as he saw fit. Dwalin only hoped there would be enough of the Company spared to see this journey to its end.

"Brother," Balin calls out to Bilbo, causing Dwalin to shift his gaze to his bagged sibling, recognizing the tone as the one he used on particularly intelligent political adversaries. "We've lost enough daylight as it is. Can ye please unbind us so that we can be on our way?"

Bilbo continues to sharpen an arrowhead for a moment before he stops, raising his gaze and meeting Thorin's unwavering glare. The King had yet to remove his glower from the Hobbit's person for the entirety of this battle of wills, one Dwalin knew Bilbo would win if Gandalf or he did not interfere. Thorin was never a patient Dwarf.

"A King's decision affects more than just himself, wouldn't you agree, Balin?" is all the Hobbit says before his gaze drops back down to his work and continues.

His King's glower contorts into a vicious snarl before his temper, predictably, explodes.

"As the leader of this Company, the one you are beholden to, to see this journey to its end, I demand you release us! You betray your contract to me with this act of defiance!"

Bilbo raises the arrowhead up to the light, checking the edges, seemingly unperturbed by the Dwarf's rant.

"Beholden I am, but not to you," is Bilbo's flat reply as he twists the arrow around. "Tell me, oh King, did you sign the revised contract? Or could you not find your way to my study to ensure it?"

Dwalin and Balin watch with sinking stomachs as their King's face becomes thunderous. Bilbo had refused to sign the contract if Thorin was the one he was beholden to after seeing the signed document Balin had reworked. Balin had then made an executive decision so Bilbo would be willing to join them.

Dwalin had signed the contract with Gandalf as witness.

Truthfully, they should have had one of the Company sign it as they had been a neutral party. Seeing how much influence Thorin had over the others, Dwalin was glad they had not. As such, Bilbo was beholden to listen to his orders within reason, and Bilbo was within his rights to refuse them if he provided a suitable argument to do so. This made Bilbo a separate entity within the Company, one in which Thorin had no direct control of, and that would undoubtedly make him furious. Though Fundin's sons were loyal and had a long-standing friendship with Thorin, they had still gone behind his back to ensure the success of this journey. That they also had an entirely selfish reason as well, to get to know their adopted brother, was neither here nor there. Admitting their deceit to their friend and King is going to hurt in more ways than one.

"Then who is it you are beholden to, Halfling?" Thorin spits out.

The Hobbit looks away from the arrow to give the Dwarf a truly condescending stare, one that said the Hobbit was in no way obligated to even answer him. Before Thorin can really start laying into his brother, Dwalin speaks up, despite knowing he was probably outing himself and his brother. His voice is low, barely audible, but he knows his brother will hear, and his tone is edged with a hint of command.

"Bilbo, we need te be leavin'."

Bilbo's head and sharp summer green eyes snap to him, narrowing as Dwalin says nothing further, his pupils narrowing into slits for no longer than a blink, before they relax back into a neutral state.
Denied his chance to meet out justice undeniably owed again, Bilbo is sure to take it out on his hide, of that Dwalin is certain. What pride Bilbo allows himself will demand it and Dwalin will not deny him, though he certainly won’t make it easy for his brother. With Bilbo’s conscience not allowing him to justify the delay of the journey for the slights against him – though he was well within his rights to do so – it will also make whatever justice his Hobbit brother dealt out that much more biting. Dwalin couldn’t find it within himself to care at this point. At some time the hole Thorin has dug himself into would be lain in, and Dwalin was not going to pull him out of this one. His stubborn friend needed to learn not everyone would bow to just anyone. He and Balin have had to listen to a months’ worth of insults thrown at their Hobbit brother and Dwalin, at least, was sick of it. He has no idea why Thorin is so set against Bilbo, but it needs to stop, and soon before Bilbo was pushed too far past his patience threshold. Thorin would be lucky to leave that fight with his limbs intact let alone his beard.

Bilbo stands from the log, motions fluid and calm, though Gandalf and Dwalin know better, and approaches the sacked Dwarrow. He ignores the Dwarf’s blade and proceeds to Balin’s side. From his person, he procures his dagger and cuts his Dwarrow brother free and helps him to his feet. With a curt nod, he then shuffles around to Óin and repeats. Glóin is next, but as the Dwarf holds out a hand to be helped up, Bilbo dismisses it as he steps over the Dwarf to Kíli, ignoring the volatile red-haired Dwarf’s angered sputtering. As with Glóin, despite the youngling’s hopeful eyes and extended hand, Bilbo ignores him too, swiftly moving to Fíli.

Moving on to the Dwarrow King, he pauses a moment to stare down his nose at the Dwarf, and as Thorin meets his stare with a glower of his own, the Dwarf finds himself only able to hold the Halfling’s vicious gaze for just a few moments. The Halfling’s summer green glare holds nothing but the banked rage that burns like fire against Thorin’s skin. As he shifts his gaze away, he mentally curses himself and whatever sorcery the Halfling commands to make him feel as though he is staring down the maw of some great beast. The Hobbit barely stands passed his shoulders, yet rouses unease when his verdant gaze fixes on him. Thorin has yet to decide if the feeling bodes ill or otherwise.

“Just to be clear,” the Hobbit says as he bends down, grabbing the sack. “I’ll have a dagger at your throat if you try and bring harm upon my person at any point, Master Dwarf.”

With that, the Hobbit slices the sack open and walks over to Dwalin and Balin as though nothing was said or done. Thorin sits there in surprise for a moment, stunned that the small creature would dare threaten him, a king, so openly and without care of who heard. Despite his disdain for the Hobbit, Thorin finds himself beginning to respect the Burglar.

He shakes his head as though to rid himself of such preposterous thoughts, pushing himself up off the ground he paces over to the pile of clothes and weapons the trolls had tossed their belongings. As he dresses he pauses when he catches sight of Kíli trying to grab the attention of the Hobbit who’s packing away his weapons.

“Bilbo, I can expl-” his nephew starts to say after several failed attempts in gaining the Halfling’s attention.

“Not now, Kíli,” is the Hobbit’s terse reply.

“But-”

“Lad,” Dwalin cuts in and shakes his head when the Dwarfling looks to the older warrior.

His nephew’s face falls even further, and Thorin once again finds himself glaring at the Halfling. Before he can even try and lay into the Hobbit once again, his vision is blocked by grey robes. Looking up, he meets the stern gaze of the wizard. Huffing through his nose, he continues to dress.
“Where did you go to, if I may ask?” he asks, his voice rough from battle and his verbal bout with the Halfling.

“To look ahead.”

“What brought you back?” he adjusts his belt.


“No thanks to your burglar.”

The wizard’s gaze narrows.

“Bilbo is many things, Thorin, but one to walk blindly into danger he is not. Nor is he one to put others in danger willingly,” Gandalf snaps before sighing again. “Perhaps you should ask your nephews what really happened. Besides, he had the nous to play for time. None of the rest of you thought of that.”

Thorin’s gaze falls to the ground, unable to look and acknowledge that though he has issues with him, the Hobbit had kept them alive. Gandalf stares at him a moment longer before changing the subject, allowing the Dwarf his pride for the time being.

“They must have come down from the Ettenmoors.”

“Since when do Mountain Trolls venture this far south?” the Dwarf asks.

“Ooh. Not for an age… Not since a darker power ruled these lands,” he says gravely.

Thorin’s gaze snaps to the wizard as apprehension floods him at Tharkûn’s tone.

“They could not have moved in daylight.”

“There must be a cave nearby,” Thorin says, looking around the hollow to see if it was here.

“Bilbo, my good lad, I have a task for you!” Gandalf calls out as he ambles away from Thorin. “There’s a troll cave nearby that we need tracking down.”

All eyes look to the Halfling and Thorin can’t help but smirk at the appalled expression that breaks out on the small creature’s face.

“Can’t you smell it out yourself?” he asks incredulously.

“If I could, dear boy, do you think I would send you off to do so?”

The look the Hobbit levels at the wizard is particularly scathing, but only causes the wizard to chuckle and shoo the Hobbit along with his staff. Bilbo heaves a long-suffering sigh and, with a glare thrown at the wizard, darts off into the woods before the Dwarrow can even hope to follow.

“Wai-” Thorin begins to call out before Gandalf interrupts him.

“No need for that, Bilbo will return shortly. Scouting is one of his many skills after all,” he says with a meaningful look at the Dwarrow King.

Thorin looks away with a huff and shifts his gaze to assess his companions. Seeing Fíli and Kíli looking particularly miserable, he decides he will head the wizard’s advice this once and ask his nephews about the whole incident when they make camp for the night.
Mere minutes later Bilbo returns, his face twisted with disgust, nose flared as though to draw in as much air as possible. Then he sneezes. It nearly knocks him off his feet, causing Dwalin to start laughing at his brother and patting him on the back.

“So where’s it at, brother?”

“Straight that way,” he motions with his arms as his other hand rubs at his nose. “You can’t miss it. It reeks.”

“On your lead then,” Dwalin says with a smile.

Bilbo looks at him in horror then around to the rest of the Company who are all looking at him expectantly.

“Really? I have to go back to that foul place?!”

Silence is his answer, and the Hobbit looks close to frustrated tears as he turns and heads back the way he came.

The Company hears it before they smell it, though by how green he looks, the Hobbit could smell it long before they could. Flies buzz around their heads as they approach the entrance. Glancing around Thorin can see the Hobbit has stayed back as far as possible but still within sight of the Company.

“Bilbo?” Balin calls out.

“I’m not getting any closer than this, Balin. You’ll have to stuff me in a sack knocked out before I do.”

Thorin snorts.

“Dwalin, Nori, Bofur, Glóin, with me.”

Thorin and his chosen follow the wizard down into the hole.

“Oh, what’s that stench?” Nori gags.

“It’s a Troll-hoard,” Gandalf states as though it were obvious. “Be careful what you touch.”

Thorin and the others gag and cover their noses as they descend further down, the Dwarf wondering that if he and his companions had to be this close to smell the reek, the Hobbit must have an incredibly sharp nose to smell it long before they were even near the opening. As they become accustomed to the stench, they fan out, Thorin lighting the cave with his torch.

Bofur stops short when the glint of gold coins catches his eyes. He shifts his foot through it and looks at the other Dwarrows.

“Seems a shame to just leave it lying around. Anyone could take it.”

“Agreed,” Glóin says as he peruses through some nearby chests. “Nori.”

“Yea?” the thief asks, stopping his own perusal.

“Get a shovel.”

Thorin ignores the nattering of his Dwarrow as a crate with what appears to be weapons catches his
attention. He shifts through them, pulling out a worn arrow before he sees an intriguing hilt and scabbard. He pulls the thin sword and another that appears to be curved from the crate.

“These swords were not made by any troll,” he says as Gandalf comes to stand beside him.

He passes one of the blades off to the wizard.

“Nor were they made by any smith among Men,” he murmurs before blowing on the scabbard as he draws the blade.

Thorin examines the sword he holds as the wizard muses.

“These were forged in Gondolin. By the High Elves of the First Age.”

Thorin stills, a glower descending upon his face, and turns to return the cursed blade back into the crate.

“You could not wish for a finer blade!” Gandalf snaps at him.

With a defiant glare, Thorin draws the blade to prove the wizard wrong, but is captured by the blades beauty and balance.

Dwalin watches from afar as his King admires the Elven blade, unsure if he should tease the bastard later or admire the sword himself. Rustling and murmurs draw his gaze to Bofur, Nori, and Glóin. He watches as they stuff coins and goblets into a chest and set it down into the hole they dug.

“Set it down,” Bofur says.

“That’s good,” Glóin replies.

“All right, come on. Quick,” Bofur continues, and the three proceed to bury the chest.

Glóin happens to look up and catches Dwalin staring at them.

“We’re making a long-term deposit,” He defends.

Dwalin rolls his eyes.

“Let’s get out of this foul place,” Thorin says as he passes. “Come on, let’s go.”

As the three Dwarrow are slow to comply, Thorin calls them by name with command, and they move to follow. Gandalf lingers behind unbeknownst to the Dwarrow, having one more look around before he too proceeds to exit. He halts when his staff clangs against something upon the ground. Curious, the wizard pushes aside leaves and debris to reveal a small hilt and scabbard. Pulling the blade free, Gandalf hums in satisfaction as he bends to gather the blade up.

He looks around for his Hobbit as he exits the cave, spotting him some distance off from the others who sit near the entrance, seemingly sewing a tear in his vest. Honestly, Gandalf feels sorry for the lad, having to breathe such foul air.

“Bilbo.”

“Hm?” the Hobbit hums, looking up from his work as the wizard approaches.

“Here,” is all the old badger says, holding out a sword and sheath to the Hobbit.
Bilbo raises a brow at the wizard in askance.

“It’s about your size, yes?”

“Well, yes I suppose…” he says, gaze dropping to eye it though making no move to take the weapon even when Gandalf shakes it a little for emphasis. “What need have I for it?”

“The blade is of Elvish make, which means it will glow blue when Orcs or Goblins are nearby.”

Bilbo looks up sharply and the wizard gives him a knowingly sad look.

“Remember what Fundin taught you, Bilbo.”

Bilbo drops his gaze and takes the blade, unable to hold Gandalf’s any longer, not when the wizard knows him as he does. Not with what happened long ago.

Bilbo’s ears suddenly twitch as they catch the sounds of birds taking flight and small animals fleeing from something. He turns to look into the forest just as the Dwarrow King calls out in alarm.

“Something’s coming!”

“Stay together!” Gandalf commands as he trots back to the Company, drawing his sword. “Hurry now! Arm yourselves!”

Moments later a brace of enormous rabbits pulling a wooden sleigh burst from the bushes.

“Thieves! Fire! Murder!” the most unkempt Man Bilbo has ever seen yells as the sleigh pulls to a stop.

All stare in bewilderment as the Man looks around at them. When Bilbo notices the staff, dawning realization descends on him. This must be the wizard Gandalf spoke of all those weeks ago.

“Radagast! It’s Radagast the Brown,” Gandalf says as he sheaths his blade, prompting the Company to do so as well as he approaches the other wizard. “Well… What on Arda are you doing here?”

“I was looking for you, Gandalf.”

Gandalf hums in agreement and waits for the other wizard to continue.

"Something's wrong! Something's terribly wrong!"

"Yes?"

The wizard starts to say something, stops, tries again and stops again to Bilbo's amusement. Absent-minded indeed.

"What was it... Oh! I had the thought! It was right there on the tip of my tongue!"

The Brown Wizard stills in surprise.

"Oh! It's not thought at all!" he says before sticking out his tongue, from which Gandalf pulls off something.

"It's just a little stick insect!" Radagast exclaims as he gently takes the creature from Gandalf's fingers.
Bilbo's nose scrunches up in distaste. Bugs were never enjoyable to swallow.

The wizard looks up and freezes when his gaze lands on Bilbo.

"Gandalf... Why is Yavanna's-"

"This way, Radagast!" Gandalf interrupts the shorter wizard, pulling him along by his shoulder away from the Company.

Suspicious, but deciding to let it be, Bilbo walks over to Dwalin and takes a seat upon the rock his brother stands on. He sits there in silence with Dwalin for some minutes before one of the Dwarrow approaches. His ire at narrow-minded Dwarrow still bubbling beneath his skin, Bilbo pays no heed to the Dwarf, assuming he wants to speak with Dwalin. But Dori comes to stand before him, looking down at the Hobbit, giving him a once over. Bilbo raises a brow at him when the mother-hen of a Dwarf meets his eyes, summer green hard and daring him to request he leave his brother's side. Suddenly the Dwarf is bowing low, causing Bilbo to jolt back in surprise, eyes wide.

"You've done the brothers of Ri a great service, Master Hobbit. For that, we are in your debt. As the Eldest, it is my responsibility to formally ask for your forgiveness for the way Ori and I have been treating you these many weeks. Nori told me you were a decent sort, but I didn't listen."

"Wait, what? Why? I haven't done anything!" he flusters, anger forgotten with the Dwarf's sincere regard.

"Nori, for all that he's a rogue," –tossing a glare over his shoulder- "cares for our Ori above all else. He tells me you saved our brother from one of the trolls during the battle. Is that not true?"

"Well no, it is. But I hardly did anything spectacular. I did what any would do when a youngling’s in danger."

"No Master Hobbit, you did what few would especially for one not your own," Dori sighs. "For that, as I've said, we are in your debt. Anything you wish, if it is within our power, you will have it."

Bilbo sits there, stupefied, staring at the grey-haired Dwarf before Dwalin nudges his shoulder with a hand.

"Oh... Um... I could do with more intellectual conversations," Bilbo says though his tone holds a hint of bewilderment.

Bilbo would really like this conversation to cease right about now.

It's now Dori who looks at him in astonishment.

"Conversation?"

"Oi! What am I then, brother?" Dwalin asks, shoving at Bilbo's shoulder.

"You're more for general conversation, Dwalin. I doubt you'd find the history of the Kingdom of Angmar of any interest," Bilbo says blandly, jumping at the opportunity of a conversation he could handle.

Of course, Dori will not let this nonsense of debts drop.

"Conversation?! You saved our brother, and all you want is 'intellectual conversations'?!"

"Yes?"
Bilbo is entirely at a loss. What else would he want while on this journey?

"No gold? No jewels? No sworn loyalty?" Dori asks incredulously. "Conversation, really?"

"Yes," Bilbo huffs in exasperation with a roll of his eyes.

Really, wanting to have a decent conversation wasn't that hard of a concept to understand.

"What need have I for gold and jewels while on this quest? Too much to carry around if you ask me. Besides, if we succeed, I'll have exponentially more treasure than I'll know what to do with —should probably leave it in your halls just to spite that lout. As for sworn loyalty, it's not like I can ask that of you. Loyalty is earned not given, and I've done nothing to earn that."

Dori and Dwalin are gawking at him as though he's some sort of mythical creature. Dwalin is the first to speak after a moment of intense staring.

"Hobbits..." he says, head rolling back in exasperation, eyes looking to the sky as though looking for strength. "Mahal help us all, brother, yer in dire need of a Dwarrow initiation."

Bilbo looks at him in confusion.

"I thought that wasn't allowed."

"Never mind, I'll talk with Balin later. Dori, ye'd best just accept my brother's request. He's unlikely te change 'is mind."

The other Dwarf looks to be in a daze, nodding slowly as his senses return to him.

"Aye... Master Hobbit, if conversation is all you want, then I will gladly partake. Ori will as well. The lad is interested in histories and maps if you're of a mind to indulge him."

"Truly? I'd be delighted! Not many enjoy history and maps as I do," Bilbo says with excitement. Finally someone other than Balin with whom he can indulge his obsessions!

"By your leave then," Dori says with a bow and genuine smile before he turns and returns to his brothers.

Not too soon after, Gandalf and Radagast return to the Company, their faces grave and pale.

"Gandalf?" Bilbo asks as he comes to stand by the wizard, leaving Dwalin at his post.

"Later, my dear boy."

Bilbo nods, knowing better than to push the wizard about Maiar business.

The breeze suddenly shifts through the trees. He frowns and his eyes narrow dangerously as a disgustingly familiar scent hits his face.

Thorin commands Glóin and Bifur to retrieve the ponies, preparing to move on.

A blood chilling howl echoes amongst the woods. Bilbo unsheathes two of his daggers, staring in the opposite direction of the Dwarrow.

"Was that a wolf?" Ori squeaks.
"Wolves... No, that is not a wolf," Bofur says with apprehension as he raises his weapon.

As the Dwarrow continue to look in the wrong direction, Bilbo is the only one to see and hear the Warg as it crests the rocks, its lips pulled back to expose gleaming fangs. Pushing Bofur out of the way, Bilbo hurls a dagger at the beast, piercing it between the eyes. The Dwarrow watch wide-eyed as the Warg falls before it can attempt to charge, but Bilbo pays them no mind as he turns around to catch sight of another beast heading toward the Majestic Soda’s unprotected back. He cannot toss a dagger so close to the Dwarrow King without risking impaling him instead of the Warg were he to move.

"Thorin!"

"Kili! Get yer bow!" Dwalin roars out.

The youngling is swift and has an arrow notched and flying in seconds, catching the Warg in its shoulder. The shot causes it to stumble, rolling down the incline and bashing into a tree, but the beast is relentless. It attempts to lunge at the Dwarf as it gets its legs under itself, but Dwalin and Thorin are swifter. His brother swings Grasper down upon its skull with substantial force as Thorin slashes at its throat, killing the beast. The Dwarrow and the Maiar crowd closer to the King as Bilbo scales the rocks to check for any more immediate threats.

"Warg scouts!" Thorin snarls as he pulls his Elven blade from the corpse. “Which means an Orc pack is not far behind.”

"Orc pack?!” Bilbo snarls down at them, turning his glare upon the Dwarrow King as a long-buried rage scratches at his reason. “Why-“

"Who did you tell about your quest beyond your kin?” Gandalf asks with a hard edge in his tone as he approaches the Dwarf.

The wizard’s accusation surprises the Dwarf if his face is anything to go by.

“No one,” the Dwarf breathes out.

“Who did you tell?!” Gandalf demands, his tone dipped in anger and worry.

“No one, I swear!”

The wizard huffs at the Dwarf and casts his gaze around the area, lingering on Bilbo for a long moment before the Dwarf speaks.

“What in Durin’s name is going on?”

“You are being hunted,” Gandalf snaps.

The Company tenses, eyes darting here and there like those being just as Gandalf said, hunted. Bilbo nearly snarls at them. Were they not warriors?!

“We have te get out of ‘ere,” Dwalin growls, cutting through Bilbo’s rage enough to surprise him at his brother’s reluctance to fight.

The stomping of footsteps from above the Dwarf draws everyone’s gaze.

“We can’t!” Glóin bellows as several howls echo around them. “We’ve no ponies! The blasted things bolted!”
“I’ll draw them off,” Radagast declares with confidence.

“These are Gundabad Wargs. They will outrun you!” Gandalf says turning to the other Maia.

Bilbo hops off the rocks, gathering his dagger from the beast’s skull and comes to stand beside the Grey Wizard, aware of his gaze upon him as he does.

“These are Rhosgobel rabbits!” the Brown Maia defends as Gandalf gives him a look. “I’d like to see them try.”

Gandalf eyes his colleague for a moment before turning to the rest of the Company, laying a hand on Bilbo’s shoulder.

“Gather your things. Quickly now!” Gandalf commands them before looking down at the Hobbit. “Bilbo, you must stay close to me. I’ll not have your blood rage expose you to the Company prematurely!”

“Gandalf—” Bilbo starts to growl at the Maia.

“Do as I say, Bilbo Baggins!”

With a snarl and a flash of teeth, Bilbo darts over to his supplies, gathering them up and returning swiftly to the Grey Wizard’s side. The rest of the Company scrambles to follow the wizard’s orders before they too gather before him.

“We are counting on you, Radagast,” Gandalf calls out to the other wizard as he mounts his wooden sleigh.

“Just get out of here!” is all the Brown wizard says before he’s off.

Bilbo watches as the wizard disappears into the trees, listening as the Wargs howls draw away from the area.

“We must go! Swiftly!” Gandalf urges, taking the lead at a run.

Bilbo follows the Maia with ease, not daring to focus on anything but the wizard’s robes as he follows a few steps behind. Not all are so fortunate. As they exit the forest and onto the plains, some of the Dwarrows are already huffing and short of breath. Bilbo can hear the taunts Radagast flings at the Wargs and their Orc riders as he tries to bank his fury. He tails Gandalf as he runs to the nearest pile of boulders, hiding behind them before peering around to check on the pack’s proximity.

“Come on!” he commands as he takes off running again.

They follow the wizard blindly, ever aware of the pack that could catch their scent at any time. They halt as the Wargs suddenly pass some leagues before them, hoping to not draw their attention if they do not move. Bilbo keeps his eyes upon the wizard.

“Stay together.”

“Move!” Thorin commands the Dwarrows.

Some of the Dwarrow pull ahead of Gandalf as the wizard seems to be looking for something hidden in the area. As they pass behind another mass of boulders, Bilbo hears the Dwarf snap at Ori as he pulls him back.

“Ori, no! Get back!”
The Company halts instantly. Gandalf strides to the front, Bilbo on his heels for despite his bloodlust, he knows better than to disobey the wizard in this.

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Gandalf peers around quickly before waving the Dwarrow behind him forward.

“All of you, come on. Quick!”

As the Dwarrow dart passed the wizard, Hobbit, and the Dwarf, the King looks to Gandalf in concern.

“All of you, come on. Quick!”

“Where are you leading us?” he demands.

Gandalf looks down at the King and ignores him, brushing past to follow the others, a large hand heavy on Bilbo’s shoulder. They run. For hours it feels, they run from one mass of boulders to the next.

As they come to hide behind a relatively small cluster, Bilbo’s ears twitch at the sound of approaching paw steps. Coming out of what felt like a magic-induced daze –confounded wizard-, he notices he is no longer at Gandalf’s side and is pushed back against the stone by the Dwarrow King. He tenses as the steps stop above them, hearing the growls of a Warg and the drawing of a blade. From the corner of his eye, he sees the Majestic Sod look at him strangely and he tips his head back, not sparing the Dwarf a look. He need not focus on what was above them, not when his control was so stretched as it was.

The Dwarf seems to take this as some signal and slowly cants his head to look above them. Thorin’s breath halts before he lets it out slowly, his gaze falling back down. Carefully he turns his head, catching Kíli’s eyes and nodding down at the youngling’s bow. Bilbo dares to shift his gaze to the Dwarrow, watching as fear and determination war within him before he pulls in a deep breath. Slowly he draws an arrow from his quiver, notching it, and breathes deeply again.

He darts forward, drawing back his arrow, and whips around to aim at the Warg. It turns, snarling as it and the Orc notice him, preparing to lunge when Kíli lets the arrow fly, catching its shoulder. The Warg yelps, trying to reach the shaft and pull it free as the Orc reaches for its horn to call for the others. It does not get the chance as Kíli lets another arrow fly, burying itself within the Orc’s shoulder with enough force to cause the abomination to drop it and tumble them both down the boulders to the ground. The Warg screeches in pain and Bilbo’s eyes narrow as the sounds of the pack pulling to a halt hit his ears despite the noise. These beasts need to be put down swiftly. With the bloodlust pounding in his ears and narrowing his vision, Bilbo moves to do just that but is shoved back by the Dwarrow King once again. The Orc recovers first and charges, Dwalin rushing forward to meet it and bringing his war-axe down upon the brute. Bifur comes forward to stab it with his boar spear before attacking the Warg with Dwalin. Thorin delivers the killing blow to the Orc with his sword, and the Warg falls with a cut-off snarl as Bifur’s spear pierces it’s chest.

Bilbo looks at the corpses in a daze. Fluttering grey robes attract his attention from the corner of his eye, and he looks up to meet Gandalf’s worried gaze. The howling in the distance grows closer, and the wizard moves away from them to look around. But Bilbo can feel the pounding of approaching Warg paws beneath his feet; the growling and snarling of Wargs and Black Speech within his ears growing louder with each second.

“Gandalf.”

“Move! Run!”

They run as fast as they can, following the wizard again.
As they crest a hill, Glóin points to the West and calls out in alarm.

“There they are!”

Bilbo’s gaze strays from Gandalf to see no less than four Wargs and an Orc approaching from the North. His lips curl back as he unsheathes his favored daggers.

“Bilbo!” Gandalf snaps in that tone that always has the Hobbit’s eyes snapping to the Maia. “This way! Quickly!”

The Company runs, but as Gandalf had told Radagast, they were outrun in little time. The Company stops as more of the foul beasts block them from the East. The Orcs and Wargs are all around them, closing in.

“There’s more coming!” Kíli yells from behind Bilbo.

The King turns in a circle, noting the abominations positions.

“Kíli! Shoot them!” he roars.

He feels an arrow brush passed his cheek to bury itself in a Warg’s forehead some distance away. He whirls around, eyes widening in astonishment as his gaze lands upon Bilbo as the Hobbit lets loose another arrow into an Orc’s skull the same distance away. Thorin’s bafflement is forgotten as he hears the cry of his heir.

“We’re surrounded!”

Kíli lets his arrows fly, striking the Orcs in their throats or chests, though none hit with as much accuracy as the Hobbits. The Orcs and Wargs fall like flies beneath Bilbo’s arrows, and the few in the Company whose gaze dares to drift to the Halfling are wide with disbelief and apprehension. For the Hobbit’s eyes are narrowed, and his breathing is even. They are hard, yet screaming in rage as that verdant gaze never wavers from his target until it is dead. Yet despite the Halfling’s success, more come to take their fallen pack member place.

“Where’s Gandalf?” Dori cries out in fear, causing the Dwarrows to desperately look around for the wizard; all but Bilbo.

“He’s abandoned us!” Dwalin snarls as he comes to stand beside his King.

Dwalin’s gaze snaps to Bilbo, worry flooding him as he watches his brother kill Orcs and Wargs with quiet and deadly accuracy. When Bilbo turns to shoot at their enemies from the South, Dwalin can finally see the look in his eyes. He’s seen that look before. The look of a being lost in a blood rage.

“Bilbo!” He calls out despite knowing his words would not reach the Hobbit.

His brother’s soul was not here with the Company but lost somewhere in his own mind.

“Hold your ground!” Thorin commands as the Dwarrow gather near him, pulling Dwalin’s attention back to the problem at hand.

Despite this his focus was torn. Bilbo was not within arm’s reach let alone a few paces, and neither was Kíli.

The beasts draw closer, and the warriors gather tighter. The chances they would all survive this battle
were grim.

“This way, you fools!” comes Gandalf’s cry from behind them.

They all turn to see the wizard disappear beneath the stone.

“Come on, move!” Thorin roars.

The King runs to the gap, stopping upon the raised stone and urging his companions towards him with his hands.

“Quickly! All of you!”

Bofur reaches him first and quickly slides down the smooth stone.

“Come one!” he calls out to the others.

“Go, go, go!”

One by one the Company descends down into the gap rising to their feet as soon as they hit bottom to fight should the Orcs follow them down. Thorin spots the Warg charging at him from the North. He draws back, ready to swing his blade when the beast crashes to the ground, slain by the arrow piercing through the side of its skull. The Dwarf can hear Gandalf counting the Company as they descend, but his attention is drawn back to the plains when he catches sight of Kili and the Burglar still shooting at the Orcs.

“Kili! Halfling! Run!” he roars out at them.

Kili turns and does just that, looking back only once to see Bilbo shoot down the closest of the two Orcs and its Warg before the Hobbit places his bow upon his back and draw out his daggers.

“Bilbo!” Kili yells, coming to an abrupt halt as fear for the Hobbit floods his veins.

He notches an arrow and shoots at the other rider, catching it in the shoulder and tumbling it from its Warg.

"Icasevinya, Bilbo! Drego sercëcnvaltalde Perian!" Gandalf’s voice bellows in an unfamiliar tongue from the stone in anger, his inherent magic snapping and charging the air as it echoes out. (The Dwarfling, Bilbo! Flee you blood blind Hobbit!)

Kili watches as Bilbo’s entire body jolts as though shocked, eyes locking onto him before the Hobbit rushes at him.

“You foolish Dwarfling, run!” Bilbo howls, grabbing his arm and dragging Kili behind him as he races to where Thorin stands above where the Company hides.

Fili, who was standing beside Thorin waiting for Kili, slides down first as Bilbo shoves his brother ahead of him. The Hobbit follows closely behind the younglings with the King right on his heels. As the Company readies their weapons, a horn sounds across the plains above followed shortly after by the pounding of hooves and the howls and cries of pain from Orc and Warg alike. The din of blades slicing deep into flesh and arrows hitting their marks vibrate in Bilbo’s ears, stirring the blood rage Gandalf’s words had banished.

The Dwarrow shift around in confusion and apprehension, jumping when a body falls down into the gap. Gandalf brandishes his staff at the fallen Orc as Balin pokes at it with his sword. The sounds of
the battle above begin to quiet as Thorin steps up beside the body, leaning down to yank an arrow from the felled Orc’s throat. He stares at the point for but a moment and his face curls with disgust.

“Elves,” he growls and throws the shaft to the ground.

His glower lands on the wizard. The Maia is fortunate Dwalin calls out from further into the hollow as he turns to observe the warrior.

“I cannot see where the pathway leads. Do we follow it or no?”

“Follow it of course!” Bofur says incredulously as though Dwalin has no sense at all.

As the King –after shooting one last glare at the wizard- and his Dwarrow follow behind Bofur and Dwalin, Gandalf lingers behind upon noticing Bilbo idling as well.

“I think that would be wise,” the Maia mumbles as he observes his Hobbit.

Bilbo meets Gandalf’s gaze only when the last Dwarf is passed the bend.

“Gandalf… Thank you.”

The Maia smiles, stepping forward and laying his hand upon Bilbo’s head.

“Think nothing of it, my dear boy. All of us need… a little push here and there.”

Bilbo snorts and follows after the Dwarrows.

“‘Little push’, he says. I’d hate to see what you consider a shove then, Gandalf,” Bilbo mutters.

The wizard follows with a chuckle.

As they continue through the fissure Bilbo can feel wisps of magic brushing against his own. A very powerful, very familiar and comforting magic.

“Gandalf… Are we headed to where I think we are?”

“Indeed,” Gandalf says with a smirk.

“So this must be that back door you never got around to telling me the location of,” Bilbo huffs.

The wizard merely chuckles once more as Dwalin’s voice echoes back at them.

“There’s light ahead.”

The Company emerges from the fissure to see the most wondrous sight.

“The Valley of Imladris,” Gandalf says as he comes to stand among the Dwarrow. “In the common tongue, it’s known by another name.”

Bilbo steps closer to the edge to gaze upon the beauty he has not seen for many years, relishing in the sounds of the waterfalls flowing against the rocks; the birds as they sing; and the crisp, clean air as it caresses his face. The Kingdom below seems to glow with an ethereal light against the natural beauty around it, soothing Bilbo’s soul with precious memories of this place.

Bilbo sighs out its name in relief and joy.

“Rivendell.”
“Here lies the Last Homely House East of the Sea.”

Chapter End Notes

Bastardized translations of Elvish (Quenya) below in order of appearance (tried my best, but if someone knows better, please send me a note with correct translations):

“Icasevinya, Bilbo! Drego sercëcenvaltaldë Perian!” = The Dwarfling, Bilbo! Flee you blood blind Hobbit!
Thorin stomps back to where Bilbo and Gandalf stand, his brow furrowed in ire.

"This was your plan all along," he growls. "To seek refuge with our enemy."

The look Gandalf casts down his nose at the Dwarf is, as Bilbo calls it, the 'You're quickly becoming my least favorite creature on Arda, do kindly silence your wagging tongue' expression. It's an expression Bilbo has been, and probably will always be, subjected to when he's hazing the wizard.

"You have no enemies here, Thorin Oakenshield," the wizard says with exasperation. "The only ill will to be found in this valley is that which you and your kin bring yourselves! Valar above, Lord Elrond is nothing like Thranduil, nor will he ever be! Your mistrust for everyone but Dwarrow will cost you one day!"

"It has yet to steer my kin wrong, Tharkân. Yet, you think these Elves will give our quest their blessing?" the Dwarf snaps at the wizard. "They will try to stop us!"

"Of course they will! But we have questions that need to be answered," Gandalf clarifies.

Bilbo listens as the two converse and can't help but roll his eyes at the stubborn blindness of Dwarrow. Truly, few of their race bother to see beyond old grievances or the benefits of certain alliances. More infrequent were those who take a chance with others outside their race, so set in their ways as Dwarrow are. Bilbo had always lamented to Fundin that if the Dwarrow of Erebor had
sought help from the Shire sooner, there would have been far fewer lost to starvation before they inhabited Ered Luin.

"Now, if we are to be successful, this will need to be handled with tact."

Bilbo snorts, catching the wizard cut him a harsh glance before his eyes rest upon Thorin's once again.

"And respect. And no small degree of charm."

Bilbo starts coughing as a laugh gets caught in his throat, but Gandalf swats the back of his thighs with his staff and a huff for Bilbo's cheek. The look on the Dwarf King's face makes him giggle despite himself.

"Ignore him. Now, what was I saying... Charm! Yes, which is why you will leave the talking to me, Thorin."

The wizard sweeps passed the Dwarf to continue down the path, Bilbo trailing behind him, mouth twitching with mirth. The other Dwarrow fall in behind their King as he too follows the old badger. As the Company crosses the bridge, Bilbo can't help smirking as he looks back to see several of the Dwarrow looking around in awe at the flowing streams and lush trees. At least they could appreciate the beauty of his second home. As they gather in the courtyard, Bilbo sidles up to Dwalin and stands at his side, opposite the Dwarf King.

"Quite different than what you're used to, I'm sure," Bilbo says to his brother, gazing around at the architecture he has missed for so many years.

Dwalin grunts at him, setting down the hilt of his hammer to lean upon the head.

"Te much green."

Bilbo snorts back at him.

"The Shire has too much green, Dwalin."

"... Aye."

Bilbo looks up sharply, catching Dwalin's eyes for but a second before the Dwarf is looking around again. His shoulders are tense, and he looks ready to grab Grasper and Keeper at a moment's notice.

"Dwalin... You do know that no one is going to attack us here, don't you?"

"They're Elves," he says with a forced shrug, brow furrowed in discontent. "I don' trust Elves."

"Really you're-"

"Quiet, Halfling," Thorin barks from Dwalin's other side.

Bilbo leans around his brother just as Dwalin snaps his eyes to the Dwarf, both staring death at him. Oh, this King is just asking to be socked on his bloody hawk's nose.

"That's just uncalled fer, Thorin," Dwalin growls.

Under the onslaught of two vicious glares, the Dwarf King almost takes a step back from his Guardsman and his Hobbit brother to try and leave their eyesight. Fíli and Kíli chortle from somewhere within the group behind them and Gandalf, as per the wizard's twisted sense of humor,
looks at the three of them in amusement.

Footsteps pull Bilbo’s gaze to the stairs, sparing the Dwarf, and grins at the sight of the Elf descending them. He moves to step around Dwalin, but a palm pushing against his chest keeps him nearly behind his brother. He looks up in askance at the Dwarf, but Dwalin is staring at the stairs, as are the other Dwarrows.

"Mithrandir!"

Gandalf turns, a smile lighting his face as he takes in the Elf.

"Ah, Lindir!"

Bilbo catches the Dwarrow King lean closer to Dwalin, whispering in his ear in what Bilbo is sure the King thinks won’t be audible to Elves… or Hobbits not even a step away.

“Stay sharp,” and Bilbo rolls his eyes at the Dwarf’s paranoia.

“Lastannem i athrannedh i Vruinen,” Lindir says to Gandalf with a smile. (We heard you had crossed into the Valley.)

Bilbo tries again to get around his brother to no avail, so he shoves at the large Dwarf’s back in retaliation, causing him to stumble forward a step. Bilbo darts forward despite the hissed warnings from Dwalin and Thorin. He’s had enough of Dwarrows for one month, thank you very much. He needs some Elven Therapy.

Lindir’s eyes light up as they land on him as the Hobbit approaches, but before they can greet each other, Gandalf speaks much to Bilbo’s displeasure.

“I must speak with Lord Elrond,” the wizard says in a grave tone, causing the Elf to look at him sharply.

“My Lord Elrond is not here,” Lindir says a tad imperiously.

Bilbo smirks, seems he is not the only one miffed at their reunion being interrupted.

“Not here? Hm… Where is he?”

An Elven war horn sounds throughout the valley, causing Lindir to look beyond Gandalf and across the bridge as all the Dwarrow turn back as one. Bilbo tries to do the same, but the taller Dwarrow block his view. He hops a few times to try and see over them, but with little luck. As he settles down with a disappointed twitch of his nose, he sees Gandalf throw Lindir a smug little look before facing the bridge as well. The pounding of hooves vibrate up Bilbo’s legs, and his eyes widen in alarm. The courtyard could not possibly hold all the Dwarrow, himself, and horses, let alone the Elves that ride them!

“Ifrídi bekâr!” Thorin commands the Dwarrows as he pushes those closest to him. “Close ranks!” (All to arm!)

Bilbo suddenly finds himself yanked by his jacket back into the group of Dwarrow by Dwalin.

“Now see here-” he begins to shout at his brother when the hoof beats fill his ears and resound louder than his ire.

The riders, led by Elrond upon his favored black stallion, circle around the Company and Hobbit.
The Dwarrow draw their weapons, shaking them and snarling threats at the Elves. They finally come to a halt when all of the riders are gathered around them. Elrond stops close to Gandalf and cheerfully greets the Grey Wizard.

“Gandalf!”

1“Lord Elrond! Mellon nîn!” the wizard says with a bow. 2“Mo evînedh?” (1My Friend! 2Where have you been?)

“Farannem ‘lamhoth i udul o charad. Dagannem rim na lant Vedui,” the Elven Lord says as he dismounts his steed, embracing Gandalf before showing off his prize - an Orc blade - from the battle at the Hidden Pass. “Strange for Orcs to come so close to our borders,” -he frowns as he steps around Gandalf and passes the Orc blade to Lindir- “something or someone has drawn them near.” (We’ve been hunting a pack of Orcs that came up from the South. We slew a number near the Hidden Pass.)

“Ah, that may have been us.”

Thorin and Dwalin step forward, tense and still armed. Ori sidles up beside Nori -eager to watch the proceedings for his book on their adventure- while Bilbo watches as Elrond looks them over before he too steps forward to speak with the Dwarrow King.

“Welcome, Thorin, son of Thráin.”

“I do not believe we have met,” the King says imperiously.

Bilbo huffs from behind Nori and moves to intercede. This lout was going to have them dining on what the Dwarrow call ‘rabbit food’ at this rate. Once more he is held back, this time by the star-haired Dwarf. Really, this was getting ridiculous. Valar above, he wanted some of the Elves famous roast chicken pie, and he was certainly not going to be partaking in it if he leaves all the talking to these ill-mannered clot-heads!

“You have your grandfather’s bearing. I knew Thrór when he ruled Under the Mountain.”

“And this is when I step in!” Bilbo shouts as he ducks under Nori’s arm and darts around the Majestic Sod to stand between him and Lord Elrond. “Hîr Elrond! Ten annaië acca anann!”(Lord Elrond! It has been too long!) (Lord Elrond! Ten annaië acca anann!)

“Bilbo Baggins! As I live and breathe!” the Elven Lord gasps in pleased surprise as he approaches the Hobbit, kneeling to embrace him. “Tol dadwendh ammen, i draug huinnen!”(You have come back to us, my wolf heart!) (You have come back to us, my wolf heart!)

"Istad uin sui ne eneth,” Bilbo huffs as he returns the embrace with a smile. (You know I do not like that name.)

He releases the Lord from his embrace to lean forward and rub his cheek against Elrond’s, who chuckles with delight.

1“Hi, hautael brêg i aew di rhaw naugrim,” Bilbo says stepping back to let the Elf stand, motioning toward the Company. "Iestnyë ma aës fileg maetha hain!”(Now, cease your lively bantering with these untamed Dwarrow. 2I want some roast bird for dealing with them!)
"Quëa hîn?" (Vegetables for them?)

"Na thel-pân!" (By all means!)

Lord Elrond shifts to face the Dwarrow once more, staring hard at the Dwarrow King.

"Nartho i noer, toltho i viruvor. Boe i annam vann a... nethail vin." (Light the fires, fetch the miruvor (wine). We must give food to... our guests.)

The Dwarrow stand in stunned silence for a moment before Glóin comes forth with fire in his eyes.

"What are they sayin'? Do they offer us insult?!" the Dwarf roars.

Gandalf's gaze -that had been full of mirth at the Hobbit’s conversation- lifts to the heavens as though praying for patience.

"No, Master Glóin, he's offering you food!"

The Dwarrow turn to each other, murmuring amongst themselves on whether or not to accept the Elf's offer.

"We use the toilet and then we leave," Bilbo hears the Majestic Sod say to Dwalin over the din of the others.

Bilbo cuts a glare at the Dwarf, who inclines his head up to look down his nose at him with his own frown right back. Quite done with this lout, Bilbo makes an obscene Dwarrow hand gesture - courtesy of Dwalin- at the King before trotting over to Lindir. He just manages to see the utterly shocked look upon the sod's face and hear Dwalin's snort of suppressed laughter before he is out of the Dwarf's eyesight.

"Well... in that case lead on," Glóin says as he steps out from the circle of Dwarrows.

Elrond smiles tightly and with a nod to Gandalf ascends the stairs, pausing next to Bilbo so that the Hobbit can ascend beside him; Lindir, Gandalf and the Dwarrow following behind.

Elrond and Bilbo chat amiably about the recent happenings in the Shire and Rivendell, falling back into the easy rapport they had when Bilbo was last here. When they reach the guest halls, Elrond asks Lindir to show the Dwarrow and Gandalf to the room -or rooms- they would be given for the duration of their stay. Elrond lays a hand on Bilbo's shoulder when he moves to follow.

"I would ask that you stay with the twins and I during your time here, Bilbo. They have missed you these many years and will want to spend as much time with you as possible."

"Certainly! I need a break from all the Dwarrow posturing I've been subjected to this past month," Bilbo says with a smile, ignoring the affronted huffs from Glóin, Dwalin, and the Majestic Sod.

"What?! You can't-" Kíli starts to wail in distress as he comes forward to steal the Hobbit back into the fold.

"Let the Halfling do as he pleases. Maybe then he'll not complain half as much when we move on," Thorin gruffs, pulling Kíli back before he moves to stand near Lindir, shooting a hard glance back at Fundin's sons. "Balin, Dwalin, we need to talk."

The Elven Lord, Lindir, Dwalin and Bilbo cut the Dwarf heated glares which the King ignores.
"Brother-" Dwalin begins to say before Bilbo cuts him off.

"I'll be fine, Dwalin," he says with a huff as Elrond steps down another hall. "Considering the circumstances, time away from certain... Dwarrow will be more beneficial than me staying with the Company."

As Lindir motions the Company and Gandalf to follow him with an irritated gaze, Bilbo waits till they are nearly too far away and calls out,

"Be sure you have a guide, Master Dwarf! Wouldn't want you to get lost again!"

He trots off after Elrond before any counter can be made, ignoring the many backward glances Dwalin, Kíli, Fíli, Bofur, and Ori shoot over their shoulders and chuckling as he sidles up to the Elf.

"I see your penchant for mischief hasn't waned, maen rusc," Elrond says with a fond smile. "The twins will be delighted."

"Oh I have much to make up for regarding those Dwarrows, Elrond," Bilbo replies with a vicious smirk. "I've let much slide for far too long with certain ones."

"I'll inform the rest of my kin to keep an eye out for your devilry then. Try not to give too many ideas to my sons, would you? Lindir is still upset from the time you showed them how to mix dyes into the body soaps. He was a fascinating shade of fuchsia for nearly a year before he realized the cause," Elrond says with a grin. "How on Arda did you manage to get that ward to last so long?"

Bilbo cackles with glee and proceeds to enlighten his Elven friend of his experiments.

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After Elrond leaves him to unwind before supper, Bilbo decides to walk the grounds to relax before he has to sit with the ridiculous Dwarrows for another feast. He's nearly positive they were not going to behave for their hosts, and he would rather be as calm as he can be after only a few hours reprieve from the noisy bastards.

A pair of footsteps echoing down the hall cause him to tense. As they draw closer, he makes a snap decision. He'd rather not deal with troublesome Dwarflings at the moment. Slipping around the nearest corner he shifts into his kit-fox skin and darts under a nearby bench, tucking himself into the shadows beneath it. He watches from his hiding place as two pairs of Elven style shoes stop before his hideout.

"Are you sure he darted around this corner, Elladan?"

"I'm certain he did. You know how sneaky honegmen can be."

"Indeed... perhaps he shifted and is hiding in the shadows as usual."

Found, as per usual when he didn't use his wards on these deviants. With a sigh Bilbo squirms out from under the bench, shaking out his fur before shifting back into his Hobbit skin. The twins, with their long umber hair, and the strong jawline of their father, look down at him, blue eyes sparkling with tender affection and excitement.

"Good afternoon, my dear miscreants!” Bilbo grins up at them before he does a sweeping bow. "You’ve found me-"

He suddenly finds himself swept up into the arms of Elrohir and squeezed tightly and given an
enthusiastic cheek rub, knocking the breath from him before he is passed to Elladan for a repeat performance.

“Honeg!!” both twins shout with glee. (Little Brother!)

“It has been too long!”

“Have you gone on many more adventures since your last visit?”

“You’ll tell us of them, won’t you?”

“You’re not leaving soon are you? We won’t allow it!”

“This is not the ‘Elven Therapy’ I had in mind, oh self-appointed brothers mine,” Bilbo drawl’s from Elladan’s arms. “Now put me down, you bloody trees!”

“Eloquent as always, brother dearest,” Elrohir quips, taking Bilbo from Elladan’s arms and setting him back onto the ground.

“It’s a requirement if I’m to deal with wizards, Elflings, Elven Lords, and clot-headed Dwarrow, I think.”

The twins giggle as each lays a hand upon his shoulder and gently push him along down the halls. They ask him about the Shire and the comings and goings of his more annoying relatives as they enjoyed hearing how Bilbo would put them to task. They reach a beautiful veranda covered with healthy green vines, flowers of different violet, alabaster, and cobalt hues and the foliage a vibrant green that reminds him of the Shire. They pull him over to an elegant marble table where they sit, the twins with the light behind them, facing Bilbo as he sits across from them to let the mid-day sunbathe his face in its warm glow. The lazy flow of dust motes lulls him into a haze of serenity. He hums in contentment, eyes closed as he tilts his face to catch more of the sunlight.

"You're such a cat, honeg. Are you sure your skin isn't some ridiculously large-eared feline?"
Elladan snickers at him.(little brother)

"Shush," Bilbo grumbles at the Elfling. "You know the air here makes the sunlight feel even more divine."

The twins giggle like Faunts but sit with him quietly as he soaks. They know better than to try and engage him before he's had his fill of the mid-day sun in the Valley. Some minutes pass before Bilbo tilts his head back down, chartreuse eyes barely visible between heavy lids.

"Father says you have plans for the Dwarrow?"

"With your wards, of course."

"Herbs as well, if history is anything to go by."

"Will you need aid in your plans? We would very much like to participate."

Bilbo huffs out a few lazy chuckles, having a hard time shaking his sleepy haze.

"I'd forgotten how you terrors do love to talk."

The Elflings tilt their heads in embarrassment though each has a pleased little smile upon their ageless faces.
"Well?" Elrohir says as he leans back. "Will we be helping you in your mischief?"

The twin’s eyes twinkle with glee as a feral smirk spreads across their adopted brother’s face.

"Indeed," Bilbo says, sleepy haze forgotten at the reminder of his future schemes. "I need someone's tall enough for some of my 'devilry', as your father calls it."

Energy renewed, Bilbo leans over the table, his excitement and the twin’s curiosity driving the Elflings to hover over the table as Bilbo spoke of his plans for the Dwarrow. The feral grin Bilbo has upon his face migrating to theirs as they listen.

This visit would be the most... _inspiring_ one yet.

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The sun was low in the sky when Elrond finds his sons and the one they had come to see as their brother conversing on the veranda. When Bilbo had stayed in the Valley for a time, the twins had taken the young Hobbit under their care. Those days had been joyous as well as saddening. Bilbo had been found by his scouts wandering near the Hidden Pass, distraught and hardly aware of anything around him. When he was brought before Elrond and the twins, his sons had latched onto the young Hobbit and never let go, recognizing the despair that enveloped Bilbo as a reflection of their own. His sons had never truly forgiven themselves for not finding Celebrían before she had been tortured by the Orcs; violated beyond what she could endure. Though she had not faded and was only awaiting them on the shores of Valinor, the grief his boys endured, echoes in the Hobbit and remain with them all to this day.

Elrond comes out of his reverie at the sound of his son’s deep laughter, laughter he rarely hears outside of his Hobbit friend’s visits. He smiles warmly as he watches the three of them leaning in close so they could commiserate undisturbed, their laughter the only sound louder than a whisper among them. Though the twins had asked many times to adopt Bilbo formally into the family, Elrond could not see the Hobbit as more than a very close friend and confidant. Bilbo was more world-wise than his sons, being so well-traveled, and the rapport between them had not developed into one of a familial distinction. He would be doing Bilbo a disservice by adopting him at his age. He just wishes his sons would realize this.

Loathe as he is to disrupt their reunion - and undoubtedly their plans for future devilry- dinner would be underway in a few minutes, and at least Elrond and Bilbo would need to be in attendance. Seeing the smirks on the twin’s faces, he decides he would not let them wheedle out of their duties. At least not this first night.

"I see your silver tongue has indeed swayed my sons to your aid once again, Bilbo," Elrond says with fond exasperation.

The three of them startle so severely Bilbo falls off the bench as he jumps away from the table, landing in a heap upon his back as Elrohir and Elladan snap up to attention.

"Elrond, you bloody git!" Bilbo groans from the ground, much to Elrond's amusement. "Ugh... I'm going to bell you like I said I would last time I was here."

"You're welcome to try, dear friend. Though even if you do manage it, it would be removed before it would be of any use to you," he says with a smirk directed at Bilbo. "Besides, if anyone here needs a bell, it is you, my friend."

Though when he notices the challenging gleam in the Hobbit's eyes and the stubborn set of his jaw,
he realizes with some trepidation what he has invited. With great resignation -for when Bilbo was of a mind to do something, nothing and no one stood in his way for very long- he turns his gaze to his sons.

"Elladan, Elrohir, don't you have duties to attend to before you retire?"

He raises a hand to silence them as they move to protest and they fall silent again.

"I think there are enough of our Kin to sufficiently make the Dwarves suffer this night, my sons. You have as long as they remain here to cause mischief with Bilbo to your heart's content."

Bilbo snickers, raising himself up off the ground and dusting himself off as the twin’s huff in annoyance before they shuffle passed their father.

"We will see you at first light, honey," Elrohir calls back to the Hobbit as they leave. (little brother)

"'First light’ my furry feet! I'm sleeping in while I’m here, you daft brat-lets!" Bilbo snaps out at them in alarm.

Elrond hears them laugh as they disappear around a corner as Bilbo huffs in exasperation.

"I'm gluing their hair into ghastly decorations if they do," Bilbo grouses as he comes to stand beside Elrond. "Be sure you tell them that."

"Hmm," the Elven Lords hums, lips twitching up in humor before settling once again. "Come along, your companions were already on their way to the terrace when I came looking for you."

"Will my meat pie be there when we arrive?"

"I've asked Lindir to keep it away from the table till we have."

"My thanks," Bilbo says with a nod of his head. "And the main course for the Dwarrow?"

"Greens per your request, though I decided to be somewhat gracious and provide them with bread rolls as well."

"You're too kind, Elrond," the Hobbit snickers.

Elrond smirks as well.

"We will need to retrieve Mithrandir and Thorin before we arrive. They were in conference when I left them."

"Lead the way."

As Bilbo, Elrond, Gandalf, and Thorin approach the veranda overlooking the Great Valley, the sounds of disgruntled Dwarrow is like music to Bilbo's ears amongst the actual music the Elven musicians were playing.

"Try it," Dori tries to cajole Ori into eating the leafy greens as the youngling stares at it with disdain. "Just a mouthful."

"I don't like green food," Ori pouts with a shake of his head at his elder brother, dropping the leaf he was holding with a huff.
Further down at the second table, Bilbo sees Dwalin rummaging through the bowl set before him in bewilderment.

"Where's the meat?" he asks Balin, who sits at his left, near desperately as Oín huffs at the food.

"Do they have any chips?" Ori asks anyone who'll hear him in his sweet and calm tone, the one that makes Bilbo want to bundle him up and ship him off back to Bag End.

"Kind of you to invite us. Not really dressed for dinner," Gandalf says with a depreciating laugh.

"Well, you never are," Elrond says with a smirk causing Gandalf to chuckle.

Bilbo chuckles too as he hops up the steps behind the Dwarrow King. His eyes linger on Ori for a moment before he paces down to his brothers as Elrond, Gandalf and Thorin walk over to the table left for the three of them. Glancing at the other Dwarrow, and barely restraining a very toothy grin at the various states of bewilderment, disgust, and their general unhappiness with the meal, he walks over to Dwalin.

"Can't survive without your pound of flesh, Dwalin?" Bilbo asks as he moves to sit in the only open seat at the end.

Dwalin quickly stands, startling Bilbo, and grabs the Hobbit under his arms, lifting him up and placing him into his abandoned seat.

"Don' want these poncy tree-shaggers thievin' ye again," Dwalin growls.

Bilbo -swatting at his brother as the Dwarf tries to maneuver him to face the table like he was a wee Fauntling having a tantrum- rolls his eyes as he is turned and seated when he sees Kíli nod his head in quick agreement.

"You're our Hobbit, Bilbo," Kíli says with mock authority as he looks around at the various Elves in suspicion before they land on the harpist and stick.

"I'm my own Hobbit, you cheeky gits," Bilbo grumbles as Dwalin takes the end seat before he turns and motions for Lindir who had his eyes on him the moment he stepped up onto the veranda.

Seconds later a steaming bowl of minced chicken pie sits before him, causing Bilbo's face to light up.

"It smells delicious, Lindir, thank you," Bilbo says as he stuffs a napkin into his collar and takes up his silverware.

Just before he tucks in, Balin taps his arm causing Bilbo to twitch with a twinge of annoyance. He was hungry by the Valar!

"If ye don't mind me askin', laddie... might ye tell me what it is ye've got there?"

"It's aes fileg," he answers before scooping up a decent mouthful and plopping it into his waiting mouth. (roast bird)

He moans as the flavors burst against his tongue, chewing slowly before he swallows.

"It's a roast bird in a unique, Elven recipe for Shepherd's Pie. It is absolutely-"

Movement from the corner of his eye jolts his more primal instincts into the forefront, and he impales the knife he holds into the table between the large fingers of his stouter brother with a growl.
"You even think about putting those sticky paws anywhere near my meal, Dwalin, and I'll make it very impossible for you to continue our line."

Dwalin inches his hand away slowly, and with great care as not to provoke his small but fanged -in several different ways- brother.

"Why do ye get to have meat an' we don't," Dwalin grouses as he settles his hand in his lap like a chastised Dwarfling.

"Because I asked nicely," Bilbo snaps as he shoves another mouthful down amidst Balin's chuckles.

"Ye could share-"

"You could ask."

Balin turns and waves down the closest Elf who bends down so they are eye level.

"If it's not te much trouble, I'll have what my brother is eatin' there, please."

"Of course," the Elven lass says as she straightens up.

"Thank ye kindly."

Bilbo glances at Dwalin and sees him gaping at their elder brother.

"It's not like it would kill you to ask," Bilbo huffs at him as he polishes off the bowl and waves at Lindir, holding up a finger to signal 'another one, please'.

Dwalin remains silent and stares defiantly across the table, his eyes landing on Kíli who was staring at -when he looks- the Elf-maid playing the harp. He watches with some mild amusement as the lad gives the lass a lazy wink before the brat-let catches him staring. He looks surprised at being caught before he tries to defend himself.

"I can't say I fancy Elf-maids myself, too thin," he says as he shakes his head.

Dwalin twitches his eyebrows at the lad, face carefully straight as Bofur turns to include himself in the conversation.

"They're all high cheekbones and creamy skin..." Kíli says as he looks to Bofur who smiles at him indulgently then around before the Elf walking behind him catches his eyes, and he stiffens for a second before facing Dwalin again. "Not enough facial hair for me. Although... that one there's not bad."

The lad’s eyes follow the Elf strumming on their instrument as they come to stand beside the harpist. Dwalin glances at the Elf and sets his sights on the Dwarfling, barely suppressing a wicked smirk.

"Tha's not an Elf-maid," he manages to say with a straight face.

Kíli looks at him in utter confusion before Dwalin winks at him and the lad’s eyes widen as his cheeks flare a brilliant crimson. The Company, having overheard the conversation, all burst into raucous laughter at the Dwarfling's expense.

"That's funny," the lad mumbles in embarrassment.

Bilbo chuckles along with the other Dwarrows in between mouthfuls of his bounty, though silently pleased not all of his companions were Elf hating sods.
Lindir steps behind Bilbo, another steaming bowl of the mince pie in his hand which he sets before the Hobbit, who has to snap and snarl at Dwalin as his brother tries to steal the entire bowl this time.

"I said back off, you bloody git! Get your own!"

Not moments later the Elf-maid whom Balin spoke to returns and sets another bowl down before their brother. Balin flashes a smirk at Dwalin before digging in. The rest of the Dwarrow have gone silent at the display before Kili's hand shoots up.

"Can I have one of those too, please?!"

Lindir and the maid stand frozen behind Bilbo, uncertain as what to do since this was Bilbo's first little act of devilry. They didn't want to put it to an end before the Hobbit allowed it as his retribution would be swift and merciless. Lindir lightly taps Bilbo's shoulder in askance, to which the Hobbit, still devouring his second helping, shrugs and twitches his head forward in a parody of a nod. A signal he had used many times with Lindir and the twins. Might as well let this barmy lot eat their fill to keep them from cutting into their supplies. It would save him from having to hunt extra when moving through the mountains as they would probably gorge on their meat stores if they didn't get any while they stayed here.

"Of course," Lindir says to Kili whose face lights up with glee.

"Thank you!"

Suddenly, half a dozen hands shoot up and various calls requesting the same, though the manners sound very much forced, nearly deafen the Hobbit.

Dwalin remains steadfastly silent.

"Oh for Valar's sake," Bilbo grumbles before turning around and catching Lindir's robes before the Elf disappears. "My stubborn lout of a brother will have the same too, please Lindir. He'll thank you when you return."

Lindir smiles down at his Hobbit friend.

"Very well, I will return shortly."

"Thank you."

As the Elf leaves, Bilbo turns in time to see Dwalin nearly getting away with a mouthful of his food. He grabs the meaty hand holding his fork hostage and redirects it to his mouth, promptly swallowing the bite before snatching back his fork and yanking Dwalin down by his ear.

"Do that one more time, and I promise you, I will not be lenient when we spar for the next fortnight," the Hobbit hisses into his ear, giving it a rough pinch before releasing it.

Dwalin grumbles and winces as he rubs at the abused skin, giving Bilbo the stink-eye before poking at the salad still sitting in front of him. Bilbo huffs in frustration and goes to resume his meal when he catches sight of Bofur and Nori both looking at him with various degrees of astonishment and amusement upon their faces as Kili chuckles between them.

"What?" he snaps at them, viciously forking up another bite and putting it in his mouth.

All these interruptions to his eating was quickly wearing on his nerves.
"Oh, nothin' really," Nori says with a smirk. "Jus' amusin' te see Mr. Guardsman there put to heel."

Bilbo rolls his eyes -a common occurrence with these Dwarrow he coming to notice- and ignores the sly Dwarf as Dwalin curses at the thief. Really, he was dealing with a bunch of Fauntlings instead of grown Dwarrows.

As the mince pies come out for those 'smart' enough to ask for them, Bilbo glares at his brother until a short, 'Thank ye,' leaves his lips as Lindir sets the pie before him. Bilbo nods like a proud parent much to Dwalin's displeasure and Balin's and Nori's amusement.

Bilbo settles in to nibble at the salad on the table after finishing his third pie -much to some of the Dwarrow astonishment-, lazily focusing on the various conversations drifting around the veranda as the meal progresses.

"This is Orcrist, the Goblin-cleaver," he hears Elrond tell the Majestic Sod and Gandalf at the table behind him.

He hazily wonders if the Dwarrow King's stomach won over his stubborn pride and asked for a mince pie.

"A famous blade forged many years ago by the High Elves of the West, my Kin. May it serve you well."

Bilbo takes a bite from the pastries Lindir has brought him and lazily defends them from the cheeky Dwarrow at his table to no avail. He's too content and pleasantly full to really bother much to their benefit. The shing of a drawn blade pulls his attention back to the Elven Lord's conversation.

"And this... this is Glamdring, the Foehammer. Sword of the King of Gondolin. These were made for the Goblin Wars of the First Age."

He tunes out the rest of what his friend chatters to the wizard and Dwarrow King, shuffling to maneuver the blade Gandalf gifted him around. Once in his lap, he draws the blade slightly from its sheath, looking for any markings that would hint at any name bestowed upon it.

"I wouldn't bother, laddie."

Bilbo looks up at his elder brother in askance.

"Swords are named for the great things they do in war, ye see. Beheading Dark Lords or Orc leaders and the like."

"What are you saying, my sword hasn't seen battle? All blades see a battle at some point, Balin," he huffs, affronted for his blades sake.

"I'm not actually sure it is a sword," Balin says pointedly. "More of a letter opener, really."

Bilbo casts Balin the most affronted look he can.

"Letter opener? This is a sword, Balin."

"Te a Hobbit, sure. Te an Elf... not so much," he says with a serene 'I know what I'm talking about' smile.

"You're terrible, Balin, ruining my fancies like this. It's a dagger at the very least," Bilbo huffs at him, looking away to ignore the chuckles from his brother and listen in on other conversations again.
as he sheathes the blade.

"How did you come by these?" he hears Elrond ask.

"We found them in a Troll-hoard on the Great East Road," Gandalf replies. "Shortly before we were ambushed by Orcs upon their Wargs."

"And what were you doing on the Great East Road?"

The Hobbit's sharp ears pick up Gandalf's fidgeting and distracted chewing.

"Excuse me," the Majestic Sod finally speaks, and in a tone that was barely civil at that, much to Bilbo's chagrin.

Bilbo's eyes follow the Dwarrow King as he passes between the two tables and paces over to the tree upon the veranda. Bilbo stares at the Dwarf's pensive face before deciding to ignore him altogether. There were more interesting characters to look at amongst the company he tells himself. Like Nori who was... slipping a delicately cast iron salt shaker into his vest! Bilbo glares at the Dwarf who has the gall to wink cheekily at him despite being caught. Oooh, the things Bilbo's devious mind just came up with to punish the Dwarf for stealing from his friends. Hair glue among other things...

"Thirteen Dwarves-"

"Dwarrow!" Bilbo chimes in automatically, which Elrond ignores.

“And Bilbo Baggins, hmm. Strange traveling companions, Gandalf."

"These are the descendants of the house of Durin. They're noble, decent folk."

Bilbo's glare sharpens overhearing Gandalf's praise, pointedly looking at the Dwarf's vest then meeting his eyes several times trying to silently demand the lout return the lifted property. The bastard only smirks and puckers his lips at him. Indeed... hair glue among other things...

"They're surprisingly cultured, and they've a deep love for their crafts."

"Gandalf, we both know you only have Bilbo along when one of your ventures needs his... expertise," Elrond says flatly.

Gandalf starts coughing around the food in his mouth.

Nori takes to ignoring Bilbo's glare and raises his eyes to the harpist.

"Change the tune, why don't ye. I feel like I'm at a funeral!" Nori gripes, sticking a finger in his ear and twisting like he was trying to bring hearing back to it.

"Did somebody die?!" Bilbo hears Óin ask around in concern, looking around frantically.

"Alright lads. There's only one thing for it!" Bofur chimes in.

The Dwarf stands, clambering onto the table and hopping onto the plinth between the tables, inadvertently saving Gandalf from having to explain himself to the Elven Lord.

*Theeeeeere's aaaaaaaaanmnmmmnmmnn
Inn there's an inn, there's a merry old inn*
Beneath and old gray hill

The entire Company -besides Thorin from what Bilbo can see- adds their voice to Bofur's singing. Dwalin nearly roaring his head silly right next to Bilbo's ear, which he very much does not appreciate.

And there they brewed a beer so brown
The Man in the Moon himself came down
One night to drink his fill.

Ooooohhh
The ostler has a tipsy cat
That played a five-stringed fiddle
And up and down he saws his bow
Now squeaking hihihihi
Now puuuuuuuurr looollloww

The Company laughs and tosses around food at Bofur and anything around them as the Dwarf continues stomping and dancing upon the plinth as he sings.

Now sawing in the middle
Sooooo the cat on the fiddle
Played hey-diddle-diddle
A drink that'll wake the dead
He squeaked and he sawed
And he quickened the tune
And the landlord shook the Man in the Moon
'It's after three!' he said.

The Dwarrow roar and cheer for Bofur, tossing more food around like it was going out of style, as the Dwarf bows mockingly at Elrond and Gandalf.

"Now that's music!" Bofur says before he hops down with a cheeky twist and plops himself in his seat with a wide grin directed at Bilbo.

"I should have never taught any of you that song," he deadpans.

All the Dwarrow roar in laughter.

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The sun finally sinks below the horizon when the Company has had their fill and makes their way to their quarters. Bilbo follows behind them at a lazy pace, Dwalin and Balin flanking his sides with Kíli walking backward in front of him to continue their conversation of the benefits of Elven fletching, which the Dwarfling was adamant was inferior to Dwarrow technique.

"Considering there are few Dwarrow archers, Kíli, you'll not convince me that Dwarrow fletching is superior to Elven," Bilbo says and raises his hand when the youngling opens his mouth to argue.
"Though given what I've seen of yours, I'll not say that it is inferior either."

The Dwarfling grins, placated, letting the matter slide. Dwalin snorts in derision beside him while Balin chuckles.

"Ye'd make a fine consigliere, Bilbo," Balin says.
"I don't know whether to take that as a compliment or not," Bilbo grumbles. "Considering your King isn't too fond of me... well, I think it best to leave that position for you, Balin."

"He'll come around, laddie, you'll see."

"Not before he's old and gray I think."

Balin chuckles once again, patting Bilbo on the shoulder before pulling forward to keep pace with the Dwarrow King, who was stepping out of the throng to speak with Gandalf. Bilbo, Dwalin, and Kíli continue on, sedately passing the trio, but before they round the corner to the Dwarrow hall, Gandalf's voice calls out.

"Bilbo! I have need of you!"

Bilbo heaves a heavy sigh before waving Dwalin and Kíli off.

"I'll join you later for some drinks before bed."

"You'll stay with us then?" Kíli asks with a smile.

"No, I'm still sleeping away from you lot while we're here. There's only so much snoring I can take for one month."

"Aw, Bilbo, don't be like that!"

"Off with you troublemaker! I'll see you when I'm done with whatever nonsense that old badger is dragging me into!"

The Dwarfling pouts as Dwalin grabs him by the scruff and pulls him along to their quarters - wherever they have chosen to take their rest-, waving back at Bilbo with promises to have the Elves send along whatever alcohol the 'poncy bastards' deem drinkable.

"No terrorizing our hosts, Dwalin!"

All he gets is a dismissive wave over a broad shoulder as Kíli whines at both Bilbo and Dwalin. Bilbo shakes his head at both of them as he paces over to Gandalf, Balin and the Dwarrow King. The King who glares at him as he approaches before the lout returns his gaze to the wizard.

"I do not see why your burglar needs to be in attendance to this meeting," he growls, his expression stony.

"Bilbo has an academic interest in maps and an uncanny ability for... figuring things out," is what the daft old badger tells the Dwarf who scowls up at him.

"It is a relic of my people, and you would have outsiders privy to its secrets?" the Dwarf snaps. "You ask too much, wizard."

Gandalf huffs and is about to lay into the Dwarrow King from what Bilbo can see when Elrond makes his entrance.

"You wished to see me, Gandalf?" the Elven Lord asks, raising a brow at Bilbo's presence.

"Yes, but perhaps we should take this discussion somewhere private?"

"Of course."
Elrond motions for them to follow him down the hall opposite of the living quarters. Bilbo walks beside his towering friend, comfortable in the silence between them, but all too aware of the burning gaze scorching holes into his back. Bilbo huffs at the Dwarrow King's paranoia. Honestly, if Bilbo had even thought of mentioning anything about their quest to his friends, the crazy lot of them would have been in the dungeons quicker than they would have been able to draw their blades. Elrond and the twins didn't take kindly to anyone -well, anyone but Gandalf with his wizard status and all-putting him in needless danger, much to his exasperation. They acted like he couldn't take care of himself half the time! So no, he was not going to say anything to anyone outside the Company.

Elrond leads them back to the veranda where the shards of Narsil lay; Elrond’s Chamber. The room hardly has any visitors this time of night as far as Bilbo can remember from his last stay in the Last Homely House of the East. Elrond strides forward a few paces, leaving Bilbo standing beside the Dwarrow King, much to his annoyance.

"What business is it you wish to discuss with me, Gandalf? To have Bilbo here as a witness, it must be important."

"No, no, not terribly important, I assure you," Gandalf says as reassuringly as possible.

You would think the wizard would be more practiced in outright lying than he has been of late. Balin paces back and forth beside his King, unable to stand still, it seems, when his King was being pressured into doing something against his will.

"Thorin, if you would."

"Our business is no concern of Elves," Thorin growls, glaring at the wizard before returning his stare to Elrond.

"For goodness sake, Thorin, show him the map!"

"I told you, it is a legacy of our people!"- he glances at the wizard -"It is mine to protect, as are its secrets!"

Gandalf heaves a frustrated sigh, tapping his staff on the stone floor in his agitation. Balin continues his pacing but pauses and nearly smirks at the wizard, his own Dwarrow pride silently congratulating his King in his staunch position to defend their history. Bilbo throws neutral glances at each of them, noting their expressions and moods, subtly scenting the air for any changes their faces may not be allowed to reflect. The air is full of tension, anger, and no small amount of male posturing from the Dwarrow at least. Bilbo almost gives in to the urge to bash all their heads in and barely keeps himself from rolling his eyes in exasperation. He's had enough of that this past month thank you very much!

"Save me from the stubbornness of Dwarves! Your pride will be your downfall, mark my words, Thorin Oakenshield!" the wizard snaps at the Dwarf. "You stand in the presence of one of the few in Middle-earth who can read that map! Show it to Lord Elrond!"

Bilbo watches as Elrond's gaze moves from the wizard to the Dwarrow King, brow quirked in interest and concern. Whether the Dwarf did not want to further aggravate the wizard or because he finally saw the truth in Gandalf's words, Bilbo does not know. All he sees is the Dwarf slowly reach into his armaments and pull forth the map.

"Thorin, no!" his elder brother commands as he reaches to keep his King from passing the map to the Elven Lord.

Thorin pushes aside Balin's arm and steps forward, slowly handing the map to Elrond who takes it
just as slowly and with some reverence. It cannot be said that the Elven Lord of Rivendell could not
hold the same respect for relics of the other races as he would his own. His expression changes
lightning quick when he opens the map and sees its contents.

"Erebor!" he says, looking at Thorin sharply. "What is your interest in this map?"

Bilbo watches as the Dwarrow King opens his usually offensive gob to answer when Gandalf steps
in, eyes on Thorin as though daring him to speak against what the wizard is about to say.

"It's mainly academic. As you know this sort of artifact fascinates Bilbo so. As it is of Dwarrow
origin, they sometimes contain hidden text. Bilbo is most eager to know if there is any," he says,
watching as Elrond glances at the Hobbit then to him, a look of mild disbelief on his face before
stepping away from them and to the steps leading up to the balcony.

Gandalf shoots Thorin a stern look to which the Dwarf heaves a small sigh, his lips quirked up in a
small smirk at the wizard's deflecting of truth.

"You still read ancient Khuzdul, do you not?"

Elrond shuffles around for a moment, the map held in his hands delicately as he tilts it here and there,
moonlight shining upon the parchment. He looks up and out at the night sky, gaze set on the moon.
Stepping into a shaft of pale light he brings the map up closer to his face and shifts it about.

"Ah, kirst ethir."

"Moon runes..." Gandalf says aloud. "Of course."

Bilbo meets the wizard's gaze as he turns around to address him, head tilted and expression confused,
interested in the wizard's knowledge.

"An easy thing to miss," the wizard clarifies, but does not explain much to the Hobbit's annoyance.

Thankfully his Elven friend steps in.

"Well, in this case, that is true. Moon runes were invented by the Dwarrow and can only be read by
the light of a moon of the same shape and season as the day on which they were written," Elrond
explains as he lowers the map.

"Can you read them?" Thorin asks humbly much to Bilbo's surprise.

"That I cannot, not on this night at least," Elrond says with some regret. "They shimmer in the
moonlight now but are too faint to read which suggests that the day upon which they will be visible
is near. If you would like, I will check each evening for you?"

The Dwarrow King's face had fallen at the ill news at first, but as Elrond continued to speak, his eyes
had alighted with grudging respect and thanks.

"If it is not too much trouble, you have my thanks," he says, taking the map back from the Elven
Lord before turning to take his leave with Balin following behind him.

"Be sure to bring Bilbo to our meetings, Thorin Oakenshield," Elrond calls after him. "I would hate
to deprive my friend of his... scholarly ventures."

The Dwarf's shoulders stiffen, but at this point, Elrond's steely gaze has fallen to the retreating figure
of Gandalf, missing the reaction to the Elf's words. When Gandalf has vanished around the corner
does Elrond move his gaze once more to address his Hobbit friend, only to find he has disappeared as well.

"Suspicious indeed," he muses with a frown before retiring from the room as well.

He would learn just what this company of Dwarves was hiding in time and what that entailed for his young friend.

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Bilbo trots down the hall in his kit-fox skin, avoiding any wandering Elves by ducking into the shadows until they pass, making his way to where he can hear the Dwarrow snarking and laughing with each other. He smirks when he thinks of the mischief he will unleash once all the Dwarrow are sleeping. Arriving at the room they have made into their camp -after changing back of course- Bilbo is greeted heartily by Kíli, Dwalin, Nori, Dori, and Ori as they pass him a pint of Elven ale.

"Not as strong as yer ale back in the Shire, but it'll do, brother!" Dwalin laughs merrily before he downs half of his mug.

Bilbo huffs at his brother. Elven wine may not seem substantial, but that was the secret of it. It has knocked even the hardiest of Elves on their arses if there was an occasion to celebrate.

"Keep that up, and you'll have a spectacular hangover in the morning," Bilbo warns him lightly as he takes a seat beside the burly Dwarf, Kíli practically gluing himself to his other side with a wild grin, and Fíli coming over to share in the merriment.

Several hours later and with six of thirteen Dwarrow passed out from their childish need to outdrink the Hobbit, Bilbo bids the others a good evening and leaves for his room, a vicious little smirk upon his face. He spends his time reading in his quarters until the early hours of the morning before he sets his plan in motion. Shifting skin after grabbing what he needs, he blends into the night shadows and makes his way back to the Dwarrow. Slipping into the common room and hiding within the shadows, Bilbo observes the Dwarrow to determine if any were likely to awaken during his mischief-making.

Seeing no immediate wakers, he pads over to his first victim of the hour. Shifting back into Hobbit skin with nary a sound, he pulls out his implements of devilry and begins his work. Carefully he constructs his tiny masterpiece, ever aware of the consciousness of the Dwarf. Once done and satisfied with the results, he moves onto his last two victims of mischief. Smirking, he shifts once again and pads out of the common room on silent paws.

The morning will be delightfully entertaining indeed!

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Bilbo stretches his arms to the ceiling as he makes his way down the hall to the common room to greet his brothers -a stipulation of theirs for as long as they remained here-, yawning in contentment. Barely ten steps from his destination, a familiar roar of fury echoes loudly into the hall and reverberating further still.

"Ye little bastards! I'll skin ye both!"

Crashing and thumping of clunky Dwarrow boots follow as the raucous laughter of two Dwarflings near and recede as they no doubt run around the room. Bilbo rolls his eyes at the complete lack of common sense of the two. Really, they could run out of the room and lead Dwalin on a merry chase through the grounds, but no, they stay in the room where they are likely to be caught. He'll need to
up his schedule in schooling them.

Stepping into the room, he observes overturned furniture and a broken vase or two before a blur of gold and raven hair streak by him followed shortly by the hulking mass of an enraged Fundinson. With a raised brow, he steps further into the room to stand before Dori, who's pinching the bridge of his nose in agony as his other hand twirls some object between his fingers.

"What in the world is going on here?" he asks the eldest Ri, watching as Dwalin leaps and dives over furniture and whatever the brats throw at him as he chases after the two hellions.

"Ugh," Dori groans. "I don't know, but make them stop! My head..."

Bilbo rolls his eyes.

"I told you not to try and outdrink a Hobbit."

"Mrghl..."

"Pathetic..."

Dwalin roars as he crashes through something the brat-lets toss behind them.

"Make them stop, Bilbo," Ori whines from the other side of Dori, head bent between his knees.

He sighs, though silently laughing at them all, and steps to the middle of the room lightly tracing a ward upon his throat. Another crash.

"Mahîdînî!" (Halt!)

And everyone's gaze falls on Bilbo, all frozen in place with looks of shock upon their faces.

"There you are, Ori, they've stopped," Bilbo says turning back to Ori, ignoring the stares.

"You know Khûzdu?" Thorin eventually growls out.

"Hardly," Bilbo scoffs. "Just a few words here and there I picked up with the caravans. It's not difficult sorting out the meaning of some of your commands when they're being shouted out willy-nilly."

The Majestic Sod looks affronted, and Bilbo visibly rolls his eyes at him, deepening the Dwarrow King's scowl. No more is said on the matter, though by the looks on some of the older Dwarrow faces, they aren't too happy with this development. Well, at least Balin seems nonplused. He turns to face the three troublemakers.

"So what has you three hellions causing a ruckus this early in the morning?"

Dwalin shakes his head as if to throw off his shock and scowls majestically, pawing at the cloth wrapped around his forehead as though trying to erase something from under it.

"These barâg wrote on my head!" (brats)

Bilbo stares at him with a raised brow, arms crossed over his chest as he leans on one foot.

"They wrote on your head..."

To his amusement, a deep flush spreads across the large Dwarf's face before he motions for Bilbo to
follow him. His brother leads him out into the corridor, looking left and right as though expecting someone to jump out, armed to the teeth. Seeing that the hall was clear, the burly Dwarf unties the knot at the back of his head.

"Don' laugh," he growls as he unwraps the cloth.

As the cloth reveals the skin underneath, I need cuddles appears written with ink in sloppy script across his brother's forehead. A moment passes, then another and Dwalin starts to shift about restlessly as his Hobbit brother remains silent, eyes wide and brow arched.

"Well do you?"

"What?"

"Do you need cuddles?"

Dwalin's face erupts red and Bilbo chuckles, silently patting himself on the back for a job well done in mortifying his brother.

"I'll be sure to slip over some nights to be a... furry hat for your head," he laughs as he turns and dashes down the hall to the main balcony for breakfast.

"Ye cheeky bastard!" Dwalin growls as he stomps after him.

"Keep calling me names, and I'll not share my soap to get rid of that charming ink of yours, brother dear," Bilbo says primly as he turns around, walking backward with ease and failing to look affronted with the smirk upon his face.

Dwalin grumbles but remains silent, giving his Hobbit brother a flat, but imploring look.

"Oh all right," the Hobbit huffs. "You're lucky you're my favorite."

Dwalin's lips quirk up in a pleased smirk.

"Go down the hall to the left of where you lot have taken to sleeping; turn right and follow that hall to the end. Make another right, and my door is the third on the right. There's soap on my desk for ink stains. The one on the left mind, the one on the right is a dye. Wouldn't want your hair turning some brazen color, now would we?"

"Ye have my thanks, brother."

"You're welcome. Now off with you! The sooner you get that washed off, the sooner you can 'fend off the poncy Elves from thieving me away' at breakfast," Bilbo says with a roll of his eyes.

Dwalin huffs at the reminder but turns and stomps off down the hall back towards the common room, completely missing the vicious grin that blooms over the Hobbit's face as he watches his brother depart.

"Most entertaining indeed."

The Company is merrily partaking of the improved meal -as it included meats and fresh bread- as Bilbo speaks with Balin and Fíli about how his sword was not a letter opener when it happens. Deep into his debate with his brother and the youngling, Bilbo doesn't notice the abrupt silence of the rest of the Company until he is yanked by the back of his coat, lifted up off his seat, and staring at eye
level into the face of a very angry, very blue haired and bearded, Dwalin. Bilbo visibly swallows.

"The left ye said?" Dwalin asks with a low growl.

"Yes..."

"Right, then how de ye explain this!" his brother snaps, waving at his beard and hair.

Bilbo stares at the dark blue color of his Dwarf brother's beard in concentration.

"Well, it seems you used the wrong soap, really," he says and shrugs in nonchalance even as he dangles off the ground in Dwalin's grip.

Dwalin snarls something impressive and shakes the Hobbit a bit.

"Ye said it was the one on the left!"

"Well obviously I must have forgotten which one I put where!" Bilbo snaps back, crossing his arms and glaring at his brother, trying to ignore the giggles and laughter of the Company lest he starts giggling as well. "You can't blame me for that!"

"You cheeky little-"

"I notice your delightful ink is gone, so at least you used the right one eventually," he drawls before he yanks on one of Dwalin’s ears and whispers. "Now put me down so I can finish my breakfast before I tell all and sundry what those heathens inked on your head."

He is unceremoniously dropped - nearly not landing on his feet, the brute- after a long hard glare from Dwalin who then shoves a meaty finger at his nose, bending down to have his face to accompany it, before growling lowly at him.

"It may have been those little bastards this time and forgetfulness on your end, but mark my words brother if yer havin' me I'll get ye back ten-fold. Father tol' me all about yer tricks."

"I have no idea what you're getting at, Dwalin, truly," Bilbo huffs, inspecting his nails and scuffing them on his shirt to clean them.

Turning around, he retakes his place beside Fíli, nearly certain Dwalin is miming strangling him behind his back. He sees from the corner of his eye as the burly Dwarf rounds the table to take a seat beside Balin. After taking a bite of a fruit covered tart, he wipes his mouth with his napkin, hiding his diabolical smirk behind it. Dwalin, of course, could hold onto his delusions. His brother would never catch him in the act unless Bilbo himself was under great duress, Fundin's warnings or not. The only Dwarf Bilbo was concerned may sniff him out was Nori. The sneak-thief was nearly on par with him concerning sneakiness. Compared with that, Dwalin, as loud as he is, wasn't going to be able to gather any proof, and eventually, his gruff brother wouldn't be able to blame him until Bilbo reveals all on the eve of their last day in Rivendell.

That day would be most glorious indeed.

"By the way, Dwalin..."

His younger-older brother looks up from his meal with a frown.

"That color is most becoming on you."

The warrior lunges across the table only to snarl in frustration as Bilbo dances away from his grasp,
darting down the balcony steps as he cackles in glee.

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The days pass with Bilbo visiting Elrond, the twins, and Lindir. Each night, Bilbo would accompany Thorin and Gandalf to see how much closer Elrond was able to read the moon runes. Each night, Thorin's mood would worsen, and Bilbo would spend as little time in the common room with the Dwarrow as he could get away with, much to Kíli's and Dwalin's displeasure. The Majestic Sod's short temper was not something he was going to suffer until he had no other choice.

The sixth morning, however, Bilbo walks into the common room to greet his brothers, the Ri brothers, and the princes only to enter an empty room with clothes and equipment strewn about. Confused, mildly concerned, and highly offended at the mess, he heads to the balcony. Maybe the Dwarrow had awoken earlier than usual and were already at breakfast?

The balcony is empty on his arrival but for the Elves setting the table for their guests. Spotting Lindir, he waves as he approaches the auburn-haired Elf.

"Good morning, Lindir!"

The Elf smiles, but it looks strained, and his friend’s pallor seems a bit green around the gills despite the glow of the morning light.

"What's the matter?"

"Your... companions have taken upon themselves to bathe."

Bilbo raises a brow in confusion. How on Arda was that a bad thing?

"Is that a problem?"

A shudder visibly shoots down Lindir's spine, making Bilbo's brows shoot up in surprise.

"They have decided to use the fountain for their cleansing rituals..."

Bilbo stares at him for a moment.

"You're joking."

"I'm afraid not, my friend."

Bilbo's hands acquaint themselves with his face as he rubs his eyes furiously, before wiping off his face, a deep glower upon it.

"My friend, don't use any water from the fountains until we have taken our leave. Now if you'll excuse me, I have some Dwarrow to... speak with."

Bilbo turns on his heel with a frustrated growl, stomping away from his friend and into the hall before he shifts skins and darts off to the fountain. He switches back before reaching the fountains resting place and -as he had calmed some of his frustration on the run over- casually walks out to the rowdy lot of Dwarrow.

"Bilbo!" comes Kíli's excited shout from atop the shoulders of his brother. "Have you come to join us?"

He stops as he reaches the base of the fountain, averting his eyes from the naked lot of them and idly
tracing his fingers against the stone.

"No, I'm afraid I've already bathed this morning."

"Then come in for some fun!" he hoots, falling from Fili's hold, splashing and flailing water as he approaches the Hobbit, naked and furry like the rest of the Dwarrows.

"I'd rather eat, really," he says as he steps back, keeping out of reach of the youngling who tries to drag him into the water.

The soft tread of bare feet upon water covered stone catches his attention, and he turns in time to see Nori about to make a grab for him. Dancing away from grabby hands, Bilbo settles himself further away from the fountain.

"I do have to ask why you lot have decided to use a very public fountain for your ablutions," Bilbo trails off as he sees the pile of towels some feet away from the fountain, well out of the reach of flying water.

"The baths were too... poncy," Fili grumbles.

"Poncy... Really?"

"The soaps smelled like flowers!" Kili whines.

"Or green things," Fili chimes in.

"Or some kind of frilly nonsense," Dwalin grumbles.

Bilbo stares at them, long and hard, and the younglings, his brothers, and the rest of the Company - not Thorin, however - all avert their gazes.

"Indeed," is all he says, turning away with a determined air, leaving the Dwarrow to their foolishness.

"Bilbo! Where are you going?!"

"Breakfast!"

He disappears out of sight of the Dwarrow.

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Nearly two hours later, with no Dwarrow in sight, Bilbo starts cackling madly from his perch in the tree on the balcony. Hidden in the foliage, he quiets when the cautious tread of Dwarrow boots echo in the hall.

"Do you think the Elves will have left the food out for us?" he hears Ori ask.

"If not, we'll have to make do with our stores. I'll not have these poncy Elves seeing me like this," Dori trills back with a huff. "I may be fond of this color, but not when it's become one with my hide!"

He carefully climbs higher up, confident in his penchant for silence, and watches from between verdant leaves as the Company 'soft-foot' their way up onto the balcony. He has to cover his mouth to stifle the absolute glee coursing through him when they come into view. From head to leather-covered toe, the Dwarrows' skin don the most delightful shade of fuchsia, leaving their hair and
beards as they were -well, Dwalin still exhibits his dashing blue-hued bristles. "Whose idea was it te bathe in that blasted fountain?" Glóin snaps.

"We put it to a vote, we did," Bofur says with a chuckle. "I fer one find this rather amusing."

"Ye would, ye axe-grinding sod."

"No need fer name calling!"

"Quiet!" Thorin snaps. "Or would you rather the tree-shaggers come out and see us like this?"

The Dwarrow quiet and look around as though expecting an Elf to pop out of nowhere. Still cautious, they approach the table lined with cold foods and sit. They fall upon the vittles as they are prone to do, throwing food here and there to pass it along instead of politely handing it down the table. Bilbo rolls his eyes. Really, the manners of these Dwarrow. Climbing down back to the branch where he had taken his nap earlier, Bilbo makes himself comfortable and pulls his notebook from his coat pocket. Saving this moment for the ages was high on his list of priorities at the moment.

He sketches the Dwarrow as they eat, planning on adding color to the picture once he was safely back in his rooms for the night with the Dwarrow none the wiser. He grins. He will enjoy adding this moment to his memoirs back in the Shire. Once finished, he tucks his notebook away, pulling out a book - *Elven History of the First Age* - and relaxes against the trunk, flipping to the page he left off on.

"Did you lot bathe in dye?" he calls down to the Company.

All thirteen Dwarrows startle horribly. Food flying off of plates that were being held up to faces, drinks being spewed out from between closed lips, some choking... really these Dwarrows are so dramatic. They look around for him with frantic eyes, beards and hair whipping around as they search.

"I'm up here..."

Thirteen pairs of eyes lock onto him in the tree, all wide with embarrassment.

"Really, you Dwarrow could use some instruction on observation."

"Tryin' te find a Hobbit that don' want te be found is like tryin' te find a needle in a pile of needles," Dwalin growls.

Bilbo turns his head from his book and looks at his brother.

"I must say, Dwalin, that color does not suit your stunning beard."

Bilbo barely manages to catch the apple thrown at his head.

"That was uncalled for!"

"Yer a cheeky git, Bilbo!"

"I'm not the one who-"

"Quiet! Both of you!" Thorin roars.

Bilbo snorts.
"Like no one heard that at all..."

"Oh my..."

Thirteen heads swivel around to lay eyes on the new witness of their embarrassment. Lindir stands just past the steps, looking over the Dwarrow with a pitying look.

"It seems you all have fallen prey to our wayward trickster spirit," Lindir says with a heavy sigh.

Bilbo shoots him a glare from his perch to which the Elf - who had glanced his way - only raises a brow.

"Trickster spirit?" Thorin asks.

"Yes, every now and then the spirit visits and causes all kinds of mischief. It seems you all have been subject to one of its favored tricks."

"Dyeing us fuchsia?" Dori asks.

"Indeed. I had the... displeasure of being that particular shade for several months," Lindir laments, laying it on thick in that slick way of his.

"Does it wear off any sooner?" Balin inquires.

"Oh certainly. It wore off in a few hours."

"Any reason why it took so long for ye?"

Bilbo grins as he realizes how Lindir is playing this out. The poor sods. Their confusion would be marvelous to behold.

"Trickster spirits are cunning and resourceful creatures. Adept in an uncanny form of magic that few can detect," the Elf bemoans. "So of course it had spelled my supply of soaps. It hadn't even occurred to me to have my Lord Elrond check them, so I was dyed fuchsia until I had to restock them."

"Yer soaps?" Dwalin asks with disbelief, doubt about his brother's involvement creeping into his mind. For certainly, Bilbo -who was all for cleanliness as most Hobbits are- wouldn't have sabotaged anyone's soap for his tricks.

"My soaps."

"That's horrible!" Dori calls out.

Bilbo pulls the book closer to his face. It wouldn't do him any good if they saw him trying not to laugh. His grin only grows more sly when the chiming of bells bouncing as their owner walks echoes out from the halls onto the balcony. Once more, thirteen heads and an Elf turn to behold the newcomer.

Elrond steps up onto the balcony with his usual grace and air of effortless power. However, his robes are adorned in countless tiny bells that chime with even the slightest movement.

"My Lord Elrond!" Lindir calls out in surprise at his Lord's attire

"Cunning and resourceful indeed, Lindir," the Elven Lord sighs. "There was not a single robe in my wardrobe not embellished as such. And no counter spell to be found."
"Indeed," says a grumbling Gandalf.

All stare in shock for there stands one of the Istari also bedecked in bells. Unlike the Elven Lord, the wizard's glimmer and chime from where they are attached to his long beard.

"Oh dear," Bilbo says as he takes in the wizard.

Certainly he would have liked to play some tricks or two on the old badger, but he was not fool enough anymore to do so. How the bells ended up in his old friend's bristles was a mystery to him. The wizard's eyes dart to Bilbo then back to the Company, contemplative, but thankfully not annoyed. Bilbo nearly sinks against the tree in relief. He would rather not be subject to the Maia's retribution as he was when he was a tween with a rather large chip on his shoulder.

"That being said, I would advise you all **not** to bathe in the fountain while we are here. I have also informed my kin to keep a weather eye out for anything out of place. Hopefully, we can keep the chaos to a minimum if we work together in this," Elrond says, his gaze on the Dwarrow King.

The Dwarf nods and the rest continue with their meal, some of them with their fuchsia cheeks darker than the rest of them in their embarrassment.

"Well," Glóin grumbles, “if I find the sneaky bugger I’ll be sure to give it a stern talking to.”

“Tha’s yer pappy voice Glóin,” Bofur chuckles. “What are ye gonna do? Glare it inte a corner fer bein’ a bad spirit?”

“Better’n laughin’ at the mischief it causes and encouraging it!”

“Live a little, my fine Dwarf! We’re on an adventure!”

The rest of their meal is as all Dwarrow meals, full of noise and food throwing as they stuff their faces in true Dwarrow fashion with Bilbo reading calmly in the tree, hiding his wicked grin behind the pages as he plots his next move.

The other fountains have yet been treated yet after all.

A few days later, mid-morning….

Thorin curses as he makes his way to the baths. The ‘trickster spirit’ had tampered with **all** of the fountains these poncy Elves owned. Not only were three of them continuing to turn his Dwarrow and himself that appalling shade of fuchsia -which wore off after a few hours, thank Mahal-, but the rest of the bloody things were leaving them sticky if they decided to let the air dry them. So they started bringing towels... That wouldn’t be such a trial if the towels weren’t always replaced with ones full of lint, hair, and unsavory things when no one seemed to be looking.

Thorin was ready to hunt down the trickster and wring its neck.

Closing the door behind him as he enters the private bath off the hall to the Company’s current lodgings, Thorin shucks his armor and clothes as he looks around the baths warily. After all, the trickster has proven able enough to avoid detection from even his seasoned spy and trusted guardsman. It wouldn’t do for him to come out with a more alarming shade of color upon his skin.

Stepping down into the sunken bath, the Dwarrow King sighs in pleasure as the heated water warms his skin. If he avoids using those flowery concoctions the Elves claim as soaps, he would not mind
so much using the private baths instead of the fountains for his own amusement. Pulling out his own supply of soaps and hair cleansers, he gets to work cleaning off the stick from the fountains.

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The other Dwarrow and Bilbo -leaning against Dwalin’s side, reading as the Dwarf sharpens his axes- were lounging in the common room when an almighty, rage-filled roar echoes down the hall. Everyone startles in their seats, looking to the entrance of the room with apprehension. Bilbo picks up the sounds of harshly slapping bare feet upon the marble floors before the door bursts open.

And there he stands, the Dwarrow King, clad in only a towel, red-faced and wild-eyed.

Covered in feathers.

The two princes burst out laughing, faces red with mirth at the state of their uncle.

“I’m going to skin your hides, you cheeky brats!”

In a flurry of motion the Dwarrow King rushes the Dwarflings who yelp and scramble over each other to escape.

“Now this looks familiar,” Bilbo drawls at Balin who sits beside him.

“Indeed,” Balin sighs as he watches his King barely keep ahold of his towel as he chases down his nephews.

“I’m sending you both back to your mother in pieces!”

Bilbo sighs, though really he is enjoying the sight of the Dwarrow King covered in feathers in nothing but his towel. Bilbo was not ashamed to admit, despite the Majestic Sod’s continued disdain for his person, he could appreciate a good looking creature when it was before him. After some minutes -and Bilbo deciding he’s had his fill of bronze-skinned muscles- pats Dwalin on the shoulder and slips out of the common room, taking a souvenir with him as he makes his way to the kitchens. Certainly one of his friends would provide him with edibles for second breakfast.

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Some hours after the Majestic Sod has cleaned himself once more, redressed and the heathens punished with cleaning everyone’s clothes, Bilbo returns to the common room to hear Nori swearing himself blue in the face as he tears through the area in his search for something.

“What ‘ave ye devils done with them!”

“I’ve not done anything with them!” Kíli squeaks as the thief gets right up in his face. “I was cleaning your clothes for the past few hours!”

“Dwalin!”

“I saw nothin’, ye sod,” the Hobbit’s brother snarls.

“Well someone must’ve! They can’t have up an’ walked away!”

“Ah, you must mean these,” Bilbo says as he steps further into the -once more- trashed room, holding up a pair of muddy boots.

Nori straightens up quickly, eyeing his fellow thief with suspicion as he shifts on his bare feet. He
was only half certain the Hobbit had filched his boots, what with all the trickster nonsense going on and Bilbo giving him the stink eye over the salt shaker some days ago.

“An jus’ where were they then?”

“Funny you should ask,” Bilbo drawls as he approaches the Dwarf, handing him his boots. “I found them at the dinner table where you normally sit.”

“And ye didn’t have anythin’ te do with that, did ye?”

“Of course I did, don’t be daft. They kept me company while I had second breakfast. I expect you to return that salt shaker by the way. Wouldn’t want your boots to end up somewhere… unsavory.”

Bilbo then skips out of the common room leaving the sly Dwarf flabbergasted behind him amongst the snickering Company.

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If the Dwarrows thought they were only going to have to deal with fuchsia skin, dirty towels, and the misplacing of certain articles of clothing, they had sorely underestimated the ingenuity of this ‘trickster spirit’. For on the ninth day of their stay in the poncy Elves’ domain, one by one the Company awoke itching, terribly. As Bilbo walks in to see each one of them in a constant state of scratching some part of themselves, he couldn’t help but comment.

“Have you all caught fleas?”

The glares sent his way was enough to have him make a hasty retreat, giggling once he was out of earshot.

The Company as a whole grumble and growl on their way to the baths, swearing viciously when an itch was in a particularly awkward spot. Once cleaned and no longer itching, one by one they leave the baths until only Fíli and Kíli remain, soaking in the deliciously hot water. Kíli twitches as an itch erupts upon his scalp.

“Fíli, pass me the soap. Seems I’ve not got whatever it was all out of my hair,” he grumbles.

Fíli passes it to him without a word, twitching himself when an itch forms on his scalp as well.

“Pass it back when you’re done. I’ve not got everything either.”

And so the brothers wash their hair, scrubbing extra against their skin to expel the accursed itching. Once done and rinsed out, the younglings drag themselves from the bath, grabbing their towels and running them against their soaked hair. It’s Fíli who notices first.

“Kíli…”

His brother stops drying his hair and looks to his brother, eyes widening in surprise before he points at Fíli.

“Your hair!”

“My hair? Your hair!” Fíli yelps.

Kíli yanks some of his locks before his eyes, Fíli hazily noting as his brother’s eyes widen in shock as they watch his hair change from the deep raven black of his birth into Fíli’s own golden color. Mimicking his brother, the elder prince drags his hair into his eyesight and whimps in dismay. With
every second, his hair goes from its gilded hue into his brother’s obsidian. Within a few moments, Fíli and Kíli stand in silence, staring at each other in shock -Kíli- and dismay -Fíli- until Kíli bursts out in a wide grin.

“Your beard changed too!”

Fíli rolls his eyes heavenward, silently begging the Valar to open the earth and swallow him.

“This is fantastic!” the younger prince hoots. “Wait till Thorin sees us! I wonder if he’ll be able to tell the difference?”

“This is horrible…” Fíli grumbles as he towels the rest of his body off with a scowl before roughly putting on his clothes. “I’m starting to see what Glóin was talking about.”

“Don’t be such a asur-khuzd. Oh! Let’s switch clothes too!”

“I’ll show you asur-khuzd.”

Fíli flicks his towel at Kíli’s bare behind with a snap, causing the youngling to yelp in surprised pain.

“That was uncalled for!”

Fíli only flicks his towel again with a smirk.

“You’re horrible!”

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To say the Company was staring at the princes when they arrive at the common room is an understatement. They are gawking, eyes wide, with some of them unable to close their mouths. Thorin’s gaze, however, quickly becomes stormy as he stomps up to them, glaring at Fíli as he does. With how they were standing -like they had been up to their usual mischief-, the Dwarrow King will have words with them. They were in the halls of Elves. They could take offense to anything and go back to feeding them rabbit food.

“What have you done, Kíli?” he growls at the elder prince.

“I’m Fíli…”

Thorin blinks at the youngling in surprise as Kíli tries to suppress his snickers.

“What sorcery is this?” he asks as his gaze flicks between the princes in confusion.

“Prolly tha’ trickster again, Thorin,” Dwalin growls. “The wily thing has left none unscathed.”

“Except Bilbo!” Ori shouts out. “Maybe he has something that keeps the spirit away!”

The Dwarrows look at each other speculatively, though some -Nori and Dwalin- have some suspicions. Jingling bells echo against the halls near the common room, and the Dwarrow all turn to see what poor sod the trickster had belled this time.

Once more, wide eyes and low hanging jaws take in the sight before them. Bilbo steps into the room with his usual calm and blinks at them with a raised brow.

“What?”
Ori groans in despair, jolting the Company out of their stupor.

“Yer hair’s blue,” Dwalin says lowly.

“Really? I hadn’t noticed,” Bilbo drawls with a scowl on his face.

“Yer clothes-”

“Yesss.”

“Bells-”

“Yes, I bloody well know!” Bilbo growls. “Honestly! Like I hadn’t noticed I’ve been be-spelled this horrendous shade of blue or bells put in my hair! That trickster didn’t even have the decency to spell my clothes a complimentary color!”

“Tha’s yer problem? Tha’ they don’t match?” Nori ask with incredulity.

“Well why would I complain about anything else? It’s not like I can just merrily walk up to a spirit and kindly request he spell my clothes to be complementary if it wants to douse me in blue.”

“He has a point,” Balin says lightly. “Though I’m surprised yer out an’ about, brother. Yer usually so… particular with yer appearance.”

“Particular I may be, Balin, but nothing is going to get in the way of my meals,” Bilbo sniffs like he’s smelled something unpleasant.

“So you don’t have something to keep the spirit at bay?” Ori asks.

“Why would I have anything of the sort?”

“Because until now, the spirit has left you alone!”

“Hardly,” Bilbo drawls. “Just because I haven’t appeared under one of the trickster's spells doesn’t mean I haven’t been. *This* one just happened to be one Elrond can’t undo with a flick of his wrist.”

“Oh…”

“On to another matter, I was only stopping by to let Dwalin and Balin know I would be indisposed today. Good day!”

With that he steps out of the common room and out of sight.

“Wait! Bilbo!” Kili hollers as he scrambles to follow their Hobbit. “Can you-”

But the hall is empty, no trace of their Hobbit anywhere. Fili sidles up and looks down the halls with him.

“He sure is quick for a little fellow.”

“I wanted him to show me to the archery lines,” Kili whines, sulking back into the common room.

“You’ll see him at lunch no doubt, ask him then,” Fili says, following his brother.

Neither notice the golden eyes peeking out from the shadows of a nearby column, glittering with mischief.
Later that day the Dwarrow make their way to the balcony to eat. Many grumbling at the younger prince’s antics while patting the elder prince on the shoulder as he broods enough to rival Thorin’s more epic strops. Kíli had been flaunting his new hair color like a preening bird once they all left the common room, flirting outrageously with any Elven female they happened across. It left a bad taste in many of the other Dwarrows’ mouths.

However, when Elrond joins them, dragging along two Elves who seems to be hiding behind the Lord’s robes, the day becomes a little brighter for the Dwarrows.

“May I introduce my sons, Elrohir and Elladan,” Elrond says with a sigh, stepping aside and revealing a most hilarious sight.

The Elves look much like their father in coloring and build though younger looking and twins for one. What causes the Dwarrows to burst out in laughter is the state of their hair. The Elflings long locks seem to have been glued in elaborate swirls and curls, making them look utterly ridiculous. The twins’ cheeks burn a deep red as they look everywhere but at the Dwarrows.

“At least the spirit isn’t only targeting us!” Kíli hoots.

That evening, Dwalin and Balin are relaxing in the common room - Dwalin checking over Insult and Injury- as the rest of the Company go about their own businesses elsewhere when their warrior instincts make them pause. Looking up they are greeted with golden slit eyes from a kit-fox face and covered in petals and dirt from the looks of his pelt.

“Have yer fill frolicking in the gardens then?” Balin asks politely.

Blood stained teeth glint from between black lips in a parody of a smile. The older Dwarf snorts as Dwalin grins back when a glint from Bilbo’s right ear catches his attention.

“What’s with the earring?”

The Hobbit merely gives his brother a bland look and flicks said ear at him.

“Fine then, don’t tell me,” Dwalin grumbles as his kit-fox skinned brother trots over then sneers as the brat then proceeds to hop up onto his shoulders then onto his head where he twirls before laying down, acting like a furry hat. “Cheeky blighter. Yer still a mess!”

The little bastard proceeds to groom his scalp in reply.

When Kíli -whining about not seeing Bilbo at lunch or dinner-, Fíli, and Ori walk into the common room that night, they nearly trip over each other when they take in Dwalin.

“When did you get a fur hat, Dwalin? It can’t be that cold,” Kíli says with a cheeky grin only to startle when the ‘hat’ twitches and a large golden slit eye opens and focuses on him, one large ear twisting in his direction.

Dwalin’s brow twitches with remembered irritation. Kíli looked like a small Víli with his hair turned golden. Their father was just as mischievous too.
“Is that a kit-fox?” Ori asks in amazement as the creature lifts its head out from under its tail.

“Indeed,” Balin says with a chuckle.

“Aren’t they natural to the Ha… Hari… farak?” the youngling asks, stumbling over the Elven name and instead reverting to Khuzdul as his brow furrows when Fili marches towards Dwalin. (South)

Bilbo scrambles to his feet atop Dwalin’s head, ignoring the Dwarf’s hissed curses as his claws scrape against his brother’s skin. Ears folded back and spine arched he lets loose a high pitched screech at the elder prince in warning. Which of course the Dwarfling completely ignores, scooping up the screaming creature by his scruff. He immediately quiets, ears still flattened and tail curling under his hindquarters as he glares at the Dwarfling as he brings the Hobbit up to his eye level. Everyone stares in mute fascination before Fili’s face bursts out in a wide smile.

“It’s adorable!” he squees as he adjusts his grip, squishing Bilbo’s face against his and rubs; his beard an unpleasant sensation upon his fur. “Let’s tell Uncle we’re keeping it!”

“Yes!” Kili agrees with enthusiasm.

“Ye can’t keep ‘im!” Dwalin shouts, coming out of his stupor.

“Why not?!” Fili demands, ready to initiate his majestic brooding face at the Guardsman, believing it will be more potent with his hair nearly identical to his Uncle’s.

“Cause he belongs te Bilbo,” Dwalin growls.

“Bilbo owns a kit-fox?”

“How?”

“Where’d he get it?”

“We want one!”

“Quiet!” Dwalin snaps, pulling poor Bilbo from the Dwarfling’s grasp and smoothing out his fur. “Yer not askin’ Bilbo where he got ‘im either. It’s not like ye could take care of it while we’re travelin’.”

“Then why does Bilbo get to bring his?” Kili whines.

“Seems the cheeky little thing would’na let Bilbo leave ‘im back in the Shire. Prolly been followin’ us since we left. Don’t much like strangers pickin’ ‘im up, either.”

Bilbo sticks a paw against his brother’s running mouth, much to the burly Dwarf’s annoyance, with a toothy fox smile.

“But you can…” Fili says petulantly.

“Balin an’ I were introduced to ‘im in the Shire, ye spoilt brat.”

Fili and Kili huff before Kili makes grabby hands at Dwalin.

“Can I hold ‘im?”

“If he lets ye.”
With that Dwalin sets Bilbo down. Bilbo stares at the Dwarfling for a moment before darting between his legs and out of the common room, chittering as he goes.

“Aww!”

He was no house pet, thank you very much.

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On the tenth day of the Company’s stay, they are subjected to caramel covered onions at lunch, and garlic coated apples at dinner. During the day, Nori’s tools were also nicked and, under intense glares from the Dwarf at Bilbo, returned late that evening with a cheeky grin and covered in garlic.

The princes had also taken to searching for Bilbo’s kit-fox in every nook and cranny they could find. They even managed to catch the Skin-Changer while he was sunbathing on the balcony sometime after lunch, much to his amusement. They kept trying to cajole him into approaching them with pieces of meat and fruits. It was tempting. But he was no dog to be called, nor a cat to be tricked into one’s lap.

However, they persisted, and it was becoming more of a bother than entertaining. With a put-upon sigh, around the time that dinner was being prepared, he approaches them slowly and takes the offered treats, letting them -magnanimously- pet him as he snacked. As long as they don’t pull his tail or ears, or mess with his fur, he can allow them this.

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That night, Bilbo is sorely regretting allowing the brats any leeway. After dinner -of which he was absent from much to Kíli’s distress- the youngling had found him, once again, while he was hiding out in another obscure place as not to be found. As he is being carried to the Company’s “camp” in Kíli’s arms, he tries to figure out how the youngling keeps finding him. What was he, a bloodhound?

“Fíli! I’ve found him!” Kíli announces as he enters.

“Who? Our Burglar?” Thorin asks from his place off to the side out of Kíli’s sight.

The youngling freezes before slowly turning his head to face his Uncle, hiding Bilbo in his arms.

“Er… No… I can’t find Bilbo anywhere….”

“He said he was busy today,” Dwalin says from his seat beside Balin.

“How convenient,” the Dwarrow King sneers.

“What’s that supposed te mean?” Dwalin growls back.

“It’s no secret your Hobbit prefers the company of Elves over Dwarrow, Dwalin. He only shows himself at meals and when his presence is required when the Elven Lord tries to read the map. With how often he is ‘busy’, one would think he was conspiring with them to impede our quest.”

“It’s not like the rest of ye have made him feel welcome,” Dwalin snaps. “Especially you, Thorin, always grumpin’ and growlin’ at the lad. He’s not done anythin’ te ye aside from joining us on this quest.”

“I wouldn’t need to put him in line if he listened to my orders!”

Before Dwalin can reply, loud shrieking yaps come from the kit-fox standing on Kíli’s head; which
was slowly gaining back its raven hue.

“What in Mahal—” Thorin begins to say, majestic glare directed at the creature.

The beast shrieks even louder, back arching and fur puffed out before it quiets. The Dwarrow King opens his mouth to speak, and the shrieking begins again until his mouth shuts. Balin, from his seat beside Dwalin, starts chuckling at the commotion, for every time his King opened his mouth, Bilbo would screech at him until Thorin erupted over the caterwauling.

“What in Mahal is that creature!”

Once his Hobbit brother quiets does Balin answer.

“That is a kit-fox, and he belongs te Bilbo. From what Dwalin and I can gather, he’s followed us here from the Shire.”

Thorin opens his mouth and more shrieks follow.

“An’ he seems not te like ye talkin’, Thorin,” the white-haired consigliere chuckles.

“I care not for what that creature wants! Why is it here?”

“He followed our brother here,” Dwalin huffs as the shrieks morph into yapping.

“Then have your Hobbit send it back! We don’t need him worrying about his pet on our travels,” he snarls over the yapping.

“The stubborn beastie would just keep followin’ him. He’s not a tamed dog, Thorin, he does what he wants,” Dwalin drawls drawing his King’s frustrated glare.

Deciding to ignore the debate going on about the kit-fox, Kíli drags Bilbo down from atop his head and rubs his ears, effectively quieting the Skin-Changer, much to his chagrin despite his coos at how delightful it feels. The Dwarfling pokes at his earring with a questioning hum, pulling back his fingers when Bilbo snaps at them with a growl. The Dwarfling has enough sense to leave it be and continue stroking his large ears.

Balin chuckles even more.

“Seems ye have a magic touch, Kíli.”

The youngling beams at him before making his way over to his brother, whose majestic pouting was becoming grumpier the longer Kíli got to handle the kit-fox. As soon as Kíli was close, Fíli scoops the ball of fluffy mush from his brother’s arms and takes over in the petting. Despite the indignity of the entire situation, Bilbo wasn’t about to extract himself from it. It has been too long since any non-Elf would touch his other skin without violence involved…

He is jolted from his more dire thoughts as the prince’s move about, setting up their bedding and then flopping down upon them with him between them, cooing at him and declaring they would look after him when Bilbo was away. He hears Dwalin snort in laughter. Buggering sod was enjoying his predicament, but he wasn’t a kit-fox for nothing. Once the youngling’s and the rest of the Company were fast asleep and Thorin had retreated to his quarters, Bilbo slips from between the two miniature fire pits and slips out of the room.

Not before setting up a bit of mischief for the Majestic Sod come morning, of course.
Muffled roars of rage greet Bilbo as he enters the Company’s ‘camp’ on the eleventh morning of their stay.

“What’s going on?” he asks as he sidles up to Balin.

“I’m not sure. Thorin seems unable to leave his quarters,” Balin sighs.

“Can he not operate a door handle?”

Balin gives him a flat look as a heavy thud hits the door.

“What? It’s a perfectly valid question! He can’t even navigate the Shire, Balin. It only has two roads!”

The look doesn’t leave his elder brother’s face as he continues to stare. Eventually, Bilbo averts his eyes with a pout. Damn his pack instincts ceding to an elder, ugh!

“What are you staring at?” Thorin snaps, red in the face as he clambers to his feet.

“Nothing really…” Bilbo drawls with a roll of his eyes. “Just a Dwarf who seems to have drawn the ire of the trickster spirit is all.”

“That being said, I think I’ll extract myself from your kingly presence. Don’t want your bad luck rubbing off on me when I’m the one stealing from a great scaly beast,” he says as he backs away from the gaping Dwarf. “By the way, Balin, I’ll be indisposed today as well. I’ll stop in for lunch.”

The white-haired Dwarf nods at the Hobbit, and taking that as his permission to leave, passes through the Company and exits the room.

When Bilbo steps onto the balcony for lunch, he is immediately accosted by Nori, red in the face, and huffing like a bull.

“I know ye’ve taken it, now where is it?”

“Where’s what?”

“My money, ye sneak thief!”

“Ah, that. I’ll give it back once you’ve returned all of the ‘keepsakes’ you’ve nicked,” the Hobbit drawls, hardly intimidated by the star-haired Dwarf.
“It’s not like they’ll notice ‘um missin’,” Nori sniffs.

Bilbo stares at the Dwarf and Nori squirms after a few moments.

“Alright, fine!”

The Dwarf holds his hand out for his coin purse, to which the Hobbit looks down and then back at his fellow Thief’s face.

“I do believe I’ll hand it over after you have returned my friend’s belongings,” he says as he steps around the gob-smacked Dwarf before continuing in a lower tone. “Though I won’t be opposed to you keeping the items made in the Second Age. Those are horrible. Just know I’ll be looking at your stash before I hand over anything.”

The Hobbit pointedly ignores his fellow Thief’s glares all throughout the meal.

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On the twelfth night of the Company’s stay with Lord Elrond, a breakthrough occurs. Accompanying Balin, Gandalf, and the Majestic Sod to Narsil’s room, Bilbo can feel his magic flicker beneath his skin in what feels like apprehension. Something is going to happen tonight. Something that would set forces in motion. He hates the feeling. Nothing good ever came out of his magic ever feeling this way.

He narrows his eyes at the map held in Elrond’s hands as his friend holds it up in the moonlight.

“I do believe tonight we will finally have our answers, Thorin Oakenshield. These runes were written on a midsummer’s eve on a crescent moon nearly two hundred years ago. It appears that it was fate for you to come to Rivendell, Thorin Oakenshield. Had the Orcs not chased you into my home, you would have missed this opportunity to have them read,” Elrond says as he passes between Bilbo and the Dwarrow King. “Come, what is needed to read them is further into my home than I’m sure any of you aside from Bilbo have explored.”

The Elven Lord leads them through the long hallways and twisting corners of his home until they are passing from wooden structures into a carven stone hallway. The hallway slopes upward and is lined with delicate Elven lanterns to light their way. The sound of falling water and a brisk breeze greets them as they pass through. Bilbo breathes in the refreshing smell. He always did like coming up here to enjoy the view of the valley below, the crystal embedded in the stone just made the atmosphere more serene as it reflected light against the rocks.

Elrond approaches the crystal and places the map upon it. Bilbo trots over to stand at his left, Gandalf beside him and Thorin at Elrond’s right. Balin stands off to the side and observes the four of them.

The clouds move and the night’s moon casts light down onto them through the spray of the waterfall. The crystal alights, and slowly runes begin to appear on the map. Only when they are fully visible does Elrond speak.

“Stand by the gray stone when the thrush knocks and the setting sun with the last light of Durin’s Day will shine upon the keyhole.”

“Durin’s Day?” Bilbo asks, looking up at Elrond.

“It is the start of the Dwarrows’ new year,” Gandalf answers.

“This is ill news. Summer is passing; Durin’s Day will soon be upon us!” Thorin says as his hands
“There’s still time,” Balin says.

“Time for what? Are we on a time schedule now?” Bilbo asks his brother, looking around the wizard to see him.

“Te open the door. We have te be in exactly the right place at exactly the right time. Only then can the doors be opened.”

Bilbo stares at his brother, eyes wide as he speaks, and tries to motion him to be quiet to no avail. Of all people to reveal their quest, it would be Balin to do so in his excitement.

“So this is your quest? To enter the mountain?” Elrond says, as close to furious as Bilbo has ever seen him.

“What of it?” Thorin sneers with his head held high.

“Some would not deem it wise,” the Elven Lord says, handing the map to the Dwarrow King before setting a hand on Bilbo’s shoulder.

“What do you mean?” Gandalf asks as Elrond turns to leave with Bilbo, his hand clenching the Hobbit’s shirt.

“You are not the only Guardian to stand watch over Arda, Mithrandir,” he snaps before nearly dragging Bilbo away with him.

“Elrond! Slow down! I’m not bloody six feet tall,” Bilbo growls as he is pulled down the hall behind the Elf’s trailing robes.

His friend stops, Bilbo nearly running into his legs, and looks up. The Elf’s eyes are stony, and his mouth is pinched. He drops his gaze to his small friend.

“And yet you have agreed to face a dragon exponentially larger. Your last dealing with Dwarves nearly left you skinless and dead!”

“Dwar-”

Bilbo snaps his mouth shut and drops his gaze to the stone floor as the Elf plows on.

“You had sworn off any further interactions with them. What is so special about this group that would make you break that oath to yourself?”

Bilbo takes a deep breath, thinking carefully as to answer his friend; he deserved that much as the Hobbit was mostly sure he would not return from this journey alive. He thought of his home in the Shire; of his armchair, his books, and garden. He was fortunate enough to have someplace to return to; the Dwarrows’ hearts -though making a life in Ered Luin- were forever with Erebor and no place but Erebor would ever be home.

“Their home was taken from them. My brothers, the Dwarflings… Erebor is their home and if Gandalf thinks that I can help them take it back, I will. They deserve a home, Elrond.”

“They have Ered Luin do they not?”

“And you have lived in Lothlórien, but it wasn’t home was it?” Bilbo snarls. “You returned to Rivendell as soon as you could.”
“That is not the same.”

“Isn’t it?”

“There was no dragon to keep me from returning!”

Elrond’s voice echoes against the walls. Bilbo and Elrond stare at each other in the shadows of the hall.

“I have to try,” Bilbo whispers.

Elrond’s face slowly falls in resignation as he continues to gaze at his Hobbit friend. His friend whose heart was so giving, yet always receiving so little, especially from Dwarves. Vague images had been plaguing his dreams of late, terror and pain were prominent, but he knew Bilbo’s presence on this quest held the course of history in the balance. One image he could see clearly through the darkness he held onto with all his heart.

“You will return to us, maen rusc,” Elrond demands as he rests his hands upon Bilbo’s shoulders. (clever fox)

“I will endeavor to.”

“Bilbo—”

“You know I can’t guarantee it, Elrond. Don’t ask for something I can’t control.”

Elrond sighs, kneeling before the Hobbit, and pulls him into an all-encompassing embrace.

“This quest will change you, but you are a survivor, draug huinnen. We will see you again, though I ask you not mention where your quest leads you to my sons. They would follow.” (wolf heart)

“The thought had not crossed my mind.”

Elrond stands tall once more with a sad smile upon his regal face, hands lingering on Bilbo’s shoulders before he turns and continues down the hall. Bilbo watches him go until he has long walked out of sight. He lingers for a time before the footsteps of Gandalf, Thorin and Balin start echoing in the hall. The wizard must have held them back knowing Elrond would have words with him.

Meddling old badger…

Bilbo walks around Rivendell, taking in the fresh air and just wandering mindlessly. Elrond’s confidence that he would survive to return here was heartening but foreboding. He has known of his friend’s gift of foresight, though never understood how exactly it worked. If Elrond said they would see each other again, then he would believe him. That he only referred to Bilbo is what the Hobbit was worrying about. He would not let his brothers or the Dwarflings perish on this quest if he could do something about it he vows to himself as his feet lead him to the training arena.

“Brother!” comes Dwalin’s voice from the grounds.

Looking over, it seems his brother had been training, but not overly long. Bilbo grins at Dwalin, long and foxlike. Dwalin pauses in his approach, his expression suddenly apprehensive. As he should be, Bilbo thinks as he descends the stairs. He still has some retribution to meet out for that fiasco with the
trolls that his brother didn’t allow him to finish.

“Come now brother, I promised you some matches while we were here.”

Dwalin grunts keeping a wary eye on the Hobbit as he passes and heads towards the wooded area near the grounds.

“Shall we?” Bilbo asks, looking over his shoulder. “You do owe me compensation, remember?”

“Aye,” Dwalin sighs out with resignation as he follows.

Bilbo skips leisurely ahead with a feral grin on his face.

The next day the Company is in a more cheerful mood than usual. Well, aside from Dwalin. Poor sod was limping and growling at the princes whenever they bothered him and snarling and glaring at Bilbo as he steps into the room, lookingquestioningly at Balin as he comes to sit beside the Dwarf.

“What’s going on?”

“We’ll be leavin’ at sunup tomorrow. Most of the lads are keen to be gone from here.”

Bilbo huffs in exasperation.

“It’s like none of you can appreciate a warm place to sleep and food at the ready.”

“Oh we can appreciate it plenty!” Bofur cries out, a cup of what Bilbo assumes to be Elven wine in one hand. “Just no’ so much iffin’ it’s from Elves.”

“Well you’re certainly taking advantage of their hospitality…”

“Oh aye!”

The Hobbit rolls his eyes at the miner as he pulls out his pipe to watch the Dwarrow pack. They were an interesting group to observe whenever the nip of excitement was on their heels.

“Have you already packed?” Comes the Dwarrow King’s voice behind and off to the side of him.

Bilbo casts his gaze over his shoulder and levels the Dwarf with a flat look.

“Why would I have already packed when I have just learned of our departure?”

Thorin levels a glare at the Hobbit. The creature’s complete lack of respect for his station and his disregard for his orders have been grating on his nerves while being entirely refreshing. It was a frustrating state of being for him.

“We leave at dawn. I suggest you pack,” he says.

“And alert the Elves of it? I hardly think that wise, your Majesty,” he says as he returns his gaze to the rest of the Company.

The Company that was not so subtly eavesdropping on their conversation.

“Elrond and his sons visit my rooms often enough that if I were to pack, they would know we’re about to be on our way. They may just even post guards at the doors,” the Halfling says before
Thorin could get a word in. “No, I’ll pack before I retire. They, at least, know better than to interrupt my sleep.”

Thorin does not dispute the Hobbit’s statement to the astonishment of the others. Usually, their King would fight the Hobbit on any and everything he saw as a slight against him. The King saw their looks and nearly rolls his eyes at them. In this case, he could see the wisdom in the Burglar’s words. He would let it slide, this time.

“Dwalin, why are you limping?” he calls out upon seeing the state of the Dwarf.

“Was sparing last night,” his Guardsman grumbles.

“You know better than to spar with Dori before we depart,” Thorin chastises the guard.

“It wasn’t me!”

“T’was a prank of that trickster’s, Thorin,” Dwalin growls at his King.

“I did not think any of its pranks were malicious.”

“I mayhap stumbled over some things…”

Thorin stares at Dwalin for a moment in disbelief, completely missing the dangerous smirk that was upon Bilbo’s face—though, with his back to him, the Majestic Sod wouldn’t have seen it anyway—before turning away and re-entering his quarters. He was very much done with the trickster’s nonsense.

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Bilbo strolls around near the veranda by the Company’s room listening to them laugh and tease each other as they snack on sausages and other tidbits. He sighs when the groan of wooden furniture reaches his ears.

“Bombur!”

The crack of broken furniture and their raucous laughter makes Bilbo sigh even harder in exasperation as he looks over the stairway at the Dwarf. He continues up the stairs, enjoying the night air and the beauty of Rivendell under the light of the moon. He pauses at the top, looking over at the pantheon where the White Council were known to gather when he hears Gandalf from below.

“Well of course I was going to tell you! I was just waiting for a chance to do so. And really, I think you can trust that I know what I am doing,” come the wizard’s disgruntled voice.

“Do you? That dragon has slept for sixty years! What will happen if this plan of yours fails? If you wake that beast?” Elrond snaps, and Bilbo does not envy the wizard at all.

Elrond’s temper could run quite hot compared to his brethren.

“And what if we succeed?” he argues. “If the Dwarrows take back Erebor our defenses in the East will be strengthened!”

“It is a dangerous move, Mithrandir!”

“It is also dangerous to do nothing!”

Bilbo throws his gaze over his shoulder as footsteps come up behind him. He meets the gaze of the
Dwarrow King as he comes up the stairs, the Dwarf’s face impassive and eyes flinty. Bilbo only narrows his gaze at the King before gazing back at Elrond and Gandalf.

“Oh, come now, the throne of Erebor is Thorin’s birthright! What is it you fear?”

“Have you forgotten? A strain of madness runs deep in that family. Thrór lost his mind, and Thrain succumbed to the same sickness! Can you swear Thorin Oakenshield will not also fall under its sway?” Elrond says with vindication before dropping his voice. “Can you swear Bilbo will not become a victim once again to Dwarven greed?”

Bilbo casts his gaze back to the Dwarrow King, watching as the Dwarf’s gaze falls, fear and doubt flickering behind those blue eyes before he can see his face no more.

“Gandalf, these decisions do not rest with us alone. It is not up to either of us to redraw the map of Arda!”

“With or without our help, the Company of Thorin Oakenshield will march upon the mountain. They’re determined to reclaim their homeland, and I do not think Thorin Oakenshield feels that he is answerable to anyone but his people.”

His friends step beyond his range of hearing, but not before Bilbo catches the snarky remark Gandalf throws at Elrond.

“Nor for the matter am I!”

The Hobbit chuckles to himself and turns to leave when a large hand grips his arm. Startled, he bares his teeth at the King much to the Dwarf’s surprise.

“Yes?” Bilbo hisses at him.

The Dwarf takes a moment to speak, removing his hand before he does.

“If you have not packed, do so now. We leave in an hour, no later.”

With that said, the Dwarf makes his way down the stairs, turning the corner to join the Company.

“Get dressed and gather your things. We leave in an hour!”

Bilbo twitches his nose and sighs. He would have enjoyed nothing more than to stay for a while longer, but duty calls. With one last look at the pantheon, he darts down the stairs and slips into the shadows of the halls, shifting skin and making his way to his quarters.

He packs his things and tidies his room, gazing longingly at the bed before he slips out with nary a sound and once more shifting into his Kit-Fox skin, traveling through the shadows back to the Company’s quarters. He shifts again before the door and slips inside, making his way over to Balin who sits beside his bags on one of the couches.

“There ye are brother! Thorin was just startin’ te look antsy at your absence.”

“I hardly took thirty minutes,” Bilbo huffs.

“Aye, but I’m sure ye’ve heard his paranoia. I think he fears ye’d rat us out before we could leave.”

“Of that I have no doubt.”

“Master Baggins!” Thorin calls out upon seeing him. “You’re familiar with these halls. You’ll lead
us out of this place.”

Bilbo’s lips curl up in a sneer, but he does not argue with the Majestic Sod. It’s not like he was wrong. At the top of the hour, Thorin orders everyone up and with a jerk of his head sends Bilbo to the front of the line they’ve formed. Grumbling under his breath of snotty Kings and directionless Dwarrow, the Hobbit leads them through Rivendell’s halls, taking the barely used backways to lead them to the hidden path that cut into the Wilds. Bilbo falls into the middle of the line as they traverse the narrow path, falling between Fíli and Kíli much to the younger prince’s glee. The sun slowly rises to cast light upon the valley as the hours pass by.

“Be on your guard. We’re about to step over the Edge of the Wilds.”

Thorin steps onto an outcropping of rock as Balin comes closer.

“Balin, you know these paths. Lead on.”

“Aye,” his brother chuckles causing Bilbo to smirk as well.

The poor sod obviously did not know where to go from here.

A glance between the trees and Bilbo knows the Valley will be at its most glorious in the morning light and can’t help but pause and turn to look upon it. Inhaling the sweet air, he feels his restless soul find some measure of peace, only to have it tarnished just a moment later.

“Master Baggins! I suggest you keep up,” the Majestic Sod says haughtily.

As if he hadn’t been keeping up or passing them at all between Bree and here. With a sniff he turns and continues walking, a wide grin spreading across his face as a thought comes to him.

“I wonder if Gandalf got my present,” he muses aloud, Óin throwing a confused glance back at him.

Bilbo chuckles and merely shakes his head.

The next time he sees that barmy wizard will be interesting indeed!

Chapter End Notes

Khuzdul and Sindarin/Quenyan translations in order of appearance just in case you missed the superscript versions in the chapter:

_Lastannem i athrannedh i Vruinen._ - We heard you had crossed into the Valley.

_Ifridi bekâr!_ - All to arms!

_Mellon nûn! Mo evînedh?_ - My friend! Where have you been?

_Farannem ‘lamhoth i udul o charad. Dagannem rim na iant Vedui._ - We’ve been hunting a pack of Orcs that came up from the South. We slew a number near the Hidden Pass.

_Hîr Elrond! Ten annaîë acca anann!_ - Lord Elrond! It has been too long!

_Tol dadwendh ammen, i draug huinnen!_ - You have come back to us, my wolf heart!
Istad uin sui ne eneth. - You know I do not like that name.

<Hi, hautael brêg i aew di rhaw naugrim. Iestnyë ma aes fileg maetha hain! - Now, cease your lively bantering with these untamed Dwarrows. I want some roast bird for dealing with them!

Quëa hîn? - Vegetables for them?

Na thel-pân! - By all means!

Nartho i noer, toltho i viruvor. Boe i annam vann a... nethail vin. - Light the fires, fetch the miruvor (wine). We must give food to... our guests.

maen rusc - clever fox

honegmen - our little brother

Honeg! - Little Brother!

aes fileg - roast bird

Mahidini! - Halt! (plural)

barâg - brats

asur-khuzd - sour Dwarf

faran - South
Interlude I: Fundin, son of Farin

Chapter Summary

So how did Bilbo come to meet Fundin? Dwalin shuffles through the letters Fundin had sent him over the years, imagining and trying to piece together how his brother he had never met had come to be so important to his father and to himself with only penned words to guide him.

(This takes place after Fundin's funeral.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Letter #1

April 23, 2802 T.A.

Dwalin,

I pray to Mahal this letter finds you well. We are currently a month and some weeks away from Ered Luin and making good time. The weather of Eriador is milder than that of Rhovanion, and for that I am grateful. I’m currently in Bree though by the time this finds you, we may well be halfway there.

I write this not to regale you with our progress; however I found myself writing of it anyway. I write to retell a strange meeting I had. Have you heard of Tharkûn? If not, ask your brother, I’ll not go into explanation here. Tharkûn and a companion of his have come to call on me, and what a strange creature he brings with him! A Hobbit! One barely beyond his majority and so full of grief, Dwalin. Near so much as I for our beloved Raala...

Tharkûn brings him to me as a guard, and I have my doubts. The lad looked so befuddled when I asked whether he used an axe or sword! Oh, he snapped at me for that! But he has a sharp tongue, and a spine of Mithril or I’m not a Dwarf. Should you ever meet, do not call him ‘Halfling’. He’s likely to rake your arse over the coals and shave your beard for it too.

Of what I’ve seen, he’ll make an exceptional scout though. We’ll see what else the lad has to offer. Besides, Tharkûn accompanies him, and I’ll not be fool enough to turn the man’s services away.

Send your brother my regards. He’ll not appreciate a letter from me unless it contains some trade agreement or such, the ungrateful wretch!

Mahal be with you both,

Fundin, son of Farin

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When Tharkûn presented the Halfling to be a guard for his caravans, he didn’t know what to think. The wizard and the lad had suddenly appeared in his room at the Prancing Pony without invitation and started talking. Well, Tharkûn had, the Halfling seemed content to let the Gray Wizard talk. He
was young but passed his majority according to Gandalf, and in need of an adventure.

“I don’ see how he can guard anyone, Tharkûn,” he says as he looks the Halfling up and down. “He’s skinny as a rail…”

The lad was thin, thinner than any Hobbit he has ever seen, and unlike his kin, was here and looking around with narrowed green eyes, taking in everything he sees.

And remembering, he thinks as he watches the Halfling observe him in turn, those green eyes lingering on spots where he has his weapons longer than others, his nose twitching. That he had any knowledge of hidden weapons at all was astonishing!

“I have found Hobbits to be surprising creatures,” Gandalf says lightly, ignoring his observation. “Young Bilbo especially.”

“A caravan is no place for one so small.”

“Says the Dwarf only half a foot taller than I with Dwarflings running around the caravan no doubt,” comes a snarling reply from the Halfling. “If this is how you treat those willing to aid you, I think my services will be better put to use elsewhere.”

Fundin stare at the Hobbit in shock as the wizard’s staff connects with the back of the lad’s legs; eyes glaring down at him.

“Apologize!”

The Hobbit glares up at the wizard, baring his teeth -the lad seemed a might feral in his opinion-, before returning his gaze to Fundin with tight lips and a resigned look about him.

“I apologize for my manners,” he says with a stiff bow. “I was raised by wolves apparently.”

Fundin snorts out a surprised laugh as Gandalf sighs in exasperation. Surprising creature indeed!


“What?”

“I can’t be takin’ on any kiss-arse who would ask te guard our caravans, Halfling. But ye’ve a steel spine an’ fire in yer eyes. Ye’ll do I think.”

“I am half of nothing!” the lad hisses; eyes flinty and looking to jump him if he were to guess; he takes a step back in surprise at the lad’s vehemence.

Gandalf steps between them with wary eyes.

“I’d refrain from calling him that,” the wizard says, eyeing the lad. “It is a high insult among Hobbits.”

Fundin hums in understanding as he eyes the Hobbit as well.

“My apologies.”

The Hobbit huffs but says no more though his eyes say more than enough. The Hobbit was an angry wee thing indeed. He takes to ignoring the wizard -who continues on speaking after his apology- and looks more closely at the lad. Anger and despair rage behind those verdant eyes and Fundin found
himself understanding a bit more.

“- though I find it irrelevant -he is helping you after all- Bilbo was adamant you know.”

“Eh?”

“Were you not listening to a word I said?” the wizard huffs.

“He was busy staring at me.”

“Indeed!”

Fundin glares at Tharkûn, nose twitching his beard much to the Hobbit’s amusement if the twitch of his lips is anything to go by.

“If ye’ll say it once more, Tharkûn, I will pay attention this time.”

The wizard huffs in irritation and casts his gaze down at the lad.

“Perhaps a demonstration would be more suited.”

“Lazy ol’ badger,” the Hobbit grumbles.

Between one second and the next, where the Hobbit stood now sits a creature even smaller. Fundin’s hand twitches to his axe’s hilt, but he pulls himself under control quickly enough. Not quick enough to not escape the… creature’s notice, however. It stands on all fours, eyes darting around, planning where it could run.

“Peace… lad. Ye just surprised me,” he says as he lowers his hand and moves to take a seat at the table. “So yer a Skin-Changer? Now there’s a rare being. No wonder yer a tad feral.”

“His feral baring has nothing to do with his lineage, Fundin. Not with him.”

“An’ why’s that?”

“He’s not like other Skin-Changers. He’s somewhat… unique.”

“Aye?” Fundin says looking at the wizard speculatively.

“This is taking too long,” comes the Hobbit’s voice suddenly.

Both Fundin’s and Gandalf’s eyes snap to the lad now clad in his own skin again.

“I have more than one skin is what this barmy wizard is leading up to.”

“Tha’s not possible,” the Dwarf says with a shake of his head.

“Believe what you want, I’ll not be showing it off anyway.”

“Then ye can’t prove anythin’ either.”

“I loathe my second skin, Master Dwarf,” the Hobbit snarls, his eyes suddenly golden and slit like a cat’s. “If I am not forced to, I will not shift into it.”

“Calm, Bilbo,” Gandalf says as he lays a weathered hand on the Hobbit’s shoulder. “No one is forcing you to do anything.”
He flashes a pointed look at Fundin who slowly inclines his head in understanding. A vindictive little thought that his eldest son would be proud of his use of discretion flits through his mind.

“I expect ye’ll show me at some point, lad,” he says, shifting around in his chair. “Now, axe or sword?”

The Hobbit looks utterly bewildered at his question.

“What?” He stutters out.

“I’m speakin’ plain Westron, laddie. I’d like te know what ye use.”

“Neither,” the Hobbit drawls with a roll of his eyes after regaining his composure. “Seeing as a majority of those weapons are far larger and heavier than I, it should be obvious what weapons I would use.”

“Butter knives?” Fundin can’t help but poke at the wee creature.

“Among other things,” the lad says with nary a pause.

Oh, he liked this lad!

“I’ll take ye on for a season an’ we’ll see how ye do, lad,” Fundin laughs. “We’ve made camp off the road west of here. I expect ye at sunrise so I can introduce ye te the lads. Don’ want them tryin’ te poke ye with their pointy swords.”

Bilbo rolls his eyes, but a smile blooms across his face and Fundin can’t help but feel a bit proud. Obviously the lad was in need of a few good laughs, and hopefully, his people could provide that for him as they came to know each other.

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Bilbo remains in his employ throughout the prime traveling seasons of that first year. After that first go-round, Bilbo had proven to be more than exceptional in his role as ‘scout’ and Fundin didn’t even think not to ask the lad to return when the next caravan was set to travel. As he traveled with him and his chosen guards, they all had come to know one another over the year and enjoyed each others company immensely. The Hobbit had proven to be able to give as well as he got and then some and kept the lads on their toes during training. He was a joy to have around, and Fundin could not be more glad for his decision to accept the lad under his employ.

As the days bled into the next year and the weather begins to grow colder, a late caravan decides to travel, and Fundin did not even consider leaving Bilbo behind.

So of course, that’s when everything went sideways.

Chapter End Notes

So Interlude I... What do you think? Keep these within the Story Skin Deep or separate it into another story in the timeline? Let me know what you think!
Chapter Summary

In which Dwarrow Kings are absolute sods and Goblins, Orcs, Wargs, and Riddles are a thing.

Chapter Notes

So here is chapter nine! The moment many of you have all been waiting for is here! Read and let me know what you think of this chapter and another bonus! Another Interlude chapter follows this one!

P.S.: Orcish and Quenya may be wrong! If you have better translations, message me and I'll fix it! I'm a noob with these languages and trying my best T-T.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two days travel from Rivendell and Bilbo trails behind Balin at the back of the line as they traverse the plains and forests, chatting with Bofur as they walk -the Dwarf had warmed up to him after teaching him some more Hobbit drinking songs. He was keeping his ears and nose open to any changes on the wind and being in the middle of this gaggle of Dwarrows would block what he was trying to keep track of and put him out of sorts being surrounded by so many weapons. Without ponies, this journey was going to take twice as long, foot-bound as they were; and now they were on a deadline...

Their hunters would find the trail eventually. How they were going to outpace the Orcs and their Wargs was beyond Bilbo, unless, of course, the Majestic Sod decides to have them walking late into the night. Bilbo wouldn’t be able to hold his tongue if that becomes a reality he decides. Dwarflings and Hobbits need their sleep, after all, sod what the others thought or the danger following them. They’d be slaughtered quickly if they did not get enough rest.

“We’ll make camp here,” Thorin calls out, the sun beginning to set as he ushers them into the cover of a sparse copse of trees. “Fili, Kili, gather some firewood. Master Baggins, see if you can get us some venison. I’d rather not cut into our stores until we have no choice.”

Bilbo stares at the Dwarf with narrow eyes. Despite the rest and general avoidance of the King in Rivendell, being back in the wilds, hunted, and with the Dwarf demanding and shouting orders at him left and right, Bilbo finds himself having to keep his temper in check more so than he had before visiting his friends in the Valley. Before he can snark at the King, Dwalin marches up to him and grabs him by his arm, dragging him further into the trees.

“Alright, alright! Stop dragging me you great lump!” the Company can hear Bilbo shout at the
Guardsman.

The Company stares after them silently until they could hear them no more, going about their own chores to settle down for the night. They were all silently wondering when the Halfling would crack and have a go at their King, or leave them to fend for themselves. Considering the Hobbit was the one keeping their stores stocked, none of them truly wanted to see him go.

“Ye could, maybe, ask him te do things,” Balin says casually as he passes his King.

Thorin merely grunts and sits himself down on a nearby log, taking out his pipe and stuffing it with tobacco. Balin huffs but says no more. Trying to get his King to be polite to someone he has deemed useless was an action in futility.

“Seems our brother will be winning our wager after all,” the advisor grumbles under his breath.

“Wager?” comes Nori’s voice from behind him.

It is a testament of how accustomed he has become to random voices appearing behind him since Bilbo joined the Company that he doesn’t startle as badly as he used to.

“Nori.”

Balin lights his pipe and watches as Bombur and Bofur look through the supplies for the spices.

“What wager would be had between brothers, eh?”

The thief sits himself down beside the elder Dwarf, leaning close as if discussing conspiracies.

“Exactly that, a wager between brothers.”

He doesn’t have to look at the Dwarf to know he was squinting his eyes at him.

“No room te sweeten the pot?”

“No.”

Nori huffs with a roll of his eyes, pulling back from Balin’s space and moodily lighting his own pipe.

“Not like I’d tell anyone,” he grumbles. “I actually like yer brother. He’s got fire an’ a brain on him. Helps tha’ he saved Ori, ye know?”

Balin hums noncommittally and continues to smoke, eyes wandering to where Dwalin and Bilbo disappeared into the trees.

“Nimble fingers too.”

“Ye’d know, wouldn’t ye.”

Nori hums back as Balin had, causing the Dwarf to smirk around his pipe.

“I’d keep an eye on ‘im though. He might nick somethin’ off our illustrious leader jes’ te spite him.”

“If he does, ye know who’ll be blamed.”

“Aye, but it’ll be amusin’ te watch!”

Balin huffs in exasperated amusement as the young princes return with the firewood. Bombur and
Bofur totter forward and get a fire pit started, the flames warming the camp with its light and heat.

Sometime later -so long that Thorin was becoming irritated enough to send out a search party- Bilbo and Dwalin arrive with their catch.

“I did not ask for so many,” Thorin growls at the Hobbit as he sets down one of the stags he was dragging, stomping up to stand before him with his arms crossed.

“You told me bring you some venison, not bring you one stag,” Bilbo says flatly, posture stiff and eyes shifting about as he drops the other one. “Dwalin got into the spirit of things and brought you some conies. Be grateful.”

“This is too much-”

“You think both of these are for your lot? Master Dwarf, one of the stags is for me.”

“You cannot possibly eat all of it. It will go to waste!”

“You obviously have forgotten how much a Hobbit eats,” Bilbo drawls as he pulls out a knife from somewhere on his person and begins to skin a stag right at Thorin’s feet, head tilted just so; eyes never wandering, but the hair on Thorin’s neck pricks like he’s being watched. “There a flask of water about, Bofur?”

“Aye, comin’ right up!” the jolly Dwarf says with a smile and a twinkle in his eyes as a flask flies through the air.

The Hobbit catches it with one hand, turning to glower at Bofur who winks cheekily at the Halfling.

“You needn’t have tossed it at me,” Bilbo grumbles as he sets his knife down and cleans away the blood from the corpse.

Thorin steps back as some of the bloodied waste splashes about. The Hobbit snorts but continues his work. The Dwarf glowers down at the vexing creature who refuses to concede ground to royalty.

After the Hobbit has prepared his stag and the other one for the Company, Thorin watches in mute fascination as the small creature proceeds to devour all of the venison from his kill. Though as the meat is still a bit red with some of the bloody juice running down the Hobbit’s chin, it’s also a disturbing sight… A shiver goes down Thorin’s spine.

“Where does he put it all?” Kíli whispers to his brother as they take seats beside their Uncle, watching in fascination as the creature eats.

“Maybe he has a second stomach?”

“I assure you I have one stomach,” the Hobbit huffs at the princes, who jump at his voice; wiping off his chin with a handkerchief of all things.

The Hobbit was some paces away and they had been sure they were whispering.

“Well it’s not like we know much about Hobbits!” Kíli defends as he comes down from his fright.

Bilbo rolls his eyes and proceeds to ignore them as they start launching questions about Hobbits at him. He instead examines the antlers and the bones of the picked clean buck; for what Thorin can only guess. It’s only when Ori starts inquiring that Bilbo begins answering.

“Hobbits burn through food faster than other races. We need to eat quite often during the day in
order to keep up with all the activity we do or we’d waste away,” he says distractedly as he proceeds to break a bone—the Dwarrows’ eyes widen in surprise—splintering it in half and examines something. “I’ve a higher burn than most so I need to eat more depending on how much work I’ve done.”

“Are… Are we starving you?!” the young scribe squeaks out.

Several of the company, particularly Dori, Óin, Bofur, and Bombur look at them sharply.

The Hobbit snorts before commandeering Bombur’s pot and dumping the stag’s bones into it, breaking those too long to sit completely in the brothy water.

“Why do you think I wander off? It’s certainly not to sight-see.”

“Oh! That’s… That’s good then.”

And so the questioning goes on until the Dwarflings are falling asleep where they sit.

“To bed with you,” Bilbo says with a wave of his hand, pulling one of the broken bones from the pot, trimming the ragged break off with his knife and—to the astonishment of all the Dwarrows there—sucks the marrow right out of the bone.

“You can eat that?”

“We’re not—”

“Bed!”

The princes and Ori scramble away, diving under their blankets and furs and settling down. Within moments they are asleep, and Thorin silently marvels at his nephew’s quick obedience. Bilbo follows soon after ignoring or politely declining some of the Dwarrows questions or offers of drink and chatter. The sooner he got some sleep, the sooner he could wake again and fill his stomach when Dwalin was on watch. Only having three medium-sized, scheduled meals and small snacks throughout the day was not going to be able to keep up with the amount of food he actually needs. He plucks at his clothes which are somewhat looser than they had been when he left the Shire. He’ll be smoking quite a bit of meat in the early morn, he thinks.

Knocking his brother about would also be a good way to digest… and release his pent up hostility…

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Three nights later and a day before they reach the slopes of the Misty Mountains; after another day of fast-paced walking and Kingly insults thrown at him; Bilbo all but drags Dwalin away with the excuse of hunting for another stag or two before they continue into the mountains. When Thorin looks to argue, the Hobbit levels him with the most vicious glare he could manage.

“Unless you want to run out of meat before we reach the other side, then by all means, command me to remain here in your Kingly presence!”

When nothing but silence and the barely muffled laughter from Dwalin answers him, the Hobbit proceeds in dragging his brother out into the woods. They walk in silence for half an hour before they both deem themselves far enough away from camp to let loose.

Dwalin barely has time to react before Bilbo is upon him with daggers drawn.
“Ye little bastard!” he snarls as he manages to pull up his arm to block the blades aimed for his side with his vambrace.

The metals clang as they connect. Bilbo grins wide and feral, left hand suddenly twirling its dagger before slashing up at his face.

“Shite!”

Dwalin jerks back, arm sweeping out and knocking Bilbo in the chest as it pushes him away. It sends him rolling heels over head before he lands on his back, air knocked out of him. He has just enough time to gather his breath and see Dwalin advancing upon him with Grasper and Keeper drawn, a dark glint in his eye.

“Takin’ yer frustration out on me are ye? Well, we can both play that game!”

With an equally feral grin, Dwalin attacks. Rolling back, Bilbo dodges the blades as they bury themselves in the dirt, crouching on all fours, he shifts and lunges at Dwalin, running up his arm and about to bite his brother’s already scarred ear when he’s grabbed by his scruff and tossed far from the Dwarf. He lands lightly on his feet and dashes into the shadows, lips pulling back in a parody of a grin at Dwalin’s cursing when he loses sight of the Hobbit.

“Thought ye wanted a fight, ye wee ferret!”

That got his temper flaring. Darting between the shadows and plants, he circles around behind and darts forward, shifting back with blades drawn and slides between Dwalin’s legs as he twists and swings his axe, the blade singing over his hair. Edges held against his outer arms, they slice through the thick leather on Dwalin’s legs to the flesh below.

Dwalin snarls and back-swings at his back as he scrambles to get out of the way. The blade cuts through his own leather cuirass before he can shift again. He hisses at the pain and shifts, the skin knitting back together with the change as he darts to the left, circling Dwalin who follows, never giving him his back.

“Yer damn ‘fangs’,” Dwalin grunts. “Are goin’ te ruin all meh clothes.”

The Skin-Changer snorts before charging his brother again.

They fight until they are exhausted and littered in bleeding gashes and cuts. One last shove sends Bilbo tumbling backward with a laugh. He lays where he lands, Dwalin shuffling over, heavy-footed and falls in a heap beside him.

“Ye were sloppier than usual,” his Dwarrow brother huffs out as Bilbo shifts one last time, using the last of the energy he dared use to heal and back into his Hobbit skin.

“Yes well I wasn’t *trying* to kill you either.”

“Brat.”

“We’re the same age!”

“Only in Men’s years.”

Bilbo’s laugh echoes in the trees, Dwalin’s own chuckles joining his seconds later.

They rest for ten minutes or so before Bilbo hops to his feet.
“I suppose we should get to hunting then. Can’t have King Grump finding out what we really do on these ‘hunts’ of ours.”

Dwalin rises slowly from the ground with some groaning and hissing, glaring at his Hobbit brother as he snickers.

“Not all of us can heal like ye, ankle biter.”

Bilbo makes an offended noise which Dwalin ignores as he gathers his axes, Bilbo following suit and grabbing the daggers he threw at him at some point during their spar. Eleven in total.

“Where do ye keep them all?”

“Now why would I tell you that?”

Dwalin swats at him halfheartedly as the Hobbit smirks before turning and making his way deeper into the woods. They would have scared off all the game with how loud they were. Bilbo follows along beside him on silent feet and companionable silence.

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The snow hits his calves with every step, and only the hardy, thick skin of his soles and the skin of his legs keep him from freezing his limbs off. They were supposed to wait for Gandalf before traversing the terrain and Bilbo’s blood runs hot beneath his skin as he glares at the Dwarrow King who has pushed them ever onwards.

The air is thin with the cold nipping at his ears and fingers; the younglings shivering a bit beneath their own furs and Bilbo curses his hindsight at not packing more blankets for when the nights are biting and windy. Finding decent shelter in these parts of the mountains was hard, which was why they were to wait for the wizard. He had taken to sleeping in his other skin, shoving up against Dwalin’s neck and shoulder in a tight ball -ignoring his brother’s half-hearted grumbles- or under Balin’s long fluffy beard and waking earlier in order to avoid being missed.

“Where’s your fox, Uncle Bilbo?” Kíli asks one early morning -the lad had taken to calling him Uncle sometime between their entry into the mountains and wading through ridiculous amounts of snow.

“Around,” the Hobbit huffs as he rolls his bedroll up.

“Doesn’t he get cold?”

“We cuddle.”

“... Are you alright?”

Surprised at being asked that question, the Hobbit pauses in his packing and looks at the youngling. Seeing the truly concerned look on the lad’s face, Bilbo sighs and smiles at him wanly.

“Just tired, Kíli,” he says before a horrendous growl erupts from his stomach. “And hungry…”

“Have you been getting enough to eat?”

“Yes.”

The Dwarfling gives him that look; the one that says ‘I don’t believe that, how dare you lie to me’ look he seems to have picked up from Dwalin. Bilbo rolls his eyes skyward before going back to
packing when he is suddenly gripped by strong hands around his sides. He’s embarrassed to say he lets out a definite squeak in surprise.

“I can feel some of your ribs…” the youngling whispers in concern.

“Yes, well, there’s not much around these parts to eat…”

The Dwarfling says nothing to that, and after engulfing the Hobbit in a tight hug, he let’s go and wanders off to finish his own packing, whispering quite furiously with his brother. Bilbo can’t hear what they say over the whistling of the wind against the rocks.

And there wasn’t. There was no game large enough to settle his hunger in this desolate landscape and he couldn’t eat more than his share of the supplies either -though, after his conversation with Kíli, he was finding slightly more food in his rations than he thought he had; he was torn between berating the prince or thanking him. For each night, he travels farther and farther from camp in his Kit-Fox skin than he had ever dared, trying to find enough small prey or plants to fill his growling stomach. By the third week, he had begun to feel his body starting to feed on his fat stores; what little there are at that point; and ignoring the concerned looks Dwalin, Balin, and the princes kept throwing at him every night.

On top of all of this, his brother’s dear King has become more and more biting in his comments and passive-aggressive shite than ever before. That stress certainly wasn’t helping his situation. Punching the wanker on his bloody hawks nose was becoming more appealing by the hour…

So, of course, on the second day of the fourth week, it has to go bloody sideways in a most colossal fashion...

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It starts with pouring rain followed shortly by thunder and lightning and rain once they dropped below the freezing hells from above onto this barely-there path that can’t even be called a path. It was a ledge no matter what Bofur insisted it was. The rain was freezing too, so Bilbo supposes they just dropped into a milder level of the freezing hells...

Milder if not for the wind making the rain even more unbearable. Blowing directly in his face, the poor Hobbit could barely see Bofur two feet in front of him.

“Open yer eyes, lad!” Dwalin shouts over the wind.

Only the close proximity to his brother actually allowed him to hear the wanker yelling in his ear.

“I don’t have scruff covering my eyes, you git!”

Of course, he promptly slips and only Bofur and Dwalin’s grip on him saves him from falling to his death.

Bilbo grips onto Dwalin’s arm with a shaky, white-knuckled hand.

“We must find shelter!” come Thorin’s voice over the wind.

_Oh really? What made you think that, oh King_, Bilbo snarks back in his mind; not like the sod could hear him over the wind.

Dwalin suddenly grips him tight to his side.
“Look out!” he roars.

Out from the gloom and clouds, an enormous boulder flies toward them! With a deafening crash, the boulder collides with the mountainside, raining sharp rocks and gravel down upon them.

“Hold on!” Kíli yells.

When the rocks stop falling, Balin—who was further ahead in the line than Dwalin and Bilbo steps closer to the edge, much to his younger siblings alarm.

“This is no thunderstorm!”

“The lightning says otherwise, brother!” Bilbo roars back at him, to which he is ignored.

“This is a thunder battle!” the older Dwarf snaps pointing off into the distance. “Look!”

Squinting to look through the rain into the darkness of the storm, giant figures rise up out of the very mountains themselves. Fear unlike anything he’s felt in a very long time fills Bilbo’s veins.

“Well bless me!” Bofur exclaims as he too steps closer to the edge. “The legends are true! Giants! Stone giants!”

“Take cover you fool!” Thorin roars at the miner and Kíli and Fíli jerk the crazy lout back against the mountain.

The giant Bilbo watched rise from the rocks tosses a piece of the same mountains; flying passed them at great speed and Bilbo watches in mute fascination as it goes and slams itself into another giant who was ripping itself from the stone.

“Look out, brother!” Glóin cries out to Óin.

The ledge they are on suddenly begins to quake and jolt, and Bilbo has this sinking dread that something very, very bad was about to happen. A great ripping sound cracks through the roaring winds. Bilbo grips onto Dwalin and the stone behind him with all of his strength.

“Kíli!” Fíli suddenly cries out as the ledge jerks. “Grab my hand!”

“What’s happening!” the younger yelps.

“Kíli!”

The Company is suddenly split in two. Riding on the legs of one of the giants.

“Fíli!”

Another giant headbutts theirs the moment it starts to pull free from the rocks. The next few minutes are a blur for Bilbo. All he can concentrate on is gripping tight onto Dwalin and the stone behind him; and it isn’t until they are flying passed the rest of the Company -Thorin, Glóin, Óin, Balin, Bifur, Nori, Dori, and Kíli who had somehow managed to depart from the giant screaming at them to jump, that Bilbo realizes the giant they are on is falling backward. The leg flying on a collision course with the mountainside.

He doesn’t think, only grips onto Dwalin and Bofur, and as the rocks come speeding at them, he shoves the two Dwarves forward as the angle leaves space for them to land. As the giant’s leg pulls away from the mountain, he barely has time to jump, narrowly grabbing onto the ledge and having the wind knocked out of him as his body slams into the rocks. He savagely resists the urge to curl
into himself to try and catch his breath, if he did, he’d lose his grip for sure.

He hears the scrambling steps of the Dwarrows who had been watching helplessly from the path, Thorin crying out in fear.

“No! Fíli!”

As he slowly regains his breath, he can barely see them standing above him through the rain, oblivious to his plight.

“It’s all right! They’re alive!” Glóin calls out to those behind him.

Bilbo grits his teeth in frustration. Forgotten, as usual, he seethes as he floods his magic into his hands, forming claws to try and better grip the stone. He manages to get one elbow up onto the ledge when he hears Bofur cry out.

“Where’s Bilbo?”

Confused murmurs make his ears twitch as he concentrates on trying to keep his grip. His damned pack was weighing him down in his malnourished state and the rain wasn't helping any.

“Where’s the Hobbit?!”

Scrambling steps shift rocks and sends some flying at Bilbo’s hands. He flinches as one hits his head and hisses in pain.

“There!”

“Get him!” Dwalin roars at the Company.

Of course, his grip on the ledge slips and sends him further down before the hands trying to save him can grab him; his own hands and claws digging into the rock the only thing that saves him from falling into the abyss below. Ori’s and Bofur’s faces appear over the edge as they reach down to try and grab him.

“Grab my hand! Bilbo!”

“Ori, be careful!” Dori yells out as he watches his youngest brother try and save the Hobbit.

“Take my hand!” Ori begs Bilbo.

Bilbo grits his teeth, keeping one hand gripping the rock, he does his best to lunge himself upwards with his feet on the rocks. He barely grazes Bofur’s hands before he is falling again. His arm jerks painfully as his weight pulls him down and he grips the stones with his other hand as hard as he can. I’m not dying here, he snarls at himself, his fangs biting into his lips in his frustration and terror.

A hand is suddenly gripping one of his and hauling him up, Bofur and Ori grabbing him tight and pulling him back onto the path. He looks over his shoulder to see Thorin pushing him up before the Dwarf slips himself. To the King's luck, Dwalin is there to grab him before he falls, hauling his King up and over the edge as well.

From his place on his rear between Bofur and Ori, leaning against the mountain wall, he gasps for breath; his heart pounding behind his ribs that are already aching after their encounter with the rocky mountainside. His gaze follows the Dwarrow King, gratitude slowly calming his mind. He begins to speak when Dwalin scoots as close as he can to his brother.
“I thought we’d lost ye, lad.” he says, relief audible in his voice, eyes tight with lingering worry.

“He’s been lost ever since he left home!” Thorin suddenly snaps, eyes sharp and angry as they meet Bilbo’s bewildered gaze. “He should never have come.”

Thunder and the rain are the only sounds for a moment.

“He has no place amongst us.”


“No place?” he says hoarsely before rage gives life to his voice and his limbs.

He scrambles up onto his feet, hands held in tight fists by his side.

“No place?! Who is the one gathering supplies for all of you while on the road?! Hm?! Who is the one preparing said supplies for your consumption?! It certainly isn’t you!”

“You have been nothing but a bu-”

The King doesn’t get to finish his sentence for Bilbo scrambles over the legs of the other Dwarrows and flings himself at the Dwarf, crashing into him with a thud. An audible crunch echos off the stone as the Hobbit and Thorin fall onto the path. Bilbo heaves himself onto his feet and stands over the unmoving Dwarf, shaking out his hand with a feral sneer on his face, one which Dwalin has not seen the likes of directed at his friend and King. Lightning flashes and fangs glint in the light as furious slit yellow eyes stare out from between wet, curly locks at the fallen Dwarf.

“I’ve had enough of your mouth for one day, you pompous arse,” Bilbo snarls, shifting the weight of his pack upon his back, eyes fading back to their vibrant summer green and fangs shrinking.

The rest of the Company all look at the Hobbit in mute shock -well all but Dwalin and Balin, who sighs and shakes his head. They knew their brother was going to snap at some point. But the restraint the Hobbit showed was commendable and, most of all, shocking. Raised around Dwarrows for a good twelve years, some things were bound to rub off, but it seems their penchant for bloody retribution had not.

“Ye can’t just-” Glóin’s furious voice suddenly rings out, but is quickly shut down by the Hobbit.

“Oh, stuff a rock in it!” he snaps. “By your customs, I’m well within my rights to rip him a bloody new one, but I’m not. There are more important things to worry about than your delicate sensibilities, Master Dwarf, so keep it shut and you and Bifur can carry the sod.”

No one moves.

“Well what are you waiting for? An invitation? We need to find shelter!”

Bilbo shifts his gaze to Dwalin.

“I can hear the howling of a cave up ahead. Come, we need to scout it and hopefully make camp before another one of those giants wakes up and takes us all for another ride.”

Dwalin rises to his feet, glancing around at the Company before following the Hobbit. Nori sidles up beside his brother and he overhears the Thief speaking to him.

“Didn’t think ye had it in ye,” Nori says with a grin.
“I’m patient, not a pushover.” Bilbo grumbles as he passes between two stones, an opening revealing itself behind them.

“So I see,” the thief muses contemplatively as he watches the Hobbit disappear into the darkness of the cave.

Dwalin’s eyes narrow at the back of the rogues head.

“No funny business, Ri,” he growls.

“Me? Why I’d never!”

Dwalin rolls his eyes as he pushes passed the Dwarf and follows Bilbo into the cave. Pulling out his lamp and lighting it in quick efficient movements with his whetstones, he startles a bit when the light reflects off Bilbo’s eyes eerily.

“Brat,” he sneers as the Hobbit grins a bit wildly.

“I’ll check to the back. Leave that here and help the others, yes?”

“Aye, yer sights better’n mine anyway.”

His brother needed a moment to regain his composure, he could understand. Thorin’s words and actions had been getting to him as well, as had the actions of the others not fond of Bilbo. He would have punched Thorin at that moment if Bilbo hadn’t beaten him to it.

Nori is leaning against the opening, picking his nails with a knife as Dwalin shoves by him.

“I’m fond of ‘im as well ye know,” the thief says. “I’ll keep an eye on ‘im when ye can’t.”

Though Dwalin and Nori have had their… grievances that never faded, Dwalin knows he can trust the thief, at least with this. If nothing else, family means a great deal to the slighter Dwarf, especially those he is fond of. Bilbo would be in good hands despite the thief being a terrible influence.

Dwalin nods and continues back to the Company only to find them having some kind of heated argument between them all.

“He’s no right-”

“He had every right! Uncle has been nothing but awful to Uncle Bilbo since the beginning!”

“He is our King!”

“That does not mean he is without fault!”

“Shut yer yaps!” Dwalin barks out, silencing their arguing tongues. “Bilbo’s right. We’ve no time squabbling about this now. Pick him up and follow me. We’ve found somewhere dry at least.”

Bifur is the first to move, chattering at Bombur as he lifts Thorin up under his arms. Bombur shuffles over, grabbing their King by his legs and carefully maneuvering on the path to follow Bifur after Dwalin as he turns back up the path. The princes follow after, the rest of the Company trailing behind them. Dwalin stops before the entrance where Bilbo and Nori are quietly chatting, looking at the Dwarf when he stops.

“Well?”
“Clear and smells of something foul, but it’s days, if not weeks old. Whatever it was, it hasn’t been here for a while and unlikely to return…”

Dwalin knows his brother’s hesitation quirks by now.

“And?”

“My gut is saying we should move along… but finding another cave on short notice is going to be near impossible in this weather, not with all of us, Dead-weight over there, and giants having a feud just outside.”

“Aye, we’ll have a watch then. Bofur? Mind takin’ first?” he calls back at the Company behind him.

“S’fine with me. Can’t say I could sleep at the moment anyway.”

Dwalin nods and follows Nori and Bilbo into the cave. The lamp is set about the middle to give everyone some light to see; rocks looking to have been swept to the sides. Bilbo’s doing more like, Nori wouldn’t be that considerate to those who have been harassing his new favorite. Bifur and Bombur shuffle passed him, Dori following suit, grabbing Thorin’s pack and laying out his bedroll and furs. The Ur’s place his friend down on it, using his pack as a pillow before draping the blanket Dori brought over him. He just catches Bilbo’s glare at the unconscious King before the Hobbit is turning and heading to the far reaches of the cave. He glances to Balin who nods and heads over to Bilbo, setting his own blankets down where the Hobbit’s head would be and whose back would be against the cavern wall.

Dwalin could not blame the lad. What surprises him is when Nori and Ori set up near his brothers as well, leaving a space large enough for Dwalin to lay his own bedding down closer to Bilbo.

“We were to wait in the mountains for Gandalf te join us,” Balin grumbles echo in the cave as he lays down. “That was the plan…”

“Well your King doesn’t seem very fond of plans, Balin,” the Hobbit growls. “He just likes to pull them out of his arse.”

“I’d clock you, but I’m te tired fer that,” the older Dwarf says with a sigh as he pulls his blanket over him. “Remind me in the morn?”

“As if I would, and it’s not like I’m wrong.”

Balin chuckles and settles deeper within his covers.

“Would he mind if I slept near?” comes Kíli’s worryingly subdued voice beside him.

Dwalin turns his head to stare at the youngling before shaking his head.

“No, Ori, Fíli and ye are as good as adopted by him at this point, I think. He mothers and brothers ye lot enough anyhow.”

The prince only nods and shuffles over to the small group, worrying the hems of his sleeves like he used to do when he was younger. Dwalin sighs and makes his way over to Balin and Bilbo. Kíli makes his own spot at Bilbo’s feet, effectively blocking the Hobbit in a wall of Dwarrows once Dwalin takes his place at Bilbo’s open front. Fíli follows soon after, laying behind Kíli.

“Right then, let’s get a fire started,” Glóin says, dropping a pile of wood before him.
“No fires,” Dwalin snaps as he adjusts his bedding. “We don’t need te be attractin’ any creatures while we rest. Bilbo says something foul stopped here not long past. It could return if it sees the smoke.”

“Ye’d take his word?” the fiery-haired Dwarf growls.

“Over yers, aye. Hobbit’s smell better’n we do.”

The Dwarf huffs, affronted but says no more.

“Guess that’s my cue te start watch,” Bofur says, more cheerful than he had any right to be in Dwalin’s opinion. “Who should I wake for the next one?”

“Me.”

All of the Dwarrows eyes lock onto the Hobbit.

“Yer sure?” Balin asks him.

“Yes.”

Balin nods and settles back down onto his bed, the rest slowly following suit.

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It was late in the afternoon when the Company had taken shelter. Some hours pass before Thorin groans his way back into the waking world. It takes a moment for his eyes to adjust to the gloom, only to squint in confusion at the rock ceiling above him.

“Where-” he starts to say as he sits up; groaning as his nose and cheek aches.

“Awake at last I see,” comes the gruff drawl of his Guardsman. “We’re in a cave Bilbo found not long after he knocked ye out.”

“He what-”

“Can’t say I blame him. Ye’ve been a right bastard te him since the Shire. I’d have done it mehself if he hadn’t beaten me te it.”

“He had no right-”

“He had every right!” Dwalin snaps lowly, thoroughly done with his friend’s behavior. “As yer friend, ye need te listen te me! Ye’ve treated him like the dirt on yer boots and speak te him like he’s done ye wrong! Any Dwarrow would have taken a braid or two for the insult.”

“He is not a Dwarf!” Thorin snaps back, quick and loud to prevent Dwalin from interrupting him.

“Aye he’s a Hobbit, but he’s been raised around Dwarrows fer twelve years under our father. He’s Dwarf enough.”

“He has assaulted one of the Royal House-”

“An’ yer not listening! Ye think he cares how royal yer blood is? Ye think any honorable Dwarf would care if ye had besmirched their honor? Ye got less then ye deserved in my opinion!” Dwalin snarls as he rises to his feet with clenched fists. “What has gotten inte yer-”
“Be that as it may, if you both don’t shut your mouths, I’ll come over there and do it for you.”

Both Dwarrows jolt, necks nearly cracking as they turn to see the Hobbit standing some feet from them, eyes narrow and annoyed.

“And though I appreciate your defense, Dwalin, I can take care of my business well enough. That being said, some of us are trying to sleep after, oh you know, nearly dying today.”

The Hobbit’s eyes shift from his brother -who looks a tad sheepish- to the Dwarrow King.

“Considering our situation, I would prefer you leave your grievances with me alone till we are out of the mountains and on more steady ground. Having a battle of fisticuffs on a narrow mountain path is unwise if not suicidal.”

He waits a moment for the King to reply and when he doesn’t he turns to go back to his bedroll.

“Glad you agree.”

“Bilbo…”

“Hm?” he hums sleepily as he turns back to look at Dwalin.

“What’s that?”

Looking down he sees something glowing from within his sword's sheath. Dread fills him and clears his sleepy mind as he pulls the blade free to see that it is the source of the light.

Wide green eyes stare at Dwalin in fear when the creaking of metal and gears reach their ears. The sand upon which they sleep starts to disappear in a jagged line down the middle of the path of Dwarrow feet.

“Wake up! Wake up!” Thorin roars at the sleeping Company.

Confused murmurs and jolting bodies are all the reaction he gets before the floor gives away. Bilbo’s stomach flies up his throat as they fall before he grunts in pain as he hits the tunnel wall. Head over heels and heels over head he tumbles along with his companions who yell and shriek in terror as they fall. He scrambles to grab the walls with his hands and claws, slowing himself enough to keep himself from any severe injuries -and incredibly thankful his leathers are thick and tough, and his claws even tougher. One by one the Dwarrows fall into an enclosure with Bilbo falling last, landing on Bombur thankfully.

Spine chilling shrieks and howls suddenly fill the cavern. Turning over to see, Bilbo’s eyes widen as a horde of disgusting looking creatures covered in boils, tumors, growths, rashes, and other grotesque ailments rush toward them.

“Goblins!” someone from the pile shouts.

“Look out! Look out!”

The flighty thought that he had never seen a Goblin before passes through Bilbo’s mind before he’s rolling himself off of Bombur and to the back of the pile. Squeezing himself between Nori and the bars, he traces an invisibility ward over his heart and prays to the Valar it doesn’t fall before he can get everyone out of whatever cells these creatures would put them in.

The Goblins grab and pull at the Company, climbing the metal cage and dropping down upon them;
they were everywhere.

“Get off me!” Dwalin roars as he punches as many Goblin faces as he can, only to be pushed along by the horde.

The Company fights as hard as they can, tired and bruised as they are. None of them dare to draw their weapons; the tight space would make anything but a dagger unwieldy and dangerous to themselves, much less the Goblins. They are dragged and corralled on all sides by the Goblins away from the cage. When they are far enough to risk moving, Bilbo darts behind a pile of junk, crouching low and watching through the cracks as his brothers, Dwarflings, and the Company are shoved over a rickety wooden bridge and around a corner. Their battle cries echoing deep into the dark and damp cavern.

He dares not pull out the glowing sword -It’s a sword, blast what Balin says!- as he darts out from behind the refuse, unsheathing his battle daggers and making his way across the bridge. He would shift if he didn’t need them and if his ward failed under his body’s strain. Wards being a more costly magic after all.

Of course, the moment he is across the bridge, still crouched low, he feels the ward flutter and die. He curses under his breath. A surprised squawk and one of the creatures drops from the pitted rocks above. It sneers at him and suddenly another joins it.

“Suppose we can eat it? The King won’t notice one missing,” the newcomer cackles.

“I saw it first!”

They lunge at Bilbo, makeshift swords swinging at his head and torso. Bilbo snarls at them, brandishing his daggers and blocking their attacks. They trade blows for some minutes before Bilbo finds an opening and slices the throat of the cackler. Unfortunately, it leaves him open to the other Goblin -thankfully he had managed to disarm it- to jump on his back. Its rancid breath hits his nose at it tries to bite at his neck to which he introduces a dagger to its eye. It heaves itself back with a shriek of pain, and Bilbo has a brief moment of confusion where he sees the cavern ceiling above him before he realizes the bloody thing has tossed them over the side. The creature flies from his back as he hits an outcropping of rock, sending Bilbo arse over kettle with his daggers flying from his hands as he tries to grip the rock, and into the air again. He grunts in pain as his chest collides with another ramshackle bridge which breaks beneath their weight and only the rope he manages to grab slows his fall and swings him far enough to land on a slope of rocks before sliding him down into the dark below.

A sharp pain and everything goes dark after that.

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When he comes too, everything aches. Bloody hell even the tips of his ears ache and he didn’t think that was possible. He shifts and lets out a pained gasp as pure agony shoots up his left leg. Cracking open his eyes, it’s dark -and he’s under some sort of mushroom if he’s seeing right-, but his night vision allows him to look down his body to see one of his daggers sticking out of the meat of his thigh. He throws back his head and groans as he tentatively prods at where the blade would be with his hand; barely holding back his breakfast when all he can feel is the hilt and blood above his skin. He takes deep breaths, staving off a panic attack at the thought of the blade having gone all the way through and potentially already in the process bleeding out. Reaching under his thigh he tries to find an exit wound and nearly bursts into tears in relief at finding none.

The blade was at an angle then, which was better than expected, but worse than expected as that
meant more damage done to him. More damage to heal, meaning more energy spent; energy he was in short supply of being starved and all. It would probably not heal completely depending on that and how much debris had been on his blade… *Ugh!* He prays it wasn’t the blade he had sliced the Goblin’s neck with.

Weak breathing and the scrape of skin on stone nearby makes him freeze up, agony from his muscles tightening on the blade making him grit his teeth and fist his pants in a white-knuckled grip. Heart suddenly pounding in his bruised chest, he raises his head slightly to look out from behind the mushrooms to see what creature was near. The Goblin who fell with him? Some other foul beast? His heart pounds faster as his eyes dart around.

They finally land on the prone form of his Goblin attacker lying mere feet away, barely moving or breathing. He starts to convince his body to relax when heavy, wet breathing accompanied by slow, cautious step pads echo against the rocks. Out of the gloom, a pair of eyes reflecting the dim light like his own in the night comes closer to the fallen Goblin. Only when the creature is closer can Bilbo see what it is.

“Yes,” it hisses out as it observes the Goblin.

The creature was pale-skinned with large round eyes set in its face; roughly his height if it were to stand on its feet. Large pointy ears, much like his own -disturbingly-, emaciated, and with large hands and feet. Its head is covered in a smattering of stringy hairs but mostly bald, and only wore a loincloth.

It repeats its earlier words as it circles the Goblin, coming much too close to Bilbo’s place under the mushrooms. He prays to any Valar listening that it cannot smell his blood that has no doubt drenched his pants leg or has pooled on the ground.

It suddenly coughs wetly.

“Gollum, gollum!” before clambering over the Goblin and grabbing its feet, dragging it back the way the creature came.

The Goblin suddenly rears up as though sensing its impending demise if it did not fight for its life. The creature was having none of it. Slapping away the flailing hands, it grabs a rock and starts to beat the Goblin with it, leaping up and down to land harder blows.

In the darkness something glints in the low light, flying from the creature’s -Bilbo decides to call it Gollum- loincloth and landing on the rocks with a metallic ping, unnoticed by Gollum. The sound rings like a chime in Bilbo’s ears.

Gollum suddenly strikes the Goblin on the side of its head and it goes slack though still breathing.

“Nasty Goblinses!” it growls before continuing to drag it away. “Better than old bones, precious. Better than nothing! It’s been fishes and batses for weeks!”

Bilbo waits until he can no longer hear the Goblin being dragged against the rocks before laying his head back with a heavy sigh. He takes a few breaths before steeling himself. If he was going to get out of here he needs to hurry up and get his blade out and shift to heal as much damage as he could.

Pulling out his handkerchief, he stuffs it in his mouth and bites down, relaxing his leg as much as he can; using his right hand to grip the handle and his left to keep the blade from moving in his thigh. Looking down at his leg, he mentally counts to three and pulls it out in one go. His vision whites out. Dropping the bloody dagger to the ground with a clatter, he presses his hands against the wound to
slow the bleeding; silently screaming out in pain. When he can bring himself to, he takes deep heaving breaths, and with a snarl, shifts.

He can feel the muscle and skin knit back together and after a moment he rises to his paws, awkwardly trying to keep his weight off of his leg. Tentatively he puts pressure on it only to snarl in pain. *So not completely healed,* as he thought would be the case. He feels blood start to trickle into his fur and shifts back and sits. Better to have a bandage on it than leave a trail of blood for Gollum or some other creature to find. Folding up his handkerchief, he then proceeds to strip of his coat, vest, leather cuirass, and the shirt underneath, putting the former three back on. Wiping his bloody dagger on his pants leg, he then cuts the shirt into strips until nothing is left. *Better to have extra makeshift bandages than none at all,* he thinks and he quickly wraps a strip around the handkerchief pressed to his wound.

That done he sheathes the dagger and unsheathes the Elven blade. It still glows. Taking a deep calming breath, he uses it to look around on the ground for his other dagger —they were a pair he was rather fond of and would hate not having the set. The light glints of a blade near where the Goblin had lain and he takes staggering steps towards it. He grins when he sees it’s his dagger and bends to pick it up when another object shines in the light.

There on the ground was a ring.

Sheathing his second dagger he picks the ring up.

And promptly drops it.

His instincts snap and snarl beneath his skin. Something had brushed against his magic and it had not liked that. Something foul and unsettlingly familiar. He wants to leave it here; bury it deep, deep in the dark recesses of the mountain so no one would find it. A niggling in his mind, however, tells him he cannot leave it here. It was not safe.

He swallows thickly and takes a quick glance around, looking for any watchers. Seeing none he bends slowly and picks the ring back up, quickly placing it in one of the pockets of his vest and wiping his hands down against his sides; a slimy feeling creeping against his skin.

A wail echoes against the stone.

“Too many boneses, precious. Not enough flesh!”

**“Shut up! Cut its skin off! Start with its head.”**

Physically shaking himself off he sheathes the blade, no longer needing its light to navigate the darkness. He dares not crouch with his injury so takes to walking as he would normally —he’s a Hobbit remember, light-footed and quick. He can hear wind and water and decides to follow that.

*The cold hard lands,*  
*They bites our hands*  
*They gnaws our fe–et*

Though considering they were leading him closer to that horrible singing...

*Rocks and stones*  
*They’re like old bones*  
*All bare of me–at!*

*Cold as death*
Bilbo makes his way closer, looking for any other tunnels he may slink down without Gollum’s notice, though not really bothering with ducking behind any of the stones for now. Gollum was only one creature -his scent being the only one covering the rocks aside from the Goblin’s and the odd bat or snake-, even in his injured state he was sure enough in himself to be able to fend him off.

Gollum is sitting on a large rock in the middle of the lake, the Goblin’s body beneath him as he merrily hums and hacks at the creature. Bilbo scrunches his nose in distaste, ignoring Gollum when he suddenly screeches as the Goblin cries out and flails. He pads around the area, getting more frustrated when no other tunnels make themselves known aside from the one he came down. With a soft sigh, he glances over to Gollum and pauses when he no longer sees him on the rock.

He casts his gaze around and slinks back to a stone that could provide good cover, drawing the Elven blade -it's not glowing anymore so there’s one good thing-, and crouching down despite his leg’s protests. Straining his ears, he listens for Gollum’s heavy breathing only to tense when he hears it above him. He looks up slowly and meets night predator eyes with his own.

Gollum grins hungrily as he drops down from the rock, landing directly in front of him.

“Bless us and splash us, precious. What’s this? A tasty morsel? A meaty mouthful? Gollum, gollum!”

Bilbo narrows his eyes and raises the blade when he get closer, pressing the metal against the pale creature's throat.

“Stay back!” he snaps, Gollum retreating a step or two as he he stands. “Come any closer and I’ll not hesitate to bury this in your gut.”

Gollum looks at him in surprise before wandering off, confusion coloring his movements.

“It’s got an Elfish blade, but it’s not an Elfs. No, no too small to be an Elfs,” he murmurs to himself, turning his back on Bilbo as though unconcerned with baring it to someone with a blade.

“What is it, precious? What is it?!”

Bilbo drops the blade to his side, tapping it against his thigh -and barely withholding a hiss of pain for his forgetfulness- as he observes Gollum.

“My name is Baggins. That is all you need to know.”

“Bagginses? What is a Bagginses, precious?”

“I’m a Skin-Changer.”

Gollum wiggles in excitement, eyes alight with a deep hunger and curiosity.

“Oh! We like Goblinses, batses and snakeses. But we hasn’t tried Skinses before!”

He suddenly starts to stalk closer to Bilbo who stands his ground with narrowed eyes and raises his blade.

“Is it soft? Is it juicy?”

Bilbo calmly rests the blade against Gollum’s cheek and presses down, a drop of blood trickles
against the pale skin. Gollum skitters back with a hiss and growl.

“I don’t want any trouble. Do you understand?” Bilbo growls back, making Gollum’s eyes widen as he flares his golden slit ones at him. “If you show me the way out, I’ll be on my way.”

Gollum eyes him warily as he pads around to put a rock between them, reverting back to his more nonchalant attitude.

“How? Is it lost?”

“Yes and I would like to get out of here as soon as possible.”

“Oh! we knows! We knows safe paths for Skinses! Safe paths in the dark!” he says in an almost sweet voice before it abruptly changes. “Shut up!”

“I didn’t say anything…”

“We wasn’t talking to you.”

“Oh, yes, we was, precious. We was!”

Bilbo takes two steps back. Gollum’s head pops over the rock and Bilbo’s heart starts to pound. He’s come across others with a similar mental state, and they were by no means safe to be around. He grips his blade tighter. Gollum ducks behind the rock.

“Praps Skinses will sits here and chats for a bitsy?”

“You… You want to chat? What game are you-” Bilbo starts to say with a confused frown on his face when Gollum gets an excited look in his eyes and hops onto the rock.

“Games?! Oh we love games doesn’t we, precious?” he says, wiggling even more excitedly than he was earlier. “Does it like games? Does it? Does Skinses like to play?”

Bilbo tilts his head, even more confused.

“Uh… Maybe?”

With a wide smile, Gollum holds out his hand as though to stop him from talking.

What has roots as nobody sees
Is taller than trees?
Up, up, up it goes
And yet never grows?

Riddles. This pale creature wanted to play riddles. Well there are worse things, he thinks before answering.

“The mountain…”

“Yes, yes. O~h let’s have another one, eh? Yes! Do it again. Do it again, ask us!”

“No! No more riddles.”

Gollum hops off the rock and pads toward Bilbo, going around him toward the water as the Hobbit follows him with his blade. He stops only a few feet away; Bilbo backs up and makes it more.
“Finish him off! Finish him now! Gollum, gollum!”

He charges when Bilbo thinks quickly. Holding up the blade and his hand, backing up beside the rock Gollum had vacated, the pale creature stops.

“No! No, I want to play. I do!” he says with as wide a smile as he can get on his face -give him some credit for even being able to when faced with this mental mess. “I can see you are very good at this.”

He crouches down to eye level with Gollum, watching for any muscle twitches that would indicate an impending attack.

“So let’s play a game of riddles, hm? Just you and me?”

From the wide-eyed excitement slowly blooming on his face, Bilbo can tell he’s gotten his attention and lowers his blade.

“Yes! Yes, just us,” Gollum says as he hops over, getting closer than Bilbo would have liked.

“Yes, and if I win, you show me the way out of here. Yes?”

“Yes. Yes,” Gollum’s eyes suddenly constrict and a hand rises as though it wants to strangle him.

He ducks behind the rock.

“And if it loses? What then?”

“Well, if it loses then we eats it, precious!”

Bilbo heaves a sigh as he listens to Gollum’s conversation. A second later he pops back around the rock and looks at Bilbo with a most sincere look.

“If Baggins loses, we eats it whole.”

If nothing else, Bilbo can hobble the creature in order to escape. With a nod, he stands and sheathes his blade.

“Right then, fair enough.”

Bilbo doesn’t miss Gollum watching as the blade is put away, eyes constricted in the way he’s starting to see indicates the more violent personality. They dilate when they meet his own.

“Well, Baggingses first.”

Bilbo takes a moment to think of one as Gollum rests his chin on his hands on the rock like an eager child.

Thirty white horses on a red hill,
First they champ,
Then they stamp,
Then they stand still.

Gollum’s face is the most expressive thing he’s seen in a long while -what with traveling with Dwarrows whose beards cover most of their bloody faces. Bilbo feels he can even see his mind working to figure it out.

“Teeth?”
Damn, Bilbo thinks as he sighs and nods.

“Teeth! Oh, yes, my precious! Teeth! But we-- We only have... nine,” he says baring his mostly toothless mouth at Bilbo.

Bilbo can’t help but bare his own fangs at him, damned instincts. Gollum seems nonplussed by them, however, and Bilbo grumbles under his breath.

“Our turn.”

Gollum moves and starts to circle around the rock. Bilbo eyes him until he gets to close, then steps around to the other side.

Voiceless, it cries,
Wingless flutters
Toothless bites,
Mouthless mutters.

Bilbo stares at him for a moment. He knows the answer, but he waits to see if Gollum will be moving again.

“Oh! We knows! We knows!”

“Shut up!”

Gollum ducks down behind the rock when Bilbo answers.

“Of course it’s wind.”

“Very clever, Skinses,” Gollum growls as he comes out from behind the rock, posture tense and threatening. “Very clever.”

Bilbo calmly draws his blade, pointing it at Gollum as he says his next riddle.

No-legs lay on one-leg,
two-legs sat near on three-legs,
four legs got some.

Gollum wanders back to the stone, muttering to himself.

“No-legs, two-legs... four-legs gets some... three-legs...”

“Well?”

“It’s nasty!” he hisses at Bilbo while holding up a finger.

“Do you know?”

“Give us a chance, precious! Give us a chance!”

Bilbo watches, hope and anticipation welling up in his chest. Only to fall when Gollum exclaims;

“Oh! Fish on a little table, man at table sitting on a stool, the cat has the boneses! We eats them for snackses too, precious!”

Gollum suddenly exhales heavily.
We have one… for you.

Bilbo watches as he clammers away from the rock and into a darker alcove further behind.

It cannot be seen, cannot be felt,
Cannot be heard, cannot be smelt.
It lies behind stars and under hills,
And empty holes it fills.
It comes first and follows after,
Ends life, kills laughter.

Bilbo nearly rolls his eyes. All of Gollum’s riddles were familiar and he had heard this one before from his mother when she was wont to tell tales of her encounter with a beast fond of riddles. He was surrounded by it anyway.

“Dark!” he calls out, wondering how much longer this battle of wits was going to last.

Gollum snarls.

Bilbo shoots out another riddle, hardly thinking about it at this point as he tries to track Gollum in the gloom. The echoes in this place were wrecking with his perception.

Alive without breath,
As cold as death;
Never Thirsty, ever drinking,
All in mail, never clinking.

“Fishes,” comes Gollum’s voice right next to his ear.

Bilbo startles hard, leaping away from Gollum and swiping his sword where the wretch was sitting atop another rock behind where he was standing. He has a nasty grin on his face…

“Our turn~.”

All things it devours;
Birds, beasts, trees, flowers;
Gnaws iron, bites steel;
Grinds hard stones to meal.

The scare rattled his mind, and he finds himself floundering to answer. He knew this one, he knows he does.

“Answer u~s.”

“Give me a moment!” he snaps.

Muttering under his breath, he tries to calm his mind; but Gollum was shifting about, distracting him.

“It’s stuck,” Gollum growls gleefully. “Skines is stuck.”

Bilbo glares at Gollum, still trying to find the answer. He grins, having traveled back to ‘his’ rock, and shrugs.

“Time’s up.”
With sudden clarity it clicks in Bilbo’s mind and also flares his temper. The cheating wretch!

“Time! It’s time!”

Gollum snarls again.

“You didn’t finish the riddle,” he snarls back.

“Last question,” Gollum says, his fingers toying with a large rock. “Last chance.”

“Fine!”

But his mind is drawing a blank. His muscles ache, his wound is pounding, and his stomach is terribly empty; how was he supposed to think anymore?! By habit, he hooks his free hand in his vest pocket. Inspiration strikes as his fingers bump against that wretched metal he found. If Gollum wasn’t going to play it clean, neither was Bilbo.

“Ask us… Ask us!”

“All right, fine,” he says as he wanders closer to the water. “What have I got in my pocket?”

“That’s not fair,” Gollum growls. “It’s not fair! It’s against the rules!”

He throws down his rock in a tantrum which Bilbo smirks at him for.

“Like you were following the rules?” Bilbo scoffs.

“Now ask us another one!” he whines, folding his arms around him like a scolded child.

“No! You said, ‘ask me a question’. Well that is my question! What have I got in my pocket?”

Gollum jumps off the rock with a snarl and Bilbo brandishes his blade again, watching the pale wretch warily. Again as Gollum approaches, he steps around, keeping a good distance between them. He nearly trips when his foot slips on a loose rock, his hand flying out of his pocket with the ring clenched in his fist.

“Three guesses, precious. It must give us three!” he only holds up two fingers, but Bilbo isn’t going to mention it.

“Fine, three guesses. Go!”

“Bats’ wings!”

“Wrong, another?”

Gollum scrambles around; digging through the refuse and old bones littering the shore.

“Fishbones, Goblin’s teeth, wet shells, scales....”

He beats the ground as though it’s offended him, moaning and groaning all the while. Bilbo takes the opportunity to step closer to the way he arrived in this dank place. His wound was throbbing and, as time passes, the Company could have already been killed or thrown into some ramshackle dungeon while he was down here playing riddles with a mental case.

“Knife! Oh, shut up!”
Wrong, last guess.”

“String!” he says before turning completely around as though physically changing personalities. “Or nothing.”

“Two guesses at once is against the rules~. Wrong both times for that matter,” he cheers; and oh dear the blood loss must be getting to him.

Gollum falls to his side, sobbing as he lands and curls into himself. Bilbo stays where he is, almost certain the pale creature was going to snap. His instincts were screaming at him with the ring in his hand and it was setting him further on edge.

“Now, I’ve won and you promised to show me the way out.”

Gollum heaves himself onto his feet while sobbing before he suddenly stops.

“Did we say so, precious? Did we say so?”

Gollum turns and looks at him with narrowed, angry eyes.

“What has Skinses got it its pocketses?”

“You lost. What concern is it of yours?”

He stalks closer to Bilbo, frustration, and violence apparent in every move he makes. Bilbo swallows in trepidation but keeping his blade steady. Unsteady hands would get him killed.

“Lost? Lost,” Gollum snarls as he fingers at something on his loincloth.

His vicious expression suddenly falls. He pats himself and his loincloth down, growing more frantic the longer he cannot find what he is looking for.

“Where is it? Where is it?!”

Scuffling through the bones and rocks next, he gets more violent in his search.

“No… No!” he shrieks. “Lost!”

Bilbo takes this as his cue to leave. Trotting back into the tunnel and away from Gollum whose cries echo all around him.

“My precious is lost!”

He passes by where he and the Goblin landed when he hears a vicious scream.

“He stole it!”

Bilbo increases his pace. He curses Thorin under his breath, for surely this was all that wankers fault for being a complete and utter sod.

“I’m going to wring his neck when I see him next,” he growls as he has to backtrack at a dead end.

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Meanwhile, far above where Bilbo was running for his life:

Meanwhile, far above where Bilbo was running for his life:
Thorin and Company were having as hard of a time as Bilbo, it seems. After revealing himself to the Goblin King—a more grotesque creature if there ever was one; a fat blob that could move surprisingly fast and with a disgusting goiter that swung about—and being told that his old enemy, the Pale Orc, could still be alive; Thorin felt nothing but rage. The Goblin’s inventions of torture were on their way up the shoddy wooden paths to rend his Company limb from limb as the Goblin King sings some horrendous tune, and he could do nothing. They were outnumbered and restrained.

“Bilbo?” he hears Dwalin whisper. “Now would be a really good time!”

He has no time to question his guard as the Goblin’s shriek.

“I know that sword!” the King quivers as he scrambles up onto his throne. “It is the Goblin-cleaver! The blade that sliced a thousand of our kins necks!”

The King’s minions converge on them, lashing out their whips and pushing them all to their knees.

“Slash them!”

Thorin is forced down onto his back, arms held out wide and tight from his body.

“Kill them all! Cut off his head!”

One of them is quickly above him, a large dagger drawn and ready to stab down on his throat.

This is the end, he thinks.

A bright, white light suddenly washes over them like a physical wave. Everyone and everything is knocked down. Dazed, Thorin looks around and sees a figure walking towards them from the sudden gloom.

“Take up arms,” Gandalf—for it is he—commands as he looks at them. “Fight… Fight!”

They come out of their daze, scrambling to their feet and grabbing their weapons, tossing them to the appropriate Dwarf if they should grab one not their own.

They fight.

Hacking and slashing at any part they could on these creatures, they fight with renewed strength with the wizard’s appearance.

The Goblin King speaks, but none pay him any mind except Thorin and Nori. Nori dives at Orcrist, grabbing the sheath and thrusting the hilt up at Thorin when he sees the Goblin King making his way to their King.

“Thorin!”

The Dwarf grabs the hilt in both hands and swings back, catching the Goblin’s staff and unbalancing the overweight monster on his small legs. He falls off of his throne and over the side.

The other Goblins shrieks and roar in rage and attack en mass.

“Follow me! Quick!” Gandalf shouts at them and they follow the wizard down the winding wooden paths, trusting him to lead them to safety.

They run.
They fight.

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**Down below, Bilbo is having a hard time:**

Ring forgotten in his hand, Bilbo darts and leaps over and around rocks as he traverses the tunnels. Desperately trying to lose his pursuer and find a way out. He judiciously decided to come back for the Dwarrows once he has escaped Gollum with his life.

Another dead end, and he snarls in frustration. Gollum was close behind. His hand aches and he suddenly remembers the ring. His instincts are screaming at him to let it go, but another little voice tells him not to. It’s confusing and frustrating and he’s about to say to hell with it and drop it when Gollum’s voice gets too close.

He can’t backtrack, and looking more closely at the wall he first saw as a dead-end revealed itself to actually be cracked and leading to an opening on the other side. He darts over just as Gollum’s glowing eyes peer into the alcove. He slips through rather easily -nearing skin and bones, he is, and that’s worrying enough- and promptly trips over a rock.

He falls on his back with a pained thud, his ribs snarling at him. His hand is suddenly empty.

“It’s ours!”

The ring is in the air, and as Bilbo reaches for it -it’s magic, he swears it is when he thinks about it later-, the ring falls and slots itself on his middle finger. The world is suddenly wavering and lucid like he were underwater. Some unnatural breeze was also blowing around him. Ignoring that for now, he rolls to the side just as Gollum comes flying through the opening as if to pounce on him. He would have too if he hadn’t moved. Gollum looks right at him and Bilbo raises his blade and prepares to thrust forward when Gollum suddenly moves on as if he hadn’t seen him.

“Theft! Baggins!”

He pats himself down, trying to see where he had drawn a ward in his frantic state only to find none. But Gollum is moving further away, and he must think Bilbo was headed to the exit -he prays that is what the wretch is thinking- and scrambles to his feet to follow, deciding not to question his luck at the moment.

He’s getting out of here or so help him he was going to find Thorin in the Halls of Mahal and rip his braids out.

He follows close behind Gollum and the sounds of some commotion grows louder and louder as they go, the wretch none the wiser.

Gollum leaps and bounds over rocks and Bilbo is having a harder time keeping up with his injury. But he can see light ahead and he nearly wants to cry in joyful celebration. Finally!

“Wait, my precious. Wait! Gollum, gollum!” Gollum cries looking left and right.

Something startles him and he scrambles back the way they had come, hiding behind the closest rock. Bilbo steps back some to keep from bumping into him and possibly negating whatever magic was keeping him hidden. His baser instincts were still roaring at him to get the ring off his finger, but Bilbo had a hunch the ring was what was keeping him safe.

“Quick, quick!” comes a familiar muffled voice.
All sounds were muffled in this odd watery side world he found himself in.

Gandalf suddenly appears from the right, stopping before the stone Gollum hides behind and ushering what looks to be the Company passed him. Giddy with relief, Bilbo bounces on his feet and thinks to wave when he remembers. Gollum is directly facing him, and if he cannot be seen by him, he doubts he could be seen by his friend. He sighs in exasperation as one by one the Company passes and Gollum blocks his exit.

“This way,” Gandalf says as he pushes the Company along. “Come on, come on. Quickly! Into the sunlight!”

All of the Company passes and Bilbo’s shoulders sag. Left behind again. How could Gandalf not notice he was not among them?

Gollum shifts, curling in on himself and burying his face in his arms. Bilbo shuffles closer, hoping to squeeze by him. He suddenly moves, blocking the only clear way around him and Bilbo pauses in frustration. He wanted to get back to the Dwarflings. He wanted to get back to his brothers! Bilbo’s eyes narrow as he looks at Gollum’s back.

If the only way back to them was through this creature…

He rests the blade near his neck, calculating the curve, the force, and pulls back. Yet, before he can swing, Gollum turns.

Gollum’s eyes are wide and lost. Tears filling them as he chokes back a sob.

And Bilbo just… can’t do it.

As nasty as Gollum was, he couldn’t kill him. It would be murder, and invisible as he was, Fundin had taught him to have more honor than that.

With an exasperated huff, Bilbo steps back then propels himself forward, soaring over Gollum’s head. As tired as he is, it’s not as high as he needed it to be and the bottom of his right foot grazes the top of the cretans head. Gollum snarls and flails around trying to catch him, but Bilbo is already darting toward the sunlight, pushing himself to catch up with the Company.

**“Baggins! Thief! Curse it and crush it! We hates it forever!”** echo down the tunnel as he exits with haste.

Glorious fresh and clean air smacks him in the face like getting doused by early spring rain. He laughs with glee and follows the Company’s scent. He’s not too far behind!

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The wizard and the Company run until the sun begins to set. They slow only when they are far, far from their exit in the mountains. The trees are not as dense and are losing leaves and pine needles with the season’s change. Winter was not far behind.

“Five, six, seven, eight…”

Gandalf turns and continues his head count.

“Bifur. Bofur. That’s ten… Fili, Kili! That’s twelve… And Bombur! That makes thirteen!”

Gandalf suddenly freezes as does Dwalin and Balin.
“Where’s Bilbo??” Dwalin and Gandalf say as they look around.

Gandalf’s voice becomes a bit frantic.

“Where is our Hobbit?”

Another look around reveals nothing.

“Where is our Hobbit?!”

Everyone makes a show of looking and still Bilbo is not to be seen.

“Curse that Halfling!” Glóin growls. “Now he’s lost? I thought he was with Dori!”

“Don’t blame me!” Dori cries out.

“Well where did you last see him?” Gandalf asks as calmly as he can; if they had left Bilbo back there with the Goblins….

“He landed on top’a me when they first got us,” the quiet Bombur suddenly says. “I lost sight of him after that.”

“I think he was able te slip away before they first collared us,” Nori says, for he remembers Bilbo had rolled between him and the bars before the Goblins were all over them.

“And what happened exactly?” Gandalf asks.

When Nori doesn’t reply quick enough, he snaps.

“Tell me!”

“I’ll tell you what happened. The Halfling saw his chance and he took it!” Thorin snaps. “He has thought of nothing but his soft bed and his stomach ever since he left his home.”

Thorin looks around at his Company.

“We will not be seeing your Halfling again. He is long gone.”

“Ye’ll stop callin’ him that!” Dwalin snarls getting up into Thorin’s space much to the King’s surprise. “If he’s not here he’s stuck back in that mountain! How dare ye-”

“Dwalin,” comes Bilbo’s voice startling everyone.

They turn and see the Hobbit coming out from behind a nearby tree.

“Need I remind you of what I said before that most wondrous fall?”

“Bilbo Baggins! I’ve never been so glad to see anyone in all of my life!” Gandalf exclaims with a wide and happy smile upon his face, crowding up to the Hobbit and pulling him into a hug. “That being said,” -he stands after a moment- “if you ever do that to me again I’ll turn you into a rabbit!”

“Uncle Bilbo!” Kíli cries and tackles Bilbo to the ground with a thud.

“Ouch! Kíli! Off!” Bilbo grunts and he tries to shove the youngling off; his ribs and leg reminding him that they are on the 'not-all-right-pony'.

The lad scrambles to his feet and pulls Bilbo up with him, apologizing profusely as Fíli comes over
and pulls Bilbo into his side. His ribs protest, but he says nothing as he is yanked from the younglings arms and engulfed in Dwalin’s much meatier ones.

“Oh thank Mahal! Lad! I was about to go back and fight my way te ye!” Dwalin growls in his ear as he nearly suffocated the Hobbit with his furs and beard.

“Can’t breath!”

Dwalin lets him go reluctantly but doesn’t move very far from his side as Balin comes and lays a hand on Bilbo’s shoulder, giving it a squeeze.

“How on Arda did you get past the Goblins?” Fíli asks.

“How indeed…” Dwalin grumbles beneath his breath, the arm wrapped around Bilbo’s shoulders tense.

Bilbo chuckles and slips the ring into his vest pocket, the screeching in his head quieting when he does. He sees Gandalf watch the movement and knows he will need to speak with the wizard about his find, and soon.

“Well, what does it matter? He’s here is he not?”

“It matters!” Thorin growls. “I want to know. Why did you come back? You were obviously free, why are you here?”

Dwalin growls, but Bilbo sets his fist against his brother's chest.

“I had thought that by now you would have realized why I am still here,” he huffs at the Dwarrow King.

If there was one thing he had not been looking forward to, it was the confrontation with Thorin related to his actions back before the Goblins.

“I know you don’t like me. Just because I have been useful isn’t going to change that -and I have no idea what I’ve done to get your knickers in a twist-, but you’re right. I think of my home and all the food that could be filling my belly. My books and my hearth…”

“Because that is my home and that’s why I’m here. Because you, my brothers, the Dwarflings… You don’t have one; a home. Smaug took it from you and if I can do something to help get it back, I will.”

Bilbo stares into the King’s blue eyes, ignoring all of the looks the other Dwarrows are giving him, daring him to say anything against his reasons before he can’t help but add.

“Besides, someone around here needs to have a working brain.”

Many of them burst into surprised chuckles; even Thorin cracks a grin. Bilbo is all for sitting down and not getting up until the morning when he smells it on the wind. He turns and looks back up the slope.

“Uncle Bilbo, you’re-” Kíli begins to say when the wizard interrupts.

“Bilbo?” Gandalf asks carefully, recognizing the Hobbit’s behavior.

“We need to leave, now!” Bilbo snaps.
“What-”

The sound of Wargs howling echo in the air.

“Out of the frying pan,” Thorin growls as he tries to locate where the Wargs are.

“And into the fire. Run,” Gandalf finishes for him before turning around. “Run!”

They run once again, only this time the hounds of hell are on their heels.

“Go!” Thorin yells as their feet pound against the rocks and roots.

Dwalin yanks on Bilbo’s coat, dragging the Hobbit along behind him as though to make sure he doesn’t lose him again. Only it’s not helping. Bilbo shoves Dwalin off of him just as a Warg leaps from overhead, landing, and skidding across the ground as it turns to face them. Bilbo snarls at it, eyes flashing and drawing out his Elven blade as Dwalin gives a mighty roar. The Warg perks its head up in confusion and the brothers take their chance. They charge the confused creature and take it down with an axe to the head and a slash to its throat. The others take down the other Wargs that were close on their tail as Bilbo leaps over the corpse and follows Dwalin, only to have his gut sink in despair as they come to the end of a cliff.

There was nowhere to run.

“Up into the trees! All of you!” Gandalf shouts looking around for Bilbo. “Come on, climb! Bilbo! Climb!”

The Hobbit didn’t have to be told twice. Sheathing his blade, he dodges around Bifur who hurls a large stone at an oncoming Warg’s face with deadly accuracy, and claws his way up the nearest tree; Dwalin close behind him.

“They’re coming!” Thorin warns.

By then they are all in the trees, thankfully, as not moments later the area is overrun with Wargs. They leap and snarl, trying to get at the Dwarrows in the trees. They all suddenly stop, and Bilbo watches as they all turn back to watch something else approach.

Upon a large, white Warg, a pale Orc with a gruesome metal prosthetic for a hand, sits.

“Azog?!?” Bilbo hears Thorin gasp in disbelief.

The Orc makes a show of sniffing the air. Bilbo can feel the bloodlust starting to pulse beneath his veins at the sight of the Orc and his followers.

“Ála sen! Yéta ni, Bilbo!” Gandalf’s voice cuts through the haze. (Do not let loose! Look at me, Bilbo!)

Bilbo eyes cut back and look only at the wizard; the Orc’s words making his fingers twitch but nothing more.

“Nuzdigid? Nuzdigahd?” (Do you smell that? The scent of fear?)

“It cannot be…”

Thorin’s pained whispers start to drag the Hobbit’s eyes away from Gandalf, who stops him before that can wander far.
“Bilbo!”

Bilbo bares his fangs at the wizard but snaps his eyes back to his robes.

“Ganzilizi unarug obonazdaugish, Thorin unda Thrain.” (I remember your father reeked of it, Thorin son of Thrain.)

Gandalf’s eyes flutter between keeping an eye on Bilbo and on Thorin and the Orcs. Bilbo’s bloodlust would just make the situation worse, but Thorin’s blind rage would more likely get them all killed!

“Org! Dooragibariz!” Azog says to his followers, pointing his mace at Thorin. (Orcs! That one is mine!)

With a mighty wave of his mace he ushers on the Wargs, voice joyful in his coming conquest.

“Arggoríd!” (Kill the others!)

The beasts converge on the trees and Bilbo’s eyes fall to the ground below as the Wargs leap and snap at the Dwarrows with increased vigor. Some of them manage to climb quite a ways up before the branches break and they fall back to the earth.

One such Warg gets close to Bilbo who snarls and flashes his eyes again. It too pauses in confusion giving enough time for the branch to break. It does not return to his tree in order to try its luck with the Dwarrows.

Soon they are flinging themselves from the rocky outcroppings to gain momentum, rocking the trees down to their very foundations.

“Sho gad adol!” (Drink their blood!)

The tree in which Bilbo and Dwalin resides suddenly tips.

“It’s going!” Dwalin yells as the others scream.

One by one the trees the Dwarrows took to were falling. So they jumped. From tree to falling tree until there was only Gandalf’s left. There were now thirteen Dwarrows, a Hobbit and a wizard stuck in a tree. Bilbo was sure there would be some sort of joke for this, but for the life of him, he could not think of one. Maybe if they survived he’d be able to look back on this moment and come up with something.

A dark and throaty laughter leaves Azog’s throat as he watches their plight. Bilbo… Bilbo wants to do as Gandalf says - the wizard only commands him as such when his bloodlust would get them into more trouble- but they are out of options as far as he can see.

The Wargs leap and push against the trunk, trying to knock it over when suddenly a bright ball of flame shoots down from above. The ball lands and drives the Wargs back. Bilbo looks up to see the wizard lighting pine cones on fire.

“Fili!” he calls as he tosses one down to the youngling.

Bilbo grabs a nearby cone and lights it off of Fili’s - he has no magic to spare for wards. Soon all of the Dwarrows are tossing burning cones at the Wargs and into the fallen leaves to keep them back. As they retreat, Azog roars his rage as the Dwarrows cheer their victory. But it is short-lived.
The tree jerks and begins to tip.

Bilbo and Company suddenly find themselves dangling over a sheer drop to their demise. Snarling and digging his fingers into the tree Bilbo meets Fíli’s eyes.

“Don’t you dare let go!” he snaps at the youngling.

The lad nods, but they both know the effort would be useless in the end.

Dori and Ori’s screams twist his stomach into knots, but there isn’t anything he can do. It burns his heart to admit his inability to protect the youngling.

Thorin is suddenly upon his feet on the trunk, drawing Bilbo’s attention from Ori and Kíli. Orcrist is drawn and his shield is locked in his grip.

He steps away from the Company.

Bilbo watches in disbelief as his brothers King marches down through the flames before charging at the pale Orc. What on bloody Arda was the daft bastard thinking?! Charging into the fray on his own, without reinforcements?! Beards would be shaved!

With a bellowing cry, Thorin rushes Azog upon his Warg. The Warg leaps and a paw knocks Thorin down onto his back before he can even swing his blade. The beast circles round and Azog strikes the King’s chest and face with his mace as he tries to get back on his feet.

Thorin is downed once again.

“No!” comes Balin’s anguished cry as he watches his King being toyed with.

Bilbo glances at his brothers, seeing their faces fall in despair as they can do nothing but watch.

Hauling himself up onto the trunk, ignoring the bite of the bark into his palms and the burn of his ribs and leg; his gaze is unwavering and hard as tempered steel as he watches Azog play with Thorin from atop his Warg; he makes his decision.

The Warg then grabs up Thorin in its jaws and bites down. He doesn’t have much time.

"Bilbo!" Balin shouts at him, noticing his brother for the first time.

The Warg throws Thorin when the Dwarf manages to land a blow on its snout. He lands on the rocks, limp and worn.

Azog turns to one of the other orcs and says something Bilbo cannot hear over the crackling of the flames. The orc dismounts his Warg and approaches Thorin’s unmoving form.

Bilbo turns, his eyes meeting Balin’s as his brother holds tightly onto his branch. Dwalin shouts out to his friend in despair, the cry close to wailing as his branch nearly snaps and making him lose his hold on the trunk. His lips curl in a vicious grin as he darts his gaze back to Thorin’s failing fight. They swivel back to Balin, eyesight sharpening as they flash slitted gold at his elder brother before he turns quickly and darts down the trunk despite his burning leg.

"No, Bilbo!!" Dwalin and Balin yell after him.

Oblivious to the plight between the Fundin brothers, Thorin casts his arm about for his sword as the Orc steps toward him. He can barely move, and Orcrist is not in reach. He stares at the Orc when it stands above him in defiance.
Bilbo races down the tree and through the burning debris, eyes locked on the Orc approaching Thorin's fallen form. He pushes his injured leg to run faster, his bruised chest to take in more breaths. As the Orc raises its sword to behead the Dwarrow King, Bilbo thrusts himself into the air, changing his skin mid leap.

The Orc doesn't realize the danger until massive jaws clamp around its torso, biting down through its armor. The Orc screeches in agony before the jaws crunch down and shake, silencing the Orc whilst snapping its body in two. The bottom half lands in a macabre heap with a sickening splat of black blood and entrails several paces away. The upper part falls from the beast's jaws with a crunch at its feet only to be crushed into the ground with a squelch and spray of blood as the beast steps a large paw down upon it.

Azog's eyes widen in surprise as his Warg whimpers, her ears flattened against her head. Fangs half the length of his forearm and drenched in the black blood and gore of his lieutenant bare themselves from a pitch-black face barely discernible in the gloom of night. Golden slit eyes glitter in the firelight from slightly above them. The creature's growl resonates low and deep within its chest at the pale Orc, shifting back to stand over Azog's rightful kill. Its patterned pelt distracting his gaze from its snarling face.

The moonlight cuts through the smoke, bright upon the cliff and through the trees as the clouds pass, revealing the creature more clearly than the orange glow from the flickering flames nearby.

An enormous Warg stands like fanged armor over the fallen Dwarrow King.

The beast dwarfs Azog's own by several hands and it's exotically patterned pelt seems to glow in the moonlight. The surprise melts off the Pale Orc's carved face into one of vicious anticipation. To ride upon such a beast would strike more than heart-pounding fear into his prey. It would seep into their very souls.
He would have this Warg for his own.

"Gorb shuri dai biriz torag khobdidolg," Azog commands his warriors. (Grab (the) beast (then) bring me (the) Dwarf's head)

"O... shuri zung." (But... (the) beast saves-)

"Az hizi torask shi da abgur! Az hizi na dorg shi!" the Pale Orc roars. (I will beat it to follow! I will be its master!)

The Warg snarls at Azog, fangs gleaming in the moonlight, licking its chops with its head held high and austere gaze unmov- ing as though daring Azog to try and tame it. The Pale Orc grins back with vicious amusement. He will enjoy breacking this magnificent creature.

His Orcs and the Wargs gather behind him, and he snarls at the beasts when they flinch and cower at every growl and snap of teeth from his chosen beast. They hardly budge.

Azog kicks his Warg harshly with his heels to spur her forward. He would not let any of his followers keep him from his prize. He can see the beast favoring its left hind leg. It's injured and outnumbered. They could capture it!

Their hesitation is enough for Dwalin, Fíli, and Kíli to bum rush them. They fall upon the Orcs and Wargs with furious battle cries, scattering them about. Bilbo remains where he is, though he wants nothing more than to join Dwalin in battle, he must protect their King. His bloodlust sings through his veins, but his instincts override it in a bid to protect the Dwarfling’s blood-kin. One of the Orc manages to force his mount to bring him closer to Bilbo’s right flank. He snarls, turning and catching the beast in his jaws and crushing its neck before dropping it and snapping the Orc up between his fangs. He tosses the corpse towards the fray and it knocks another Orc from his mount.

Bilbo situates himself back over Thorin when he sees Azog and his white Warg stalking toward his injured side from the corner of his eye. He turns and bares his fangs, crouching low over the Dwarf, prepared to lunge at the Orc and to hell with Thorin’s wishes to end the monster himself.

Fluttering feathers greet his ears upon the winds and he bares his fangs at Azog in a wolfish grin.

Help had arrived; Gandalf must have summoned them.

The eagles swoop down grabbing up Wargs and Orcs and tossing them over the cliff as they passed. Others knock down burning trees upon the Wargs and flap their powerful wings to spread the flames upon their fur.

Bilbo howls in greeting and steps from over Thorin to give the eagle diving in room to grab the Dwarf. He is not disappointed. Thorin and Orcrist are soon safe from Azog as the eagle lifts off with him. Bilbo darts forward and grabs Thorin’s oaken shield in his jaws when it slips from his limp arm, concern flooding his veins as the Dwarf does not even stir.

As he can do nothing now, he turns and watches as the Dwarrows are plucked in pairs or one by one and deposited on an eagle's back. Bilbo and Gandalf are last to be rescued. Bilbo braces himself as an eagle flies in, grabbing him up in its talons and dropping him once out of eyeshot of the cliff. They know his secret needs to be kept. He shifts as he falls -used to the treatment-, landing with a pained thump upon another eagle's back; the shield digging painfully into his side.

He can hear Azog’s rage echoing against the mountainside as they fly East.
Bilbo heaves a tired sigh and buries his face into the feathers under him. He shudders and it has nothing to do with the night air and everything to do with the coming confrontation when they land.

His secret was out.

The Dwarrows knew.

Chapter End Notes

Quenya:

Ála sen! Yéta ni, Bilbo! - Do not let loose! Look at me, Bilbo!

Black Speech:

Nuzdigid? Nuzdigahd? - Do you smell that? The smell of fear?

Ganzilizi unarug obonazdaugish, Thorin unda Thrain. - I remember your father reeked of it, Thorin son of Thrain.

Org! Dooragibariz! - Orcs! That one is mine!

Arggorf!- Kill the others!

Sho gad adol! - Drink their blood!

Gorb shuri dai torag khobdidolg - Grab (the) beast (then) bring me (the) Dwarf's head!

O... shuri zung- But... (the) beast saves-

Az hizi torask shi da abgur! Az hizi na dorg shi! - I will beat it to follow! I will be it’s master!

P.S. This is close to what I imagine Bilbo's Warg face looks like when he's grinning at Azog:
Chapter Summary

Bilbo has been aiding Fundin for seven months now; Dwalin continues to read the letters Fundin sent while away.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Letter #6

November 15th, 2802 T.A

Dwalin,

I do not know what happened… They came from the north mountains as we traveled between the Gap of Rohan…

Bilbo had not smelled them, had not seen them. They had covered themselves in dirt and snow to hide their scents and hid amongst the rocks. The creatures seem to have learned that something in our camp could smell them...

We were holding them off at least… Until one of the buggers got in behind me...

I was guarding the Dwarflings, and over the cries of battle I could not hear the Orc coming up from behind to slay the young and me with them…

I did not see him shift. I only heard some of the Dwarflings cry out his name as I turned to witness a Warg rip out the Orc’s throat. Even more astonishing were the Dwarflings scrambling to huddle beneath the beast.

He’s a magnificent creature, when you get passed the fangs and… the fangs. His coat is black obsidian and the pelt has a stunning display of white rosettes along his back and stripes down his flanks. I stand about eye level with him - he’s still a pup in Skin-Changer terms you see.

Surprisingly, the Dwarrowdams took to him quite well despite their initial distrust. They eventually followed their Dwarflings example and welcome him readily. He had protected their young ones after all. However… many of my guard -even those who saw him as friend- have turned on him.

They wanted me to abandon him, Dwalin. To skin him; leave his carcass for the scavengers and sell his pelt to some wealthy lord! I refused and a coupe was in the works before the dams intervened.

They were fierce, Dwalin, trouncing my guards and sending them off limping with their tails between their legs as they defended Bilbo as one of their own - I’ve mentioned he’s a wee thing and that hasn’t changed.

He remains with the caravan, though I know he can see the unrest in the guards. He remains only for the sake of the dams and the Dwarflings; he told this to me last night. If they had not defended him, he would have slunk away into the shadows to guard us from there I have no doubt. The lad is
too self-sacrificing and wary for my taste... that he has to keep his guard up - he was just starting to relax around us- for fear of my Dwarrows attacking him...

What does that say of me who can’t even keep his retinue in check? To make them see that he is an ally that they had once treated like one of their own?

You must tell no one of his other skin. Better yet, tell no one of Bilbo at all. Burn this letter after reading it! The lad has enough grief now from the Dwarrows in my employ, I’d rather no more of our Kin know of this and seek to hunt him.

Send your prayers to Mahal the Hobbit’s way if you would, and send my love to Balin.

Fundin, Son of Farin

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

As Ered Luin looms in the distance, Bilbo finally breaks the silence that has been hanging over him like a shroud. Not even the snow beneath his furry feet crunches with his steps despite sinking into it.

“So I suppose this is goodbye.”

“Eh?”

Bilbo looks at him with a small frown.

“Considering I’ve caused you enough trouble with your guards for keeping me on, I assume this is the end of our association.”

“Now see here!” Fundin growls at the lad, grabbing his arm and pulling him to a stop; astonished and slightly hurt that the Hobbit would think he would turn him away after months of getting to know him. “Ye’ll leave my employ when I’m good an’ ready for ye to leave, or ye truly desire to leave. Not a second before that!”

The Hobbit’s brows rise in surprise as as he takes in the Dwarf. He’s red in the face and if it were possible, Bilbo was sure steam would be coming out of his ears.

“It’s just-”

“I’ll no’ hear it! Ye’ve done nothin’ wrong, lad. If they can’t see that, then they’ll have to take it up with me.”

“Fundin-”

“Yer more useful to me than half of the guards here, Bilbo. Yer small an’ light on yer feet, which makes ye a far better scout than any of my Dwarrows. Ye can change skins into somethin’ small or somethin’ far fiercer than a normal Warg; I’d be a fool to let ye go.”

The Hobbit says nothing to his declaration, though his brow pinches in thought.

“Also helps I like ye more than most of my guards,” Fundin whispers with a sly grin. “Not many of
them can sass as well as ye. They’re a very borin’ lot I’ll admit.”

Bilbo lets out a startled laugh, that genuine smile that Fundin rarely sees blooming across his face. He tentatively puts his hand on Fundin’s shoulder and grips it tight for a moment before dropping his arm.

“Then I guess I’ll await your summons?”

“Not going te visit Ered Luin?”

“Not this time. I think it best to… let tempers settle before I try and visit.”

“Dwalin will be disappointed.”

“I think he’ll survive until the next time,” the Hobbit chuckles though his eyes tell another tale.

The Hobbit steps out of the way of the caravan letting Dwarrows and cargo pass between them. Fundin stops, eyes on Bilbo until a cart passes before him.

Bilbo is nowhere to be seen as it rumbles along.

Fundin chuckles and proceeds towards home with the caravan.

“Mayhap I’ll visit the Shire before the travelin’ season starts,” he muses to himself.

Chapter End Notes

Interlude 2; what do you guys think? Also, here's a size chart to help anyone out. Fundin is roughly Dwalin's height, just fyi. Azog's Warg is at the 7 foot mark (according to the Hobbit chronicles books anyway). The brown Warg is Bilbo's size as a pup/teenager back when he was helping the caravans, the black is current size as he is full grown (his coat does change colors with the seasons) and Skin-Changers' skins are usually bigger....
**He's My Cousin... A Couple Species Removed, Of Course**

Chapter Summary

Skin-Changers are a thing now you know. It might be a good idea not to anger them Thorin...

Chapter Notes

**Timeline, Ages, Etc.**

**Skin Deep Alternate**

**Timeline**

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*As Thorin was only 53 when Azanulbizar was fought in the Tolkien timeline, I only adjusted his in mine to keep him near that age when Azanulbizar happens in my timeline, so that his personality wouldn’t be changed too much. He would have been of age if I had kept his birth year as in the original and that can change things.

**As Bilbo is a Skin-Changer, I’ve decided Skin-Changers have a longer lifespan than Dwarrows but much shorter than Elves.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As dawn breaks, Bilbo rises from his slumber, unsure of when fell asleep or for how long, but feeling somewhat better. Pain shoots up his leg when he shifts and he revises that assessment. Trying to curtail moving much, he looks around, finding they are still air bound and not out of the Misty Mountains just yet. The Dwarrows are being carried by their respective eagles nearby, but they are
silent. Peering over, he gets a glimpse of Thorin clutched in the eagle’s talons.

He’s still unmoving; hasn’t even stirred from what Bilbo can tell at this distance.

“Thorin!” he hears Fíli call out frantically to his uncle, falling silent when there is no response.

The eagles soar over the mountains and Bilbo takes the opportunity to absorb the rare view he was given. There weren’t going to be many peaceful moments once they landed after all.

The mountains soon begin to taper off; the Greenwood -now Mirkwood- rising from the earth in the distance; and the eagles begin their descent, banking around mountain bends and diving between the rises. The eagle carrying Thorin and Gandalf pull forward as the rest circle around the Carrock -he had seen it years ago in the distance when Gandalf and he were on another journey- jutting out of the ground; Thorin’s lands and sets the Dwarf down upon it. Gandalf’s eagle soon follows.

“Thorin!” the Hobbit hears Gandalf call out to the Dwarf with no reply.

Bilbo’s banks and lands, dipping low to allow the Hobbit to slide off with as little jostling as possible; the oak shield bouncing against his back where he had slung it during the descent.

“My thanks friend,” he says as he runs a hand against the eagles beak.

“Farewell, Bilbo! Wherever you fare, till your aeries receive you at your journey’s end!” the eagle says before it takes off.

“And may the wind under your wings bear you where the sun sails and the moon walks!” Bilbo answers for he and Gandalf; for it was the correct reply to the eagles polite well wishes.

Gandalf has rushed to Thorin’s side, looking him over. Bilbo is anxious to go stand next to the wizard, but the other Dwarrows are being dropped off one by one. As their feet meet the stone, they gather near Thorin and Gandalf. He’s not going to risk being gutted just for being near their King no matter the protection the wizard could provide.

The Dwarrows hover as Gandalf chants, passing his hand over Thorin. The Dwarf gasps in air as the spell ends and Bilbo puts more distance between himself and the Company; seeing several of them fingering their weapons as they glance between him and their King. That they eye his injured leg -something they are only now noticing- is not overlooked by Bilbo. Shoulders tense, he calculates he has just enough energy and magic to change into his larger one; twice at most before he's locked into his Warg skin; and escape...

"Uncle!!" Fíli and Kíli cry in relief as they engulf the elder Dwarf.

"The Halfling?" Bilbo hears the Dwarf breath out and nearly holds his own.

"It's alright. Bilbo is here and he's quite safe," Gandalf says neutrally as he stands, sensing the tension coming from the other Dwarrows.

Bilbo sees Dwalin throw a glance back at Balin as he and Kíli help their King and Uncle off the ground once the princes have released him.

"Oh, Uncle, it was glorious!" Kíli starts to say once the Dwarf is on his feet, crowding into his Uncle's space.

Bitter thoughts circle in his head as Balin and Dwalin come to stand with him; Gandalf shuffling closer as well. Now that what he is and what he changes into is out, the Dwarrows he started to
consider his pack- despite their reservations with him- would seek to hunt him for some perceived slight just like those who had done so before. There were no Dwarrowdams or Fundin here to defend him this time. Injured as he is, he would be hard-pressed in defending himself against them with his daggers, much less in his Warg skin. This had been why he had avoided Dwarrows like a plague after Fundin died.

"Kíli," Fíli hisses at his younger brother as he watches Dwalin, Balin, and Gandalf separate from the Company to stand beside Bilbo; their position was clear, they would stand with the Hobbit.

“What was, Kíli?” Thorin asks as he looks Bilbo over, a vague memory of seeing the Halfling hurl himself at the Orc flashing in his mind; he could be injured.

Bilbo looks at Fíli and can see the elder prince is torn. To stand by whatever his Uncle and King decrees once Kíli has bared all, or to stand with him, the Hobbit Skin-Changer he has come to see as another Uncle? Bilbo just smiles tightly at the Dwarfling when he catches his gaze, giving a small shake of his head. He is the eldest; the next in line to the throne. Silently he hopes to convey to the lad there is no choice here; to stand with his Uncle and King. He would not come between him and his blood family -though really all of them were blood kin of some sort weren’t they? It only seems to distress the youngling more.

"None of us could get to you, dangling from the tree as we were, but Uncle Bilbo did! He was out of that tree so quickly I can't even fathom how he did it with his wound. Then he was racing to you through the fire and when that shaikul rukhs was about to kill you, Uncle leapt at it! One blink a tiny, little Hobbit, the next this great black Warg with a most wondrous pelt, biting the Orc in half! Oh, you should have seen it Uncle!” (cowardly orcs)

There is a long pause of tense silence, Kíli -bouncing on his heels with excitement- waiting eagerly for Thorin’s reaction and not seeming to understand the gravity of the situation.

"What?" the Dwarrow King nearly chokes out.

"The Halfling," Glóin speaks up before Kíli can open his mouth, nearly spitting the word from his lips. "Is a spy for the Orcs! He's a Warg! Cursed! What dark magic are ye under beast?!"

“What?” Kíli cries out in surprise. “How is-”

The other Dwarrows clamor and roar over the Dwarfling’s words at the Hobbit standing between his brothers who have drawn their blades. Kíli looks at his fellow Dwarrows in distressed confusion as Thorín stares at Bilbo in confused shock. Bilbo remains silent -though wondering where on Arda Glóin got the idea he was a spy… well he does turn into a Warg, but still...- and meets his gaze, ignoring the shouts of the Company while steeling himself to face Dwarrow prejudice once more in his life. He wants to snarl and snap at them for their curses and slurs.

What right had they to judge him? Accuse him of being a spy? He has done nothing but help them and their kin, his mind races; eyes darting quickly about to find the nearest escape route. If he had been a spy, Thorin would not be among the living right now! None of them would be!

"He’s no Orc spy! My brother's a Hobbit before he's a Warg; he’s a Skin-Changer, Glóin, son of Gróin!" Dwalin roars from beside him, only Keeper in his hands.

Of course, as with everything involving Dwarrows, the Company ignores sense and blows everything out of proportion.

"How do we know he isn’t? I’ve never heard of a Skin-Changer before. It's not natural! None of it!"
Dori yells out, and it's like a blow to Bilbo's already aching chest to hear one he considers a friend say such words. "It's obvious he's under some dark spell!"

Bilbo holds the Dwarrow King's gaze, watching as his confused expression cracks and morphs with anger and betrayal through the din of the other Dwarrows and his brothers are creating.

*What right did he have to feel betrayed, jumping to conclusions as he was; as they all were?!!*

Vicious utterances call for his head as weapons are drawn; for his *skin* -and that brought sense-recall he would rather be rid of;- and vicious protests are made by Balin and Dwalin. Gandalf looks upon the lot of them; his face growing darker with each vile word thrown at Bilbo. The princes, Ori and Nori remain silent. Due to their confusion or because they too feel betrayed -though he doubts that is the case with Kíli as excited as he had been-, Bilbo knows not, nor is he willing to break his gaze from the Dwarrow King's to determine. He would rather be prepared when a blade finally comes for his throat.

"*Si-lence!*" Gandalf slams his staff upon the stone, his magic raising his voice and the cracking of rocks impossible to ignore. "You ungrateful, hard-headed simpletons! He is no Orc spy or under any enchantment but his own! You *will* give us the time to explain or so help me I will turn you all into moles!"

A few of the Company grumble as they take cautious steps back, but say no more; their weapons still drawn. Thorin's gaze nor his ire has erred from Bilbo.

"And what could this... *liar* say to defend himself?" he snarls.

"Thorin, just let 'im-*" Dwalin begins to say.

"And you two! Did either of you consider he could be a spy for our enemies? You *knew* of this creature’s deceit!" he roars, stomping forward only to be intercepted by Balin.

"Thorin, he *is* a Hobbit and we needed a burglar. He worked with our father for years, what-*"

The Dwarf shoves him aside, ignoring his words and advances on Bilbo who narrows his eyes at him. This Dwarf's sudden lashing out when in a temper sets Bilbo's instincts on edge. A leader should not strike out at his people, his kin, verbally or otherwise, when his anger was not for them. *Especially* not the ones Bilbo considered his.

Mere steps away, Dwalin steps between them, Keeper held at his side, and puts a hand on Thorin’s shoulder. Before he can speak, Thorin shoves him back with more force than he had Balin.

"You are sworn to protect those of Royal blood! You’ve let a threat close to the *last* of Durin’s line!" he shouts at Dwalin before shoving him aside and advancing on Bilbo once again.

“He saved ye!” Dwalin roars as he catches his balance, only to be ignored by his King.

Thorin reaches out to snap up the Hobbit by his lapels when Bilbo steps back, seething and ready to snap at this pompous Dwarf and his irrational Company. He can understand the King’s position -the scent of fear is thick and fear for one’s own can drive people to violence-, but once again he is shunned by those he only wanted to aid -only wanted to be friends with- because they would not listen. They were no different from the caravan’s guards; would be no different from the ones that could come after if he continues trying to aid *Dwarrows*.

"If you would clean your ears out of all the dirt clotting them, you would have heard Dwalin and Balin tell you exactly what I am," Bilbo sneers after a moment, putting his hands behind his back, leaving his front wide open to attack and affecting a rather bored, yet annoyed air.

Only Nori seems to realize the point of such a foolish move. The thief narrows his eyes as he watches the interaction between his chosen King and the Hobbit he’s decided to bring into his fold. They were akin to two alpha predators facing off; the calmer one -the prudent one- sometimes provoking the other into attacking first by leaving themselves open. His little Shadow Thief was just full of surprises. Then again, the Hobbit was a true predator wasn’t he? He decides to watch for the time being and see how this played out. Though if Thorin was going to do something drastic to their Hobbit-like kick him off the Company or worse, have him hunted down-, Nori knew he would not idly stand by.

He knows an enemy spy when he sees one and spy Bilbo was not. A spy for them he could be -sneaky as he is-, but with how the Company was reacting, the chances of the Hobbit sticking around were growing slimmer by the second. Which would be a shame as he’s beginning to prefer Bilbo’s level head the longer this journey continues. He’s seen Bilbo’s shrewd eyes observing them; seen him balk and bite his lips to keep quiet when actions were taken that even Nori was questioning their leaders sanity. Being able to shift skins was just a boon in his opinion. The Hobbit has proven to have a more ingenious and perceptive mind between his ears than any of the others bothered to realize -did any of them bother to notice that Bilbo only defied Thorin’s orders when the King can’t keep his disdain in check, thus showing more respect for him than he was given? No, of course they didn’t.

“I am no spy! What in the bloody hells gave any of you that idea? Did you just happen to forget I go into a blood rage when Orcs are around? Or did you go blind when I killed that Orc about to kill your King?” the Hobbit snarls at the lot of them, his fists clenching behind his back. “I am a Hobbit Skin-Changer, since it needs to be repeated. There is no curse, nor am I a Warg that can take a Hobbit’s skin. I was born this way, you ignorant clot-heads! At least try and rub together those rocks you call brains.”

Though Bilbo need not antagonize King and Company, Nori laments with a sigh; the Hobbit did have that sharp tongue and a bit of a temper after all.

Thorin roars as he unsheathes Orcrist, swinging at the Hobbit in his rage.

Two sudden, quick clangs of steel, and the Company watches as Thorin's stance is thrown wide, leaving him open to a second dagger Bilbo holds to his throat. Gold slit eyes glare up at him from a smooth, beardless face, as the first dagger keeps him from using his sword. Thorin gulps as the blade brushes against his jugular, hands beginning to shake and eyes wide in shock. He hadn’t even had time to recover from the block.

Wild eyes dart around the Dwarf’s shoulder -bloody tall bastard- and to the Company who had jerked forward to intervene. Dwalin had rushed forward, just grabbing the King’s fur lined coat only after Bilbo had his dagger at his neck.

Back off! those eyes roar at the Company.

"Watch your temper or it will be my fangs at your throat instead," Bilbo sneers, large fangs flashing as he meets the King’s eyes once the other Dwarrows have retreated some steps. "I have done nothing but help your miserable hides survive this journey. What evidence have you to accuse me of treachery? What right to claim my life when I have done nothing to you? You accuse my brothers who have provided your line with wisdom and strength for decades? What right do any of you have?!"
With a snarl, Bilbo backs away, hands dropping and blades held loosely at his sides, tapping them lightly against his legs -ignoring the left one as it throbs-, as his eyes and teeth return to their usual states. His heart is pounding and he would rather be prepared if the Dwarf attacks again or the Company rushes him.

"Regardless of your lots’... reservations," -he scoffs the word- "I’ve signed the contract to be your burglar. I am honor bound whether you like it or not. As for your, frankly, ridiculous claims of me being a spy; present your evidence and I’ll gladly leave you to your fate. Until then I remain, be it within your ranks or without, I leave to your judgement, Thorin Oakenshield."

"What?! Bilbo, yer not-" Dwalin snarls, releasing the King’s coat and stepping around him.

"That is your King’s decision," Bilbo says with stony finality, hard eyes flicking to Dwalin then back to the King. "Now, I am tired and would like to rest in the very, very near future, if at all possible. Standing here barking about your grievances will not make that happen any sooner. Decide now or later, oh King, but rest assured I will not be sleeping anywhere near you lot as things stand now for the rest of this journey. You may take comfort in that at least."

Thorin stares at Bilbo with a hard gaze which Bilbo returns in kind.

"Can you prove that you are innocent?"

Fangs and golden eyes return as the Skin-Changer’s lips curl up.

“I have nothing to prove to any of you. My actions this entire journey should be proof enough. You would have been dead back there with Azog if I had been in league with them! Think about that!” the Hobbit roars; roars at him.

Startled, the King resists the urge to step back. The Hobbit steps back though, chest heaving and fists clenching his daggers at his sides. He looks ready to punch him again. Thorin takes a few calming breathes yet his heart races with lingering fear for his nephews and companions. The small creature, the one he deemed useless and weak, just became the most dangerous being among them aside from Tharkûn. The wizard who volunteered the Hobbit and claims to have known the Hobbit for nigh on a century...

“If Dís were here, she’d knock all a yer heads together for not thinkin’ bout this like ye’ve got brains in yer skulls,” he hears Dwalin growl at him.

Another few breaths, and Thorin thinks back on everything that has happened on this journey and the Halfling’s part in it. He could not find anything that would imply the Halfling was in league with Azog. Before Rivendell, the small creature had fallen into a bloodlust that had slaughtered Orcs like it was the only thing that mattered; he had only seen such intense rage in Bifur when fighting the very same enemy. At the cliff, he had seen that same bloodlust descending on the Hobbit while in the trees until Gandalf pulled him from it.

The Halfling did not just dislike Orcs; there was a malice within him that was only sated with their death by his hand; animosity so deep it takes a wizard spouting some ancient language to pull him from it.

No, the Hobbit was no Orc spy.

But still, the Halfling withheld vital information about himself; could change into a Warg at will...

“Show me then.”
Bilbo raises a brow as his eyes narrow in confusion yet says nothing.

"After everything that has happened, it is true we’ve accused you wrongly in naming you a spy for the Orcs. However, you withheld information about your abilities that was vital we know. Show me your Warg skin, Ha-"

“You say vital information? Would knowing I shift skins before this journey have softened your lot’s tongues, Thorin Oakenshield? No, had you known before leaving the Shire, you would have left me behind or tried to skin me then and there. The only reason any of you are making such a fuss over this is because you fear what I am. That is the only reason anyone has no matter what pretty words they try and hide it behind.” Bilbo interrupts with a steely retort, fangs flashing and a growl layering his voice. “Fear or greed in any case.”

“Can you blame us?” for Thorin could not deny that fear was influencing his every thought and action since they nearly died on that mountainside.

“Can you blame me when revealing myself at any time has always garnered this same reaction from Dwarrows?”

“Certainly-”

“Always.”

Thorin and Bilbo stare each other down.

“I would still see your Warg skin, Half-”

“Certainly you are above insults at this point, Thorin,” Bilbo sneers. “I would hate to have to knock you senseless again.”

Thorin regards him with caution, sweat starting to drip down his skin as his fear surfaces again. The Hobbit had done it once, he would not be so proud as to think he could not do it again and with more force.

“Very well... Show me your Warg skin, Master Baggins.”

"I would rather not, actually,” Bilbo says calmly -the tension in his shoulders says otherwise-, sheathing one of his blades and using the other to pick under his dirty fingernails, averting his gaze to focus on them instead of Thorin's blue eyes, but never straying far from the sword in his hand.

He can scent the fear getting stronger on the Dwarf’s skin. It was making him nauseous and more irritable.

"Why not?” the Dwarf growls as he stands stiffly -the pain was getting harder to ignore- in front of the Hobbit, grip tightening on Orcrist.

Glancing up at him and seeing the Dwarf was not going to let this go before he got his royal way, Bilbo shoves away the frustration coursing through him and sheathes his second blade; chin tilted up in defiance. He was now -from what anyone could see- defenseless, and he is not above deflection in order to get the King’s and his kin’s guard down if it meant a clean escape. Kit-Fox instincts at their finest and a lesson he learned decades ago.

"Because I’m exhausted? Because we’ve not had a decent rest for at least a month? How about I was injured, changing skins to heal what damage I could and wandering blind in those tunnels for hours until I heard your voices? Do those count?” -his arms making grand gestures and starting to pace in a
tight back-forth line as he continues; though never showing his back- “Or how about when I had to change into my more taxing skin -which in my condition is not advised- to save your idiotic hide from an Orc set on beheading you? -By the way here’s your bloody shield. Try not to lose it this time.- Then change back so I could be carried by the Eagles, and now I'm dealing with all of you being bigoted, axe-beating sods. I need food, water and sleep, in that order, or I'm liable to start snapping at all of you with my ‘teeth’.”

The Dwarrow King looks quite taken aback by the Hobbit's sudden shift in demeanor and spirited words, glancing over his shoulder to the other Dwarrows as though to get some cue from their equally startled selves as he numbly attaches his shield to its proper place.

"What does any of that have to do with showing me?"

“Truly? Everything you rock-guz-”

"What Bilbo’s avoiding to mention is this," Gandalf decides to interrupt, slapping a hand over the Hobbit’s mouth. "If he is to change into his Warg skin again so soon, as exhausted as he is -And starved going by the state of his clothes. What on Arda have you done to him?- it is quite possible he will be temporarily… ehm… bound until he has rested and his inherent magic replenishes. However, his other skin is small enough to change into without any consequence to his fatigue."

Bilbo glares death up at the Istari and nipping at his palm -he has the gall to look affronted-, knowing full well what that old badger is up to. ‘Airing out the linen’ as his mother would say. He had wanted to keep his Kit-Fox skin to himself at the very least with how pig-headed these Dwarrows were being.

"Other skin?" Kíli says coming out of his silence.

"Yes, his first alternate skin in fact. Gained when-"

"I would see his Warg skin, Tharkûn," Thorin commands.

"Now Thorin-"

"It is this or his contract is void and he can take himself back to the Shire."

A growl and sigh sound from Dwalin and Balin as gasps come from the prince's and Ori's throats. The others remain stonily silent, their stares -though Nori’s gaze is locked onto Thorin instead- boring into Bilbo’s frame. Gandalf lets out a weary, sad sigh and looks to his favorite Hobbit. It was his decision after all.

"You might as well just toss me upon your swords, oh King," Bilbo sneers, stepping back before a massive black, patterned Warg Kíli vaguely described, is suddenly towering over them, eyes flinty and angry.

The Warg -Bilbo- holds his head high, daring any of them to attack him, eyes tracking every movement they make. Thorin studies the Skin-Changer with narrowed, fearful eyes. This... skin is heavily muscled and lean, built for power and speed like most Wargs. Black as pitch, he has to pull his eyes from the rosettes and stripes that seem to glow in the sun to focus on the... Hobbit's face. Golden slit eyes -like any other Warg- lock onto him, his massive head lowering as Thorin slowly sheathes Orcrist. He was no fool. The Skin-Changer stands several heads over him, larger than any Warg he has ever seen. Even if he were to stand on Dwalin's shoulders, he would only just reach the Hobbit's shoulders if he stretched his arms. If his actions back on the cliff said anything about his durability, his injury would not hinder him much in fighting them off either. The Hobbit could rip
him in two before his sword could hit its mark. With his head held high, shoving his fear down, he proceeds forward with cautious, limping steps; hands held before him to show the Hobbit he means no harm.

Really, what harm could I do to a creature twice my size, he thinks as he comes to a stop nearly right beneath the Hobbit’s jaws.

He needs to starve his fear with knowledge like he has done for decades. Logically, he knows the Hobbit has become more of a boon than anything. Seeing how much damage the Skin-Changer could do and understanding the creature’s motives will hopefully assuage his fears. Assure the Dwarf that the Hobbit’s fangs will -Valar willing- not be tearing into his or his kin’s flesh. Dwalin would never have let the Skin-Changer close -even if he is claimed kin- if he was a threat to them. But still, he must see for himself.

Lifting a hand slowly up to his lower jaw, he taps lightly on it, snatching his hand back when the Hobbit jerks back at the touch, his head dropping to protect his throat; eyes wide and darting around; fangs and teeth bared with his ears laid flat against his skull; growling a warning. He narrows his eyes. He had only seen such reactions from the Women and dogs whose Men had beaten them.

But…

Gandalf is suddenly besides the Hobbit's head with a hand upon his furry cheek, which drew no further reaction from the Skin-Changer.

"Calm, Bilbo," the wizard croons, running his hand through the thick fur. "I am here."

Dwalin steps around him as the Hobbit quiets and approaches his brother. Stopping just under his jaws, the burly Dwarf holds out his hand and waits. Thorin watches as Bilbo presses his nose into his brother's hand willingly though his eyes never leave his person. Those eyes are hard with mistrust yet daring him to say anything more about him or Dwalin.

"Open up," Dwalin tells the Hobbit.

Golden eyes snap to Dwalin and Thorin gets the distinct impression that the Hobbit is raising a brow at his guard.

"Thorin jus' wants te assess, brother, like I did back in the Shire." Dwalin says lightly, but threaded with steel. “Though not fer the same reasons…”

The Hobbit snorts, lips twitching and what sounds an awful lot like grumbling -though rightly terrifying to hear- vibrating in his throat.

“Manners!” Gandalf snaps with a tap of his staff on the Hobbit’s flank.

The Hobbit snarls at the wizard and flinches to the side, Dwalin shuffling with him to stand by his right foreleg.

Right. His leg is injured. No wonder he was acting highly aggressive.

“Oh! I’m so sorry, my dear boy! Let me have a look at it.”

Gandalf shuffles back, pressing one hand to Bilbo’s side as the other hovers over the wound. He looks up over his arm sharply and meets the Skin-Changer’s eyes.

“Your ribs are also…”
The Hobbit nods his head and turns back to staring at the King; assessing him in turn for a moment.

Thorin is abruptly staring dumbfounded into the gaping maw of the Skin-Changer. Large fangs easily the length of his forearm glint in the early light as the Hobbit holds his jaws open wide enough to see back into his throat. Jaws filled with very sharp, very large -did he mention that?- teeth...

"Tha's not how ye showed me," Dwalin says with exasperation as he smacks the Skin-Changer's leg before moving back under his jaws.

Jaws that snap shut with a click and an odd sound strangely resembling a chuckle comes from the Hobbit. Thorin narrows his gaze at Bilbo who stares back, tense and wary but with amused eyes. The wily creature was testing his boundaries like he had throughout their journey. Always snarking back subtly or not, pushing Thorin to either react or ignore him. It was both entertaining and frustrating.

He watches in amazement as Dwalin slips his hands under black lips and grabs the Hobbit by his lower fangs, yanking down and shaking the Skin-Changer’s head in brotherly exasperation. Thorin is suddenly hit with a thought.

"Your dagger."

Dwalin -looking ridiculous as he makes faces at the Hobbit while jerking his head around; who’s opened his jaws; licking and panting in the Dwarf’s face- stops his roughhousing and slides his gaze to him.

"Which one? I’ve lots of daggers, Thorin."

"The fang. The one Fundin gave you. It’s one of his, isn’t it."

"What of it?" Dwalin gruffs out, sliding one of his hands from the Skin-Changer's fangs to the bottom of his jaw, wiping the drool off on his fur. The Hobbit huffs and grumbles at him.

"You’ve known about him for decades. He gave you that dagger before we marched on Moria. I was there, I saw it."

"Aye, I’ve known. Our father only ever tol’ me of him in letters. Never got te meet him till we went te the Shire."

He sighs, reaching up and patting Bilbo’s nose.

"And why would he have one of his fangs?"

Dwalin glowers at his King.

"Bilbo gave it te him. How else would he have got it?"

Thorin remains silent, but Dwalin has known him for decades. With a sneer, the Guardsman pulls the dagger from its sheath and points it at Thorin.

"This is one o’ his pup fangs, crafted inte this dagger te protect our father when Bilbo couldn’t. -By the way, I want one of yer fangs. No, the ones ye have now… O’course after it falls out, ye cheeky bastard!- What was I sayin’... Right. Father gave it te me before Moria for my protection. This fang’s saved my life more times than I can count during that bloodbath and many times after. Those same teeth saved ye from that Orc! Don’ ye dare think that my brother’s fangs are for anythin’ other than our protection, Thorin Oakenshield!"
Thorin is silent for a time, shifting his gaze between his irate friend -who seems to know the Hobbit incredibly well if he’s having a conversation while he’s still in Warg skin-, the Hobbit who is watching him with narrowed eyes, and the wizard who looks close to making good on his threat from where he tends to Bilbo’s wounds. He can see the Skin-Changer is tense, ready to shove Dwalin behind him should he lash out like he had earlier -something he was not proud of in the least. Exhaustion suffuses his muscles as fear leaks from him with each breath he lets out. Dwalin, Balin, and Gandalf were right.

As the haze of fear, battle blood, and misplaced betrayal fades and his mind clears enough to think, it starts to make sense in his mind. Master Baggins has done nothing but help them despite his and most of the Company’s unwarranted animosity or avoidance. Besides the wizard, Balin, and Dwalin, only his nephews, the Ri brothers, and Bofur were the ones acknowledging the Hobbit and Bilbo repaid that with watching over them more than the others.

He approaches the pair slowly and sets a hand upon Dwalin’s shoulder -the Dwarf has re-sheathed the dagger- in plain view of the Hobbit, meeting his golden eyes. With weary a nod, he steps fully beside his friend, briefly meeting Gandalf’s eyes. The Skin-Changer gazes at him warily, keeping most of his attention on his hands. Thorin shakes out his arms then holds a hand in front of him as a sign of peace; to show he is unarmed in any way. He is only vaguely aware of the Company and it’s only the Hobbit’s eyes leaving him, lips curling up in an aggressive display that has him turning and looking back. With nary a thought, he turns his back to the Hobbit.

-Only after he has slept and eaten will Thorin realize that in his sleeping mind, he has already decided to start trusting their Burglar; for he was starting to become *their* Burglar indeed.-

The Company -sans Nori- has decided to move closer and Master Baggins would soon have nowhere to escape with the shear drop behind him and the Company blocking what looks to be the only way down.

“Unless you are trying to provoke him, step back!” Thorin snaps at his comrades and stalks some steps towards them.

Did they have any sense to not corner a wary creature? Especially one injured and as large and equipped to tear them to pieces as the Skin-Changer is?

The Company startles and many of them follow his command when realizing their blunder. Glòin, however remains where he is, hands still upon his axe and eyes pulled down in a harsh glare.

“Yer just goin’ te let him amongst us, Thorin?” the fire-haired Dwarf shouts, ignoring his brother who paws at him to pull him back. “He may be no spy, but he’s lied te us!”

“Can ye blame him? With how ye lot been actin’ since the Shire, I didn’t want te mention it either,” Dwalin sneers.

“Ye-”

“Glòin! We will speak later! For now, step back!” Thorin commands him.

Red in the face and looking to argue, Óin suddenly throws a hand over his mouth and bodily drags his flailing brother to the back of the group. Thorin watches them for a moment to make sure no one else decides to do anything to provoke Master Baggins before turning back around. The Hobbit has sidestepped with Dwalin, moving closer to the stairway down, taking Gandalf with him who refuses to be distracted from tending his wounds. Thorin sighs. He can guess as to why the Skin-Changer is exponentially more wary of them now. Something must have happened at some point when he was
helping Fundin with the caravans. Obviously involving some of the Dwarrows.

Master Baggins’ continuous glances at his sword hand make more sense now and feels his stomach clench. From Bilbo’s reactions and wariness of blades, not only was it Dwarrows, it was more likely some of the guards and the memories still linger. It has colored the Hobbit’s interactions with his people for years, even when they had entered his home.

He approaches again with short, pained steps with hands spread sanguinely. Once close to Master Baggins, he stops, keeping his posture loose and as nonthreatening as possible.

“I’ve told you that you were a burden; that you would not survive in the wilds. That you had no place amongst us. For such words you socked me in the face like any Dwarrow worth their name. But unlike any, you stayed and protected the Company and myself time and again.”

Thorin raises his hand up as far as is comfortable, letting it hover near Master Baggins’ jaws.

“I cannot speak for the others, and while I dislike that you withheld what you are, I can understand your reasons are your own. I will not deny that I am still… angry with you and your brother’s for this deceit, and I cannot trust you will not do so again. But I have never been so wrong about someone in all of my life.”

The Dwarrow King takes a deep breath and meets the Hobbit’s gold slit eyes.

“Can you trust my word that no harm will come to you from any in the Company while you are under contract?”

The Hobbit stares at him wide eyed, shifting nervously on his paws -earning him a harsh reprimand from Gandalf- as he flicks his gaze to Dwalin and what he assumes would be Balin. Thorin can see his guard nod -and he can only guess Balin has done the same- and the Hobbit’s eyes lay on him again, shaking his head negatively, but he stretches his muzzle down tentatively. A cold, wet nose touches his hand briefly before the Hobbit is pulling away again, and Thorin understands. The Hobbit has been -assumedly- abused by Dwarrows, and he and the others would have to earn -or earn again in Dori’s and Bofur’s case- Master Baggins’ trust just as the Hobbit would have to earn theirs.

“I am sorry I named you Spy; that I have doubted you.”

Bilbo looks as though he is going to reply in some way when a commotion of voices behind him has the Dwarrow King turning to see Kili, Fili and Ori rushing passed him and bouncing around the Skin-Changer, who is looking at them as with what can be interpreted as exasperated fondness. Bilbo sits on his haunches despite Gandalf’s protests -grumbling again which earns him another swat with the staff on a non-injured area- as the Dwarflings swarm around him, staring in awe as they poke at his body and run their hands through his fur despite Dori’s protests.

Ori’s face morphs into a thunderous scowl as he whirls around, eyes on fire as they land on his eldest brother.

“No, Dori! I’m sick of them constantly treating Uncle Bilbo like an outsider. And now this? I thought you had become friends with him. Now you treat him like a monster!”

The youngling continues to bowl over any of his brother’s arguments.

“He’s been with us for months and while you lot have been horrible to him, he has done nothing but help us. Don’t you remember he saved me from the trolls?” he cries out. “He saved our King! How can you turn on him like this?!”
Dori’s protests fall silent and many of the Dwarrows hang their heads in shame.

“I’ve seen this pattern before,” Fíli says distractedly; willfully ignoring the strife happening between the others -a possible tactful interruption to move the attention off of his chosen Uncle.

Nori -who approaches Bilbo slowly but with a jaunty grin and open stride- pokes at the Hobbit’s left foreleg.

“What a sly little Shadow Thief ye are. That was ye wasn’t it?”

The Dwarflings and the rest of the Company -aside from Dwalin, Balin, and Gandalf of course- look at the thief in confusion. Bilbo bares his teeth and it disturbingly looks like a smirk upon his fanged face. When it takes longer than a minute for anyone to make the connection, Nori can’t contain himself.

“Remember Mister Guardsman’s furry, loud hat?”

The Dwarfling’s eyes all widen as it hits them,

“You’re Bi-,” Kíli starts to say before he realizes the absurdity of saying it like that. “You’re the fox?”

Bilbo nods his giant head.

“Eh? What box? There’s no box ‘ere,” Óin grumbles loudly as he tightens his grip on his brother’s mouth.

“Fox ye deaf bastard,” Bofur sighs, still looking dejected and not at all cheerful. “Though it makes sense. The yappy thing wasn’t keen te Thorin’s lip just like Bilbo.”

Thorin shoots a glare at the miner before all the Dwarrows suddenly get silent.

“Well, yes,” Gandalf says petulantly. “That would be his first skin. You would have known that if you had let him show you it instead.”

Several of the Dwarrows’ faces color red while others only shake their heads in disbelief or barely contain their outrage. The things that fox had heard and seen, only to find out it was Bilbo all along.

Nori starts grumbling much to the Hobbit’s amusement.

“I should’a seen it. Yer always gone when the fox was around. Then ye’d be there and the fox’d be gone. Not typical behavior for a pet, much less one ye had for years, wild or not.”

“So where were you skulking off to during those times?” Thorin asks a bit tightly.

The fox had caught him in some compromising situations as well, especially in Rivendell.

“I send ‘im scoutin’ after he’s done huntin’ when I take watch,” Dwalin says stiffly. “He can smell an’ hear better’n the rest of us.”

Kíli shoves himself between Bilbo’s legs and site, falling back to lean against his stomach while smoothing his hands through the fur on his legs.

“Mmm, Uncle, you’re so warm. I demand you be in this skin every night so we can cuddle,” the Dwarfling murmurs.
Bilbo snorts, bending his head down between his legs to look at the youngling; the brat-let grins and blows a raspberry at him. A long slimy tongue to the face is what he gets for his cheek.

“Eeeew! Uncle!”

Ori and Fíli quickly shove themselves on either side of Kíli to experience the warmth for themselves.

“Uncle, you’re now officially decreed to sleep in this skin every night,” Fíli says with a groan of appreciation as the heat seeps beneath his leathers and mail, warming him for the first time in what felt like ages.

“You hear that Uncle Bilbo! That was by order of the Prince Regent!”

The Hobbit stands, sending the Dwarflings toppling backwards onto the stone with a thump.

“Hey!”

“But we were so warm!”

“Uncle! Get back down here!”

Bilbo ignores their protests as Gandalf resumes his treatment, huffing at the Hobbit’s antics.

“I’m afraid I can’t do much more until you can shift back, my boy. Your fur has gotten thicker with the seasons change.”

The Skin-Changer shakes out his fur; looking like a fluffy, fanged ball before his fur settles back down.

“Ye know,” Nori says as he continues observing Bilbo. “I’ve only ever heard of Skin-Changers with one skin…”

“Yes, well Bilbo’s magic is a bit different from the usual Skin-Changer’s. He was born only with the pattern you see on his pelt and didn’t change until he was but a tween in Hobbit years,” Gandalf says, moving to lean against Bilbo’s shoulder, soaking in his heat as well. “I don’t understand fully how it works -you’ll have to ask him when he’s Hobbit skinned- but from what I do; his magic steals the skin of creatures that it deems… useful and changes them as it sees fit.”

“It steals them?”

“Indeed. His magic is what you could say… sentient. To a degree of course.”

He lets the thief absorb that information for a moment before he addresses the Company.

“We’ll re-”

“Is that what I think it is?” Bofur says as he walks passed -giving Bilbo a timid grin and space- when something catches his eye, coming to a stop near the edge facing East.

Thorin turns his gaze East as well, eyes widening as he sees what Bofur speaks of. He glances at Bilbo once, seeing the Skin-Changer looking in that direction curiously, but with no obvious intention of following. Thorin stays near as the rest of the Company goes to stand beside Bofur.

The Dwarrow King meets Bilbo’s eyes.

“Our home,” he says, a small smile spreading on his face when the Skin-Changer nods.

“A raven!” Óin exclaims, pointing at a bird as it flies passed them towards the horizon. “The birds are returning to the mountain!”

“That, my dear Óin, is a thrush,” Gandalf sighs, looking at the elderly healer with exasperation.

“We’ll take it as a sign,” Thorin decides. “A good omen.”

Thorin turns, raising his hand in invitation, and Bilbo does not disappoint even though he hesitates. The Skin-Changer allows the Dwarf to pat his snout as he passes.

“Aye, we need all those we can get,” Dwalin huffs before making his way back to Bilbo’s side; running a hand into his fur as Bilbo raises his nose to the wind, looking back to the West.

“What’s it?” he asks, thought his question is drowned out by Thorin.

“We camp here for the night,” his King announces as the Company retreats from the view of their home.

Bilbo only heaves a great sigh before he makes his way to the stairs. Dwalin hangs onto his fur, unwilling to let his brother out of his reach and inadvertently getting pulled along. The Hobbit gives the other Dwarrows a wide berth and begins to descend the stairs.

“Where are you going, Bilbo?” Gandalf calls out to him in confusion, causing the Company to follow Gandalf’s gaze.

The Skin-Changers rumbles something which causes the wizard to frown.

“Speak up, my boy! And not so fast!”

“Ye understand… Warg-ish?” Nori asks as he looks at the wizard, intrigued.

“Hush, Nori,” the wizard huffs at him before addressing Bilbo again. “Say it again, I say.”

If a beast’s shoulders could fall, Bilbo’s certainly did. Between one blink and the next, the Skin-Changer is back in his Hobbit skin, Dwalin’s hand upon his shoulder, and glaring at the wizard with tired eyes. And when Nori says tired, he means tired. Physically, emotionally, just all over spent and on edge with the Company -but not including his brothers- as a whole, the Hobbit looked about ready to collapse.

“Down,” is all he says, grasping Dwalin’s tunic and pulling him toward the next step -and doesn’t that say everything about his state when he can’t even bring himself to be more verbose.

“I said we camp here for the night, Master Baggins,” Thorin says tiredly from where he has taken a seat on the stone.

Even he isn’t in the mood for words.

“No,” the Hobbit says sharply as he eyes the ‘stairs’ -which now that Bilbo looks at them, was a stretch as they were more like large smooth slabs of stone carved in a vague might-be-stairs shape if one was a giant in his opinion- and sits himself down on the edge.

Trying to jump down would be absolutely mental. So he sits and scoots himself over to drop down to
the one below, landing on his good leg, he motions for Dwalin to follow.

“Balin!”

“Bilbo Baggins, what on Arda has gotten into you?” Gandalf huffs as he comes to the edge of the ‘stairs’.

“And answer in complete sentences, brother,” Balin says as he sidles over to Dwalin who watches Bilbo with concern.

“Ye shouldn’t be hoppin’ around on that leg…”

“Down!”

Bilbo groans in frustration when none but Dwalin follows, rolling his eyes up towards the sky and is surprised they don’t pop out of his head with how hard he rolls them. He was exhausted for Valar’s sake. Can’t a Hobbit just be taken at his word for once?! Really, he gets it, they’re exhausted too and the past two days have been nothing but Mordor’s pits and he would rather do anything but move anymore or argue with stone-for-brains Dwarrows; but can they really not see what the situation is?

“Do any of you see those clouds?” he snips not waiting for any of them to answer. “That is a storm. You know the one we were in before our lovely stroll beneath the mountains? Yes, that one. The rest of you are more than welcome to sleep in it, but this Hobbit and the Dwarflings will not be joining you! Fíli! Kíli! Ori! Come!”

He was becoming a bit hysterical he admits. He just wants to eat, to drink, to bloody well sleep! Was that really too much to ask?!

He only makes it down another step, so he supposes it is.

“Bilbo…”

“What?” he barks back as he sits and scoots to the edge to proceed down.

“We have injured,” is all the wizard says as though commenting on the state of his robes.

Bilbo freezes for a second, just a moment to process what exactly the old badger is getting at before he snarls. Whipping around with energy he really doesn’t have, he scrambles back up the steps to the confusion of his brothers.

“No!” he snaps, struggling to get back up the first step when Dwalin grabs him by the back of his coat and pulls him up with ease -his weight loss probably didn’t go unnoticed by his brother. “I refuse!”

“It would be much faster-”

“I’m one of the injured! What about me?! You want to put armed Dwarrows covered in mail and weapons on my back right after this kerfuffle?! Have you lost your mind??”

The Company, who had been watching the conversation in confusion, now watch -still very confused- as the wizard and the Hobbit -sounding more frightening than ever- start snipping at each other in that strange Warg-ish tongue. The wizard sounds almost comical really...

“I can walk on my own!” Thorin snaps, realizing what the wizard was up to just as Master Baggins
was. “I’ll not ride upon a Warg.”

“I beg your pardon?!” Bilbo snaps, ire honing in on Thorin -the one said ire was usually directed at these days- as he stomps over to the seated Dwarf. “This ‘Warg’ is the one who saved your pretty head!”

“Watch your tone, Hobbit. I am King-”

“You are not my King! I’ll speak to you in whatever tone I wish,” Bilbo snarls, shoving a finger into one of Thorin’s shoulders. “I am exhausted, starving, and rightly sick of dealing with your pompous tongue and your bigoted kin to listen to anymore ridiculous ideas! So you are going to get your pretty arse on my back and-”

Bilbo suddenly cuts himself off, eyes widening and he makes an abrupt about-face, clenching his fists at his side; Thorin’s stunned face watching as he stomps back toward the stairs.

“Bilbo-”

“No! I know what that was, you meddling old badger!”

The Hobbit is unceremoniously lifted off the ground by the wizard he was hollering at.

“You’re wasting my time, Gandalf! Shelter! Food! Sleep! Don’t make me bite your face off!” he had slipped into Warg-ish if that wasn’t apparent by the startled faces of the Company -many of them assuming the Hobbit is cursing the wizard out.

“We have injured,” the wizard repeats calmly.

All of the Dwarrows can see the small Hobbit’s body violently quiver before he grasps Gandalf’s sleeve and roars in the wizard’s face. A deep, beastly cadence that nearly rattles Thorin’s bones; reverberating off the stones around them and the mountain walls behind them. Only when he is out of breath -it lasted quite a while to the surprise of many- does the Hobbit cease, heaving in deep breaths before he glowers at the wizard -his feet still dangling in mid-air.

Gandalf does not look amused; Bilbo must have been saying some very awful things…

“Really, Bilbo?”

“Fine!” he rasps, letting go of the cloth causing him to twist like a chime in the breeze as he crosses his arms. “Fine! Injured only! No weapons!”

“Thorin?”

The Dwarf looks between the Hobbit’s back and the wizard’s eyes, debating if he can extend his ‘olive branch’ to trust the Skin-Changer while on his back injured and weaponless. He shifts and pain shoots through what seems like every muscle in his body, but it is manageable. He does not need special treatment just because he was King.

-Thorin will later look back on that thought and realize that he was expecting special treatment from Bilbo for that very same reason.-

“I can walk,” he snaps as he pushes himself off the stone.

Gandalf heaves a long suffering sigh and puts Bilbo back on his feet; the Hobbit says nothing; straightening his clothes before continuing to the stairs where he resumes his descent.
“Thorin, your wounds are not fully healed even with my intervention. Bilbo is your greatest resource at the moment in many ways.”

“I am not so injured that I must impose on another to travel, Gandalf.”

Thorin’s gaze lands on Dwalin who is staring hard at him before his guard rolls his eyes and starts to follow his brother down the stairs. Balin follows shortly after, pausing on the edge to look at his King.

“Stubborn, I knew ye te be, Thorin,” he says before shaking his head. “Proudly stupid is a term I’ll have to wrap my head around.”

Balin doesn’t wait for him to reply. Instead he sits and mimics Bilbo’s method for getting down the giant steps, following his brothers.

“Uncle wait!!” Fíli and Kíli call out as they scramble up and passed the Company. “We’re sleeping with you tonight!!”

They recklessly start hopping down the stone stairs when Ori darts passed Gandalf, ignoring Dori’s commands.

“Wait for me!”

“Can we ride on your back since Uncle Thorin won’t?” they hear Kíli ask.

“No.”

“Oh come on, Uncle! I’ve never ridden a Warg before!”

“No one but Orcs and Goblins have ridden Wargs before, Kíli,” echos Ori’s quick retort.

“Exactly!”

The remains of the Company and Gandalf dart their gazes between Thorin and the stairs.

“Well… I dunno ‘bout you lot, but followin’ Bilbo’s lead on this one is best, me thinks,” Nori says before trotting over to the steps. “Sides, Ol’ Balin an’ the bratling’s have the right of it!”

As Nori disappears down them, Bifur shoves passed Bofur and Bombur, throwing up his arms as he grumbles in Khuzdul and scoots to the edge of the first step.

“Oi, Bifur, wait for me!” Bofur exclaims, running over to the stairs followed closely by Bombur - who sends an apologetic look back at Thorin.

Gandalf watches them with amused eyes before meeting Thorin’s gaze.

“It seems the majority has spoken,” he chuckles. “How long will you last, I wonder.”

“Mutiny,” Thorin grumbles before walking stiffly to the stairwell; his wounds beginning to throb in earnest. “Come. If Master Baggins is correct, I too would not be caught in that storm again.”

At the first step, Dori and Glóin try to help Thorin down, but he shrugs them off. The Dwarf hears the wizard huff at him again and he turns to scowl at the impertinent man.

“As I said before, and I will say it again! Your pride will be your downfall,” and the wizard steps around them and descends with relative ease. “I will see you at the bottom. Be sure to get there
before the storm hits. Bilbo will be most cross if he has to come out of whatever shelter he’s found to retrieve you.”

“Barmy wizard,” Glóin growls under his breath as he keeps a close eye on his King -he may be angry with him, but he was still loyal to him after all.

“Thorin, ye need te take it easy,” Óin admonishes the Dwarf as his King lands a bit heavily on the step below.

“I’m fine,” Thorin growls as his chest screams in pain.

Commiserating looks pass between Glóin and Óin while Dori hovers close to their King and frets. Thorin continues on down these Mahal cursed steps, gritting his teeth and glaring at them in defiance. He would not let them best him!

“Really, Thorin, are you sure you’re alright?” the eldest Ri asks as they come to the sixth step. “Maybe you should-”

“I’m fine!”

With restless hands, Dori quiets and watches as the sweat starts to pour down his King’s brow, his breathing hard as they descend onto the tenth step. As they reach the twelfth, Thorin stays where he sits to ease himself over the edge, breaths harsh and labored; his hands shaking from the pain his entire body is under.

“Thorin-” Dori starts to say before the Dwarf raises his hand to stop him.

“Master Baggins!” he shouts after he manages to catch his breath; the stone of the Carrock -as would later be told to him- carrying his voice.

During the silence that follows, Thorin hands Orcrist, Deathless, and his shield to Dori who stares at him in shock.

“Master Ba-” Thorin starts to call out again when the large, black furry head of Bilbo’s Warg skin rounds the bend.

As he steps closer, Thorin sees a makeshift rope harness has been attached to the Hobbit to serve as a grip. The Skin-Changer stops two steps down from the Dwarf -favoring his left hind leg- and the remainder of the Company; golden slit eyes looking him over before his gaze slides over to the weapons clutched in Dori’s arms. He nods his massive head before he comes up to the step below him, turning and laying his large bulk down so Thorin can easily slide onto his back. Óin and Glóin help him back onto his feet, steadying him as he slips one leg over Bilbo’s neck just in front of his shoulders and helping him settle with concerned faces.

“Ye sure ye can keep yer grip, Thorin?” Óin asks as the Dwarf grabs the rope.

“Aye, I can manage,” he sighs out in exhaustion.

“Now listen here, lad,” the old healer says, staring at Bilbo who turns his head. “The moment ye feel like he’s slipping ye stop an’ lay down. No buts! I’ll not have our King more damaged than he is!”

Bilbo just rolls his eyes and rises slowly.

“Don’t roll yer eyes at me, ye impertinent brat!”
He ignores him and turns carefully -as he is nearly as long as the steps are wide- and begins his second descent down the stairs. Thorin can’t help but sigh in relief as he is far less jostled upon Bilbo’s back than when he was clambering down himself. The Hobbit’s gait is smooth and his paws silent upon the stone. He hears Dori, Óin and Glóin scramble to keep up behind them. In minutes, they are joining the rest of the Company who are about halfway to the bottom.

“That’s not fair, Uncle!” Kíli whines. “I wanted to be the first Dwarf to ever ride a Warg!”

Bilbo snaps his austere gaze to the youngling before lightly jerking his head up to get the brat to look closely at his Uncle. Kíli’s eyes widen as he takes in the older Dwarf’s haggard state.

“Oh! Nothing, Uncle, ignore me,” he says before scurrying down the next step to escape his Uncle’s eyes.

Bilbo shakes his head in exasperation before following behind the Dwarfling. Nearly an hour and half later, Bilbo, Gandalf, and the Company are finally on solid ground by the river. Many of the Dwarrows hurry over to the clear running stream and gratefully water themselves. Some even shed their layers to bathe in it’s refreshing coolness. The Hobbit snorts at their antics before turning toward the woodlands and outcroppings nearby. He needs to find a shelter large enough, or a space that can be converted into a usable shelter quickly. Dwalin stands by his side, having hardly strayed from him on their journey down, watching him with a raised brow. He tilts his head in as close to a brow lift as a Warg face can express.

“Don’t give me that, lad. Ye’ve still got our King on yer back, and a wound on yer leg. The wound we can do nothin’ fer now, but I doubt he’ll be much use te ye while yer tryin’ te find shelter. Come on then. Down ye get yer Highness,” Dwalin says as he moves closer to Bilbo.

Bilbo slowly lowers himself to the ground and slightly tilts himself towards Dwalin so that he can grab the proud King.

“I can accompany Master Baggins on his errand, Dwalin,” he huffs, wanting to avoid their healer as long as possible.

Dwalin frowns up at the regal Dwarf.

“First ye pitched a fit ‘bout riddin’ him, now ye don’t want te get off? Make up yer mind, ye bloody git!” the burly Dwarf sniffs. “Not that it matters. Yer gettin’ off. Óin wants te have a look at ye after ye’ve cleaned yerself. -Same te ye, Bilbo- Now off ye get.”

“I’d rather-”

He doesn’t get to finish his thought before Bilbo heaves himself to the side, sending the Dwarrow King toppling off his back and into Dwalin’s arms. Thorin rights himself as quickly as he can with his injuries clawing at him and scowls at the Hobbit. The cheeky creature snorts in his face before dashing off into the foliage and disappearing. Thorin gazes into the darkness of the woods for a time before Dwalin shoves his shoulder.

“He’s off te find us someplace that’ll stay dry for a day or two. Sides, he’s stuck in that skin now for a time. Shiffin’ te carry your proud arse took the last of the magic he had te spare.”

Thorin feels a twinge of guilt at that and only nods, following his friend over to the river as his thoughts circle around the Skin-Changer.

“He’s a confusing, frustrating creature,” he grumbles to himself, unaware Dwalin was still beside him, listening.
“Well it’s not like ye’ve been nice te the lad. He’d have answered whatever questions ye had at the beginin’ of our journey unless it’s somethin’ private. Now though… well, Hobbits are generally open creatures unless ye’ve offended them greatly.”

“Not much different from Dwarrows...”

“Aye, but sneaky in their retribution. Keeps things interestin’, eh?” Dwalin says with a grin, nudging his arm.

Thorin looks at him in confusion and Dwalin rolls his eyes.

“Ye’ll get it when ye get it.”

With that, the Dwarf walks off shucking his armor and clothes as he goes, leaving the King confused and under the tender mercies of Óin, only to be tackled by his nephews the moment he wades naked into the stream.

“Ye right little bastards!” he roars as he surfaces with a violent splash. “Ye’ll pay fer that!”

Óin grabs his arm before he can scuttle off, pulling him until they are beside the stream despite the King’s protests.

“Right then! Down te yer skins and inte the water with ye! Ye’ve got wounds fer me te look over and they aren’t goin’ te get clean on their own!”

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The Hobbit returns at some point; barreling into the stream some ways down and gulping in water before emerging and shaking his fur out; after Thorin has bathed and is being poked and prodded at by the old healer. Dwalin -bathed and lounging near Thorin and Óin- gets up and greets the Skin-Changer with a hand upon a furry, wet cheek. The Hobbit rumbles something at the Dwarf, which Gandalf translates.

“He says he’s found... something further in the woods that will keep us warm and dry for a time, though it will need a little work before that.”

The Skin-Changer rumbles again.

“‘Kíli and Fíli should hunt for game while the rest of you help with the shelter’, is what he said.”

Bilbo pulls on Dwalin’s furs and turns to lead them into the forest. The other Dwarrows fall into a line behind them after re-clothing themselves and gathering what little they had; Thorin, Óin and Gandalf bring up the rear. Looking up at the sky through the canopy, Thorin can see the clouds growing ever darker. He worries that they will not be able to find enough food for everyone before the storm sets in.

They follow the Hobbit for a time -who throws more glances over his tense shoulder than Thorin wants to think about- before pushing through the brush where they stand before a shallow cave. Inclined high enough to keep any water out, but low enough for easy access, it looks to make a fine shelter. Bilbo steps far away from the Company, Dwalin nearly attached to his side and watches them. Thorin takes the initiative and walks up to enter the cave; Gandalf trailing behind him after speaking with the Hobbit. Some murmured incantation, and Gandalf’s staff lights up.

The cave is deeper than it appeared with a low ceiling and no tunnels leading away from the entrance or signs of a recent occupant; large enough to fit the Company comfortably, but probably not the
wizard and certainly not the Skin-Changer in his Warg skin.

“There isn’t enough room for you and Master Baggins,” Thorin says to Gandalf, voice echoing against the stone and he knows the Hobbit has heard him.

Just inside the entrance and off to the side, large rocks are piled as well as a buck. Obviously Bilbo had been doing more than looking for shelter despite sending his nephews out to hunt.

“You can block up the entrance once you’re all inside,” Gandalf says, ignoring his comment as he takes a seat outside the entrance. “Bilbo will dig a tunnel for a fire pit that will keep the smoke from filling the cave once it’s done. You will just need to dig the other end from within.”

Dori and Bombur go about blocking most of the entrance as the rest of them file in sans Fíli and Kíli who had departed the Company to look for dinner some time back.

“Gandalf—”

Thunder rumbles through the air and Thorin can see rain starting to hit the canopy above. Bilbo doesn’t come any closer to the cave despite Dwalin’s pulling, and turns to pass into the forest, slipping from his brother’s grabby hands. Dwalin is going to have a fit when he sees how small the cave would be for Bilbo unless the wizard speaks on the issue first.

“Where are you off to?” the Dwarrow King calls out to him.

A rumble and Gandalf answers as the Skin-Changer disappears into the brush.

“He goes to retrieve the princes.”

“There isn’t enough room, Tharkûn.”

“Bilbo and I will not be joining you.”

“What??” Dwalin and Thorin question at the same time.

The wizard sighs, toying with his pipe before filling and lighting it.

“There is a place Bilbo and I have used when we have traveled this far East. For reasons, we would keep its location a secret,” he says before taking a drag from his pipe.

“He stays here,” his guard says, scowling at Gandalf.

“Dwalin—”

“He will not!” the wizard snaps. “You have not the tools or space needed in order to heal Bilbo’s wounds. This place will be safest for him to be while he heals! Keeping him where he fears a sword to his gut will not help him.”

“I can—”

“Dwalin. No. You stay here,” Thorin sighs, placing a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Gandalf will be able to help him more than we can.”

“We’ve almost lost him twice! Ye’re askin’ me te just… let him out of my sight?!”

“You let him out of it to find this place, didn’t you? He was out of your sight for over a hundred years before that. He has proven he can take care of himself!”
Dwalin’s face flares red in his anger, but he cannot refute what Thorin has said. He hadn’t been there for Bilbo. Too busy following their late father’s orders to keep away, not daring to even think to try and find him. With his history learned through their father’s letters, Dwalin knows Bilbo would never have come to Ered Luin even with an invitation.

It felt like he just kept failing his brother...

Of course, the source of his strife walks out from the forest with Fíli and Kíli trailing his sides; the younger talking leagues a minute and not seeming to mind that Bilbo couldn’t exactly reply back.

“How are you so big? Is it a Skin-Changer thing? But your fox skin is so small! How do you go from being a small Hobbit to this?!”

“Kíli, Fíli.”

His youngest nephew looks to him and grins, holding up a few conies and pheasants while his brother shifts his shoulder to bring attention to the deer slung over it.

“How this is enough?” Fíli asks, looking at Bilbo then to Thorin.

The Hobbit trots over to Dwalin, bumping him with his head before his eyes dart around. Thorin supposes he is looking for the other Dwarrows; and when he sees none -hearing them all in the cave no doubt- the Hobbit is suddenly digging beneath the rocky overhang with quick and powerful strokes. In only minutes, a tunnel has been dug. This must be what Gandalf was talking about.

“Master Baggins left us a buck as well,” the King says, his lips twitching when the princes look at Bilbo in mock betrayal.

“You went hunting without us? Uncle Bilbo, how could you! I could have ridden your back and we would’ve had a glorious hunt!”

“You mean we, brother,” Fíli pouts as well.

The Hobbit snorts, looking to Gandalf in exasperation before returning to the woods at a trot. The wizard stands, patting the dirt off his clothes before he follows.

“There now, all you need to do is dig the other end! When you light the fire, wave air down into the hole so that the smoke will come out on the other side instead of within.”

With a wave over his shoulder, the wizard disappears into the gloom of the trees.

“Don’t leave that cave without us!”

His nephews look at the two in confusion before Fíli looks to him.

“Where are they going? It’s about to start pouring if the clouds are anything to go by,”

“Tharkûn and the Hobbit are taking shelter elsewhere. The cave is too small for them both.”

“What?! But Uncle Bilbo is-”

“They’re goin’ te a place where he can heal. Injured as he is, can ye ask him te stay after everything that’s happened?” Dwalin asks the youngling, his voice rough.

Kíli looks down in shame. Though he had ignored the rest of the Company’s reactions to Bilbo’s nature and Warg skin, he had, by no means, not seen it. He just didn’t understand why they would
turn on him so quickly. Mother had always taught him to never judge someone based on what they are -unless it was Orcs or Goblins-; and what Bilbo is was incredible; but no more so than Bilbo himself.

He looked up to his chosen Uncle even more than Dwalin these days; and that was saying something.

“No… No I couldn’t.”

Dwalin nods and makes his way into the cave; Thorin hanging back to let his nephews pass and looks back into the woods. A golden eyed head pokes through a bush and stares at him for a moment before disappearing into the gloom. None of them had seen him.

“Sneaky Hobbit,” he says, unable to stop his smirk as he makes his way into the cave.

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Over the course of the day, they see nothing of the Hobbit or wizard. The storm rages outside the cave; flashes of lightning can be seen through the few cracks in the wall. They go back to the stream to bathe again once the rain lets up -thunder still rumbles like an ill omen- and refill their water-skins. They only know that they have not been abandoned due to the fresh deer and edible plants that appear before the cave that evening. What they don’t eat, they smoke and store in whatever they can scrounge up. On the rainy morning of the second day they are getting restless.

Thorin especially. His wounds are on the mend yet they still plague him with stiffness and pain. But they need to get moving; Durin’s day was not long off. While they wait for the return of the wizard and Hobbit, he thinks over the issue with said creature. Though he would have rather been told at the beginning, he cannot deny Master Baggins claims of him being left behind being untrue. He has already had to separate Dwalin and Glóin when the red haired Dwarf started speaking ill of Bilbo just that morning. Risking exposure, Thorin had to take the youngest son of Gróin far out of hearing of the cave in order to get to the root of the problem. Unsurprisingly, it was just as his own misgivings, just stronger -as Glóin was a very protective Dwarf-; easier to offend and hard to makes amends with. He would need to coerce him and Bilbo into interacting in order for Gróin’s son to get over his grievances. Fighting within the Company would cause more of a rift between them than there was when they needed to be united.

The sun on the third day breaks through the clouds and with it, Master Baggins back in his Hobbit skin -leg healed- with Gandalf. They depart within an hour.

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Bilbo sticks close to Gandalf like he had when he was but a pup. It’s a tad embarrassing, but with thirteen Dwarrows trailing behind them, he would rather take his chances nearly riding the wizard’s robes.

The forest the Dwarrows had camped in was but a copse of trees between the mountains and the foothills below, and they try to lay as confusing a trail as possible for their pursuers. Rounding a rocky bend, they pull to a stop when Gandalf holds up a hand.

“Bilbo, scout ahead would you.”

He nods, shifting into his Kit-Fox skin and darts away from the Company up a nearby passage.

“His fur changed colors,” Nori points out despite the obviousness of it.
“They change with the seasons unless he wills it to stay his original coloring,” the wizard says as his gaze lingers where the Hobbit disappeared. “Takes a bit more magic though…”

Some time passes when Warg howls echo on the wind, sending everyone’s heart pumping quicker as fear starts seeping into their blood.

“Was that-”

“No.”

“They’ve seen him!”

“No! He’s quiet as a mouse, but they’ll hear you if you don’t be silent!”

More minutes pass before a small yip comes from up the passage. Thorin and Dwalin shuffle over to the bottom and see Bilbo’s Kit-Fox skin before the Hobbit shifts, trotting the rest of the way down.

“How close is the pack?” the Dwarrow King asks with urgency.

“Too close. Only some leagues and closing fast,” he says as he comes to a stop beside Dwalin before heaving a sigh and making his way into the middle of them. “That’s not the worst of it though.”

“The Wargs have picked up our scent?” Dwalin asks his brother as he follows.

The Hobbit walks backwards a few steps, keeping Thorin in his sights and shoulders tense as the Company gathers at his back.

“Not yet, but they will soon. We have another problem.”

“They won’t have seen you... What is it?” Gandalf steps closer to his friend, placing a hand on his shoulder to ease him when Bilbo turns to face him.

The Dwarrows start to chatter and Bilbo hears Dwalin snap at Thorin to listen before the urgency of the situation cannot stay Bilbo’s tongue.

“Would you lot pipe down and listen? I’m trying to tell you there is something else out there,” he snaps turning to point back the way he came.

Thorin’s face expresses Bilbo’s own exasperation with the situation. The rest of the Company looks
back the way Bilbo came, frowns and worry creasing their faces.

“What form did it take? Like a bear?”

Bilbo—who had been keeping his eyes on the Dwarrows—snaps his gaze to the wizard, brow raised in surprise.

“Ye… Ye-Yes, but bigger. Much bigger. Like… my Warg skin big.”

“You knew about this beast?” Bofur asks the wizard, his voice a tad harried.

Gandalf meets Bilbo’s eyes as the Hobbit continues to stare at him. With a frown the wizard turns, stepping away from the Company.

“What-”

“I say we double back,” the miner says to Thorin.

“And be run down by a pack of Orcs?”

The chatter resumes with a more fearful air as they discuss what is to be done. Bilbo does not cease watching the wizard. The Hobbit has known the wizard long enough to tell when the old badger knew something.

“There is a house… it’s not far from here,” the wizard suddenly announces. “We might take, erm, refuge…”

“Whose house?” Thorin asks with skepticism. “Are they friend or foe?”

“Neither… He will help us, or he will kill us, though Bilbo’s presence may smooth the way…”

“What choice do we have?”

A roar unlike any Bilbo has heard before echoes against the stone from the bear creature, startling the Company and setting Bilbo’s hair on end when he understands.

~*These are my lands! Stay away!~*

“Gandalf—”

“There is none, now follow me!”

The wizard turns and sprints down the slopes, the Company scrambling to keep up behind him.

“Come Bilbo!” Dwalin says as he grabs his arms and pulls him along.

When the Hobbit follows willingly, his brother lets him go and he shifts. Darting between legs and over logs and rocks, he keeps pace with the wizard. Down the foothills they run, Bilbo only shifts back into his Hobbit skin when they come upon a stream—his Kit-Fox skin too small to cross it without difficulty. Across a vast plane of thick grass and purple flowers, towards another copse of trees, they run.

“Come on!” Gandalf yells at the Dwarrows behind them.

Into the thicket they run, the Dwarrows having a harder time with the logs and rocks now that they are on more level ground.
Warg howls proceed another roar that bounces against the trees, closer and louder than before.

~You dare enter my lands?!~

The sounds of the Wargs and their riders peters off as the Company runs, and Bilbo prays the bear creature has stalled them long enough to reach this house before it or the Orcs catch them. Some of the Company turn and foolishly look behind them.

“This way! Quickly!”

“Run! Bombur, come on!” Thorin yells at the rotund Dwarf.

More logs and trees slow them down as they follow the wizard and Skin-Changer until they break free from the trees onto a plane of golden long-grass. There before them is the house Gandalf spoke of.

“To the house! Run!”

They run, some -like Bombur who runs faster than anyone of his size Bilbo has ever seen- faster than others, yet all of them huffing and desperate to reach the house before the creature got them. Roars follow close behind.

Gandalf and Bilbo reach the gate first, Bilbo shifting to see over the Dwarrows that run passed toward the house. Anxiously, Bilbo watches his Dwarflings pass before looking back to the forest.

“Come on, get inside!”

Not a moment after the last Dwarf passes, the bear creature bursts from the tree line with a furious roar. With a gasp, Gandalf turns and follows after the Dwarrows. Bilbo turns to do the same when he sees the Dwarrows clamoring at the door.

“Open the door!” Gandalf roars at them frantically as he approaches.

The desperate yelling of his Dwarflings decides him. With a snarl he turns back around and darts toward the charging creature. Gandalf cries at him to cease when he sees the Hobbit make a sharp about-face.

“Bilbo!”

The Hobbit ignores him as he passes back under the gate. Shifting, he charges at the bear with fangs bared. Pushing his legs to run faster, he lowers his head and barrels into the creature with a bone shaking thump. Teeth snap around the bears foreleg as claws dig into Bilbo’s side with a roar as he bowls the bear over backwards. He hangs onto its arm as he regains his feet, and with all his might - his neck straining against the bear's weight- he flings it away from him, causing him to land on his side with a crunch. Scrambling to his feet, he howls at the creature who roars back as it too right itself.

~You dare?!~

~Stay back!~

The creature rears up on its back legs and bellows as Bilbo lunges at it. His attack is thwarted as the bear merely grasps him between its paws and throws him. He lands hard again on his side with a cut off howl as the bear continues its charge at the Company. Righting himself, he gives chase. Slamming into the bear’s side, he sends the beast rolling as he takes his place between the Dwarrows...
and the creature again.

The bear rears up and bellows again, coming down to slam its great paws into the ground before pacing side to side. Bilbo keeps stride, lunging forward, hackles raised and snapping his jaws at the bear before retreating with deep guttural snarls, determined to keep the creatures attention on him. He ignores the pain in his side as he strives to keep the bear away. The bear returns his efforts in kind, lunging and swiping at him with its claws and Bilbo starts losing ground as he is herded back toward the gate. The Hobbit presses his luck, trying to get under the bears guard and is rewarded with claws swiping across his muzzle. He yelps and retreats further, Dwalin’s roaring voice close behind him.

The bear has herded him into the entry of the door; so focused on it as he was, he hadn’t noticed.

The Dwarrows and Gandalf had gotten the door open at some point during the confrontation, and Bilbo is pinned in on either side by stone and wood shelves, the bear before him, and the Company behind him with the door open; roaring and brandishing their weapons. The bear lunges again; he stands his ground, spreading his legs for balance as the beast’s teeth sink into his shoulder while his own do the same. He bites down hard and jerks, depending on his longer snout and sharper teeth to try and deter the bear.

The bear releases him with a roar and retreats backwards, pacing to one side of the wall only to come back around and over to the other. Bilbo snarls and keeps his eyes locked with its own honey colored ones, unmoving. The bear rears and roars and him before settling on the ground and walking off back towards the gate. Bilbo watches until he is sure the creature is well and truly gone. With a huff, he tilts his head to see the damage to his shoulder when the shing of blades being sheathed startles him forward. He turns once freed from the entryway and sees the Dwarrows staring at him from within the house.

“Our thanks, Master Baggins,” the Dwarrow King says, tilting his head in what could be interpreted as a bow.

Bilbo cautiously nods his own, glancing at the faces of the other Dwarrows before casting his head back to see the wound on his side.

“Let me look, you daft Hobbit,” Gandalf snaps as he pushes passed the Dwarrows. “By the Valar, we just got you healed!”

“Aye lad, ye took a beating,” Óin says as he follows the wizard, pulling out ointments and bandages.

As Gandalf approaches his shoulder, the elder Dwarf goes to his side, but Bilbo dances away from both.

“Bilbo-”

“It is my duty to see to the wounded in our Company and yer injured. Thrice over now,” he huffs at the Skin-Changer. “I’ll not be harmin’ ye, lad.”

Bilbo observes the healer with wary golden eyes before nodding his head, approaching them with slow steps till he is standing in front of them again. Gandalf is quick in his assessment of his bitten shoulder, announcing it clean, but deep. Looking at his snout, he declares it clean as well before gently pushing Óin away from his wounded side -ignoring the healers protests- when the Dwarf was preparing to adhere bandages to the claw marks. He hums and haws for a moment before catching Bilbo’s eye.

“Changing will heal your face, but your shoulder and side will take a bit longer and multiple shifts.”
Bilbo hums his agreement, preparing to shift when the wizard places a hand on his snout.

“You are still low on magic, Bilbo. Shift now, but wait until we are ready to leave before shifting to heal again.”

The Hobbit grumbles, but nods. His magic stores were still not full, and he would need to shift quite a few times in order to heal them fully. Healing his leg had taken a lot out of him - malnourished and tired as he was - after Gandalf had reopened the wound to clean it and he had rested a day to restore his magic enough to finish the process. Healing two heavy injuries would take a lot more magic and energy to heal than he had stored.

“What was that?” Ori asks as the Hobbit shifts and follows the wizard into the house.

“That was our host.”

The entirety of the Company looks at the wizard as if he had lost his mind.

“His name is Beorn,” he continues with a smirk. “And he’s a Skin-Changer.”

“What?”

“You lead us into the territory of a Skin-Changer?” Bilbo asks in alarm; flinching when his wounded side pulses with pain. “Do you have any idea what he could do to us just for that?!?”

“Indeed, hence your presence is most fortunate.”

“Gandalf-”

“He’s like Bilbo then?” Kili asks.

“Of a sort,” Gandalf grunts as he makes his way to the table and sits. “Sometimes he’s a huge black bear; sometimes he’s a great, strong Man. The bear is unpredictable, but the Man can be reasoned with… hopefully. Bilbo’s defense of us may have caused… tensions… Nor is he over fond of Dwarrows…”

Bilbo rolls his eyes and heaves a mighty exasperated sigh before carefully weaving through the Company to stand besides the wizard.

“Reckless…” he grumbles.

The old badger’s lips twitch into a small smirk as he lights his pipe.

“You’re the one who rushed him.”

Bilbo scoffs and makes his way to a window, looking around at the overly large items in the house before looking out to see a pasture with a herd of ponies frolicking around.

“Now, get some rest, you need as much of it as you can get, Bilbo Baggins. The land here is rich in magic; you’d do well to soak in as much as you can. You’ll be safe here tonight.”

The wizard watches as the Company disperses to explore the house before his gaze travels to Bilbo as Óin ambles over to him wielding bandages and medicine.

“I hope…”
Bilbo keeps vigil as the Company slumbers. In another Skin-Changer’s territory he can’t relax enough to sleep himself despite the need to, so he’s taken to concentrating on recovering his magic stores. It didn’t help that he could hear snarling Wargs and Orcs not half a league away. Or the sounds of other creatures within the house and the bear outside...

He has never met another of his kind, even if distantly related only through ability. He was anxious. Had his defense of the Company or his presence on his lands angered the other enough to deny them refuge? Would he be cast out to wait for the Company to rest and resupply before they traversed Mirkwood?

Was he like Bilbo; able to change near instantly or into more than one skin?

So many questions, and only one person could answer them.

It is nearly dawn when something comes through the door leading out of the dining area. Bilbo crouches low amongst the hay from the other side of Dwalin, peering over his bulk at the giant of a Man stepping into the shafts of moonlight; remnants of his fangs bite on his shoulder and arm. His eyes widen in surprise, he had not expected the Skin-Changer to be so large!

"I know you are awake," Beorn says softly from the shadows into the early morning air. "You smell familiar but you are not a Dwarf... Come! I would speak with you and no other."

Beorn steps back outside and Bilbo debates following him alone or if he should wake Gandalf when his sharp ears pick up the low growl from the bear-Man. He huffs and rises, nimbly and silently hoping over his brother and the sleeping Dwarrows in his path before making his way outside. The other Skin-Changer stands several yards away in the field and Bilbo approaches cautiously.

From what he has seen of Beorn's bear skin, his own Warg skin matches his in size; though in weight he is positive the Man has him beaten. He would be able to defend himself if Beorn was... reluctant in allowing his presence. But for his Dwarfling's he would try to persuade Beorn in letting them, at least, stay for a few days.

"What are you, small one?"

"I'm a Hobbit, from the Shire," he says with a small bow as he stops some feet away. "Bilbo Baggins is my name."

"A Halfling," Beorn rumbles, arms crossed as he looks down at the Hobbit. "But you are not just a Halfling, are you?"

"I am not half of anything," Bilbo says sharply before he can stay his tongue.

"No... you're not. So what are you Hobbit? You smell almost like kin, but you are no Man who can change his skin."

"No, but I am a Skin-Changer nonetheless. Hobbit Skin-Changer, actually. Raised as one until I gained my skin at least."

"Gained?" Beorn asks, brow raised in confusion.

Bilbo frowns up at the larger Skin-Changer.

"Well yes, I didn't gain my first skin until I was six winters old you see."

"First skin?"
"Um... I'm not a usual Skin-Changer, but I am one all the same."

"No, Skin-Changers have but one other skin. All their lives they have that skin and they are born with it. What are you, really?" Beorn growls down at him, shifting restlessly on his feet.

Bilbo steps back from the bear-Man, instinct preparing him to fight or flee.

"I don't understand... I am a Skin-Changer," he says in confusion. "The Elves and Gandalf call me no different. They taught me all they knew about our kind. The protocols, the trad-"

"Show me."

"What?"

"Show me," Beorn snarls. "I remember your Warg skin, Hobbit. If what you say is true, I would see the other one."

Bilbo steps back some more, eyes narrowed upon the elder Skin-Changer.

"And I would have your word you will not attack me or those I call my own."

Beorn sneers and steps toward him threateningly. Golden slit eyes glow in the darkness as Bilbo snarls back, startling the large Man.

"I will fight you again if you give me no other choice. Those I consider my pack are in your house!"

Beorn stares at him through narrowed eyes before he nods.

"Very well, no harm will come to your... pack. But you show me and they must agree to my rules."

"What are they?"

"All the animals are mine. They are not food to fill your stocks... I will allow you to roam during the day, but at night, you remain inside. The dark is dangerous, even in my lands."

Beorn looks at him expectantly and Bilbo nods.

"I'll make sure they agree. They need rest. Now, if you could step back a bit?"

Beorn raises a brow at him.

"I'd rather you be as far as possible when I change. Let's be adults here. We don't trust each other, despite our agreement, and you're much larger than any of us. So I ask for this boon."

"Very well," Beorn says with a nod after a moment's contemplation before stepping several feet away.

Bilbo takes in a shaky breath, gaze never leaving the larger Skin-Changer, then shifts. The transition is as smooth as it has ever been despite his fatigue. He stands there and waits for the bear-Man’s reaction to his first skin. Admittedly, it is not as impressive as the Man’s bear skin, but still…

“Again.”

Bilbo startles before cocking his head in question.

“I would see you change skins again.”
Bilbo nods slowly and acquiesces despite his confusion. If it would allow his Dwarflings and brothers to get their much needed rest, he could go against Gandalf’s order and humiliate himself just a bit by entertaining the other Skin-Changer for a time.

“You change faster than any I have known.”

“I mix my energy and magic to accelerate it. It helps conserve my magic stores so they last longer.”

“Interesting.”

Bilbo stands under the Skin-Changer’s scrutiny for some minutes, shifting nervously on his feet before Beorn finally seems to come to a decision.

“You and your pack may stay as long as my rules are followed. Now come, join me for a time in our other skins. You will tell me your story as we check my borders.”

Bilbo scrutinizes Beorn in kind before nodding, stepping closer to the man.

“Your face is healed I see.”

“It wasn’t as deep.”

“Apologies for your shoulder and side.”

“I apologize as well for your arm and shoulder then.”

“You have nice manners. A wonder you can claim Dwarves as your own.”

“I’ve been trying to teach them you see.”

Beorn chuckles, casting a glance at the Hobbit who walks beside him before shifting.

Bilbo watches the older Skin-Changer in fascination. He grows concerned when the process isn’t swift and looks painful; much like when he was first learning how to change his skins. He decides to ask the Man of it later and shifts into his Warg skin, his side and shoulder healing a little more.

Gandalf was going to throw a fit, he was sure.

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Bilbo slips back into the hay to sleep beside his brother as the sun begins to ignite the sky in dawn’s hues. Bilbo had regaled the older Skin-Changer with the story of their journey so far, causing the Man to laugh as much as a bear could and snarl in turn as he spun his tale. During their patrol, Beorn and he had tracked down some Orcs and their Wargs that were left behind to scout and proceeded to tear them to pieces; Beorn carefully skinning one of the Wargs and decapitating one of the Orc corpses before they saw fit to return. On a lark he had voiced how it would be hilarious if they pretended their conversation never happened and that they should let the wizard make introductions. Bilbo looked at Beorn in pleasant surprise when he agreed, slipping off to one of the sheds as Bilbo entered the house.

Some hours later when the sun is high, he wakes as a great thumping like chopping wood echo in the house; alone and with giant bees flying around him. Good gracious, what was Beorn feeding them?! Voices reach his ears as he sits up groggily. Shuffling to his feet, he stands and stretches before following them into the kitchen area.

“Don’t blame me!” comes Dori’s voice, followed by Bofur’s.
“Come on, Dori.”

Bifur speaks up in Khuzdul next, leaving Bilbo to wonder just what they were talking about.

“This was a mistake,” Glóin says.

“I say we leg it, slip out the back way,” he hears Nori say as he approaches.

“I’m not running from anyone, beast or no,” Dwalin snarls as he grabs at the thief.

The other Dwarrows start to speak when Gandalf interrupts just as Bilbo slips between Thorin and Fíli; keeping an eye on the others for any wandering hands.

“There is no point in arguing!” the wizard snaps. “We can’t make it through the Wilderland without Beorn’s help. We would be hunted down before we even catch a glimpse of Mirkwood.”

Gandalf catches sight of Bilbo and smiles nervously.

“Ah, there you are, Bilbo. I hate to ask this of you, but come with me. This will require some delicate handling.”

Bilbo stares at the wizard flatly before he sees Thorin jerk his head at the wizard while looking at him. Fíli mimics his Uncle much to Bilbo’s amusement. He snorts and steps forward.

“We must tread very carefully and I don’t trust the Dwarves to do that…”

The Company grumbles at him, but none dispute his claim.

“In fact, the last person to have startled him was ripped to shreds!”

Silence from the Dwarrows as they eye the wizard. Bilbo is almost certain they are all thinking very unkind things about him. He glances at the Dwarflings standing beside him and gives them a small smile. Their faces don’t lose their apprehensive mien as they look at him.

“I will go first and, Bilbo, yes, you come with me.”

“Is this a good idea? I did attack him remember.”

“Yes, now the rest of you stay here and don’t come out until my signal.”

The Dwarrows nod their heads anxiously.

“Also, no sudden movements or loud noises and don’t overcrowd him. Only come out in pairs. Right?”

Gandalf turns not waiting for the Dwarrows to respond, his hands on Bilbo’s shoulder to lead him out when he turns back to the Dwarrows.

“Actually, Bombur, you count as two so you come alone.”

“Aye,” the Dwarf says as he casts his gaze down from where he was nibbling on a carrot.

Subtle, Gandalf, Bilbo thinks as he looks to the sky for strength.

“Remember! Wait for the signal.”

“Right, wait for the signal,” he hears Bofur say as they exit the house. “What signal would that be?”
Bilbo has to keep himself from palming his face when he hears that last bit and the following confusion amongst the Dwarrows. *Really, Gandalf?* Though he can’t help but smirk a little as they approach the Skin-Changer who is chopping wood with an enormous axe. This was going to be entertaining indeed!

“Refrain from shifting if you would, my boy. No need to make this situation worse,” Gandalf mumbles at him as he fixes his hair; startling when the axe comes down and splits a log in two. “Ahm.”

Bilbo looks from the wizard to Beorn and back, a slow grin spreading on his face.

“You’re nervous.”

“Nervous,” -chop- “What, nonsense.”

He startles at another chop. Bilbo snickers and is promptly whacked on the thigh with Gandalf’s staff.

“If I am nervous, it is for *you*, ungrateful faunt!” Gandalf snaps lowly, glaring as the Hobbit snorts in mirth.

They stop some feet from Beorn who has ignored them. The Man has removed his tunic and Bilbo can see various scars amongst the dirt covering his skin. The skin on Bilbo’s back feels tight when he sees them; for a wound to leave a mark on a Skin-Changer, they must have been dangerously deep or infected for too long before healing.

“Good morning!” Gandalf calls out as jovially as he can.

He remains ignored, startling back when the axe is thrown back only to swing down on the wood again.

“Good morning~!” he trills this time.

Bilbo shoves a fist against his mouth.

Beorn sighs before he speaks, turning at ear toward them.

“Who are you?”

“I am Gandalf. Gandalf the Grey,” the wizard says with a small bow, shoving Bilbo behind him with one hand.

Beorn turns to face the wizard, stance aggressive as he rests the axe on the ground, leaning lightly on the hilt.

“Never heard of him,” he growls at the wizard.

Gandalf fumbles for a moment to compose his words and Bilbo can smell the undercurrent of nervous fear on his skin. Bilbo was finding it a bit humorous that an Istari was this wary of a Skin-Changer. Then again… if Beorn could wield wards… well this stay would just get exponentially more fun!

“I-I’m a wizard,” he stutters. “Perhaps you have heard of my colleague, Radagast the Brown. He lives on the southern borders of Mirkwood you see~”

“What do you want?”
“Well, ah, simply to thank you for your hospitality and to apologize for the altercation with our… Skin-Changer. You may have noticed we took refuge in your lodgings here last night.”

The wizard motions back to the house, inadvertently revealing Bilbo standing behind him as the Hobbit peeks around his robes with a grin.

“Who is this little fellow? Is he the one who shifts skins?”

“Ah, yes, well this would be Mr. Baggins from the Shire.”

Beorn’s eyes widen as Gandalf ushers the Hobbit forward, lifting his axe from the ground as though to use it on them.

“He’s not a Dwarf, is he?”

“No! No, he’s a Hobbit, and a Skin-changer, mind you. He comes from a good family with an unimpeachable reputation.”

Bilbo smirks up at Beorn -whose eyes glint with mischief as well- as Gandalf pats his back. They were certainly pulling the wizard around the bend.

“A Halfling and a Wizard,” Beorn drawls out as he puts the axe back down. “How come you here?”

Before Bilbo can snap at the older Skin-Changer for that Halfling comment, Gandalf has slapped a hand over his mouth with a nervous chuckle.

“Oh well, the fact is we’ve had a rough time of it from Goblins in the mountains.”

“What did you go near Goblins for? Stupid thing to do!”

“You are absolutely right!” Gandalf agrees, hand removing itself from his mouth to wave up and down as though to calm the bear-Man as Bilbo snickers.

Thumping feet behind them startles Bilbo into looking back. He puts on a show of widening his eyes as Dwalin and Balin come out of the house with slow strides, keeping their eyes on Beorn when not watching their steps on the large stone stairs. Gandalf had made them all leave their weapons behind too it seems.

“It was a terrible-”

Gandalf stops in his explanation as he hears them come out as well, turning in a flurry of grey robes. He stares at the two Dwarrows in what Bilbo decides to interpret as surprise and ‘Fatherly Exasperation’ as he turns back to Beorn. The Skin-Changer is growling and has lifted his axe aloft, baring his teeth at the Dwarrows.

“Dwalin and Balin,” his gruff brother introduces them as Balin waves with a smile on his face.

Bilbo twitches his nose to stave off his own smile.

“I-I must confess that, uh, several of our group are, in fact… Dwarves…”

He says ‘Dwarves’ like he means ‘naughty Fauntlings’, and Bilbo fights to keep his face straight.

“And do you call two ‘several’?”

“Well, uh, now that you put it that way… Yes, there could be more than two,” he says, looking
down at Bilbo as if for aid.

The Hobbit merely glances at him with a small twitch of his lips causing the wizard to scowl at him.

“And where are they? Killed, eaten, gone home?”

“Oh, er, no… well…”

He stutters and he tries to come up with a reasonable explanation for the hole the Dwarrows have dug him into before holding up a hand.

To start counting on his fingers.

“Go, go!” Bilbo hears Bofur say to the Company inside and the Hobbit grins as he realizes just who is interpreting the ‘signals’.

Oh, Bofur, you sassy Dwarf.

“Wait, that’s us!” Glóin says as more thumping steps get closer.

Óin and Glóin make their way out to stand beside his brothers and bow as the wizard heaves out a most exasperated sigh; stomping a foot -Bilbo chokes back a chuckle.

“Oh! Here are more of our happy troop!”

“And do you call six a ‘troop’?” Beorn asks, his voice rising.

Gandalf laughs nervously as he looks at the Skin-Changer.

“What are you, a traveling circus? Or are you unable to count?”

Bilbo can’t keep the bark of laughter hidden at that statement. The wizard is still chuckling nervously as he shrugs a shoulder and behold, more Dwarrows come out of the house on Bofur’s que. The strained grin falls from the wizard’s face as Beorn growls at the new arrivals, turning to see who it is this time.

“Dori and Ori at your service,” the eldest Ri says with a quaver in his voice before he and his Dwarfling bow many times.

“A troop indeed; a right comic one. I don’t want your ‘service’,” Beorn snarls.

He turns quickly back to the Man and holds up his hand to ‘calm’ him again; or somehow ward him off.

“Absolutely understandable!”

More steps and Bilbo watches as his two other Dwarflings come out with their apprehensive faces, catching Bilbo’s eyes. Bilbo quirks a brow at them and they seem to relax some -Bilbo can only guess they find his nonchalance at the situation reassuring.

“Oh! Fíli and Kíli. I’d quite forgotten. Yes.”

The rest of the Dwarrows come tumbling out en mass, pulling Gandalf’s gaze back for but a moment before he seems to deflate on himself.

“Oh, yes, and Nori, Bofur, Bifur… and Bombur.”
He sounds so much like the tired parent of thirteen rambunctious Fauntlings that Bilbo can’t take it anymore. He falls to the ground laughing, tears coming to his eyes as he rolls much to the great confusion of the Dwarrows. Gandalf only looks down on him like he’s the oldest sibling who is most definitely not helping the situation by applauding his youngers for their misbehavior.

To Beorn’s credit he only glances at the hysterical Hobbit before addressing the wizard again.

“Is that it? Are there any more?”

Softer treading steps stop at the top of the stairs, and Bilbo knows it’s Thorin without stopping his laughter. It only gets worse.

Beorn hums as he takes in the Dwarrow King before a large, fanged grin spreads across his face.

“I see Bilbo was most apt in his descriptions of you Dwarves.”

Bilbo continues to roll in his laughter, hitting the wizard’s leg who promptly -yet gently- kicks him away. Bilbo only laughs harder knowing the wizard has figured out what happened. He ignores the throbbing wound on his side and shoulder; rolling around on the ground was doing the injuries no favors after all.

“One day, Bilbo Baggins…” the wizard vows beneath his breath and none save Bilbo and Beorn could hear it.

Bilbo snickers as his laughter peters off, rising to his feet and wiping the grass from his clothes and the tears from his eyes. He moves and stands beside the bear-Man and grins up at him.

“Oh, that was a good laugh,” he says before looking at the Dwarrows and Gandalf. “We came to an agreement late in the night. We can stay so long as we do not kill any animals on his lands and remain inside when night falls.”

When some of the Dwarrows look to argue Bilbo flashes golden eyes at them.

“This is his territory, not yours. We abide his rules or we leave without any supplies.”

Several Dwarrows look to Thorin for guidance while the other half nod at Bilbo in agreement.

Nori can’t help the small smirk from appearing on his face. The journey was shaping up to be even more interesting.

“Very well, Master Baggins. We appreciate your hospitality, Beorn of the Skin-Changers.”

Beorn grunts and places his axe against the stump.

“Bilbo makes a most amusing story-weaver, Dwarf. You should thank him. Had he not, you would be leaving with the dawn. Now come, I will have my animals prepare you breakfast.”

Bilbo trots along beside the elder Skin-Changer as he makes his way into his home.

“Animals?”

The man says nothing, only claps his hands and out comes a swarm of varying animals. Large, long-bodied grey dogs, cats of varying colors, sheep, and four beautiful white ponies. They come from seemingly nowhere and after Beorn speaks to them in a queer language -like animal noises turned into talk that Bilbo understands-, they begin to clean and prepare a meal. One dog lights the hearth with the torch clutched between its jaws. The sheep bring in plates and bowls of food and cutlery
upon their backs that the dogs -who can stand on their back legs and use their forelegs to carry things- take and place on the table. The ponies gather two benches and push them up to the table, pushing the enormous chair that had been there into a corner by the fire. The cats sit around and observe the other animals, occasionally letting out a meow directed at one of the dogs.

“What on Arda—”

“These are some of my animals. In exchange for protection, they aid me in my home. But that one,” - he points to a cat sitting near the giant chess set- “he only plays chess.”

Bilbo decides to not question the apparent sentience of Beorn’s animals and makes his way to said cat. He’s a beautiful feline; a slim, Rhovanion Blue if Bilbo remembers the breed correctly.

“Does he now? Well, let’s see what you’ve got, yes?” he says, addressing the cat as he sits on the stomp on the dark pieces side.

The cat leaps down from the banister to sit on the opposite side. Bilbo ignores the looks from the Dwarrows and asks for the cat’s name.

“He calls himself RatSlasher. He doesn’t speak much.”

“An apt name, I’m sure,” the Hobbit says distractedly as he moves a piece.

He barely notices Balin and Dwalin coming to sit by him as he continues his game with the feline. It’s only when the cat gets up and leaves in the middle of their game -neither of them could get one over on the other- that he notices the food is done and the Dwarrows are sitting at the table stuffing their faces.

“How kind of you to inform me that the meal was ready,” he snarks at Dwalin as he comes to sit beside him, choosing to sit at the end of the bench to keep Dwalin between him and the other Dwarrows.

“Ye looked like ye were having fun,” Dwalin grins around a mouthful of bread.

“Swallow before you speak.”

“Yes, mother,” chuckling when Bilbo shoves his shoulder.

Beorn goes around pouring milk into the large mugs the animals provided, remaining silent as the Dwarrows whisper between themselves -they don’t seem to realize both Skin-Changer’s can hear them. As he pours the beverage into Bifur’s mug, he looks at the Dwarrow King.

“So you are the one they call ‘Oakenshield’,” he says, passing by to fill Fíli’s mug. “Tell me, why is Azog the Defiler hunting you?”

“We battle against him long ago at Moria... How do you know of Azog?”

The Skin-Changer stops behind Bilbo, threading a large hand through the Hobbit’s curls. So intent in listening to Beorn’s tale and his food, he doesn’t notice several of the Dwarrows narrowing their eyes at the Man. Even if he had, the gesture was a greeting and embrace in turn among Skin-Changers, as he had been told many years ago. Had Bilbo and Beorn been in their skins, they would have rubbed foreheads together. Beorn’s eyes land on the King and grins briefly when he sees the Dwarf’s thunderous scowl. It falls when he speaks again.

“Many years ago, my people were the first to live in the mountains... before the Orcs came down
from the North.”

The shackle Bilbo had noticed around his wrist -hauntingly familiar- clinks as his hand runs through Bilbo’s hair.

“The Defiler killed most of my family, while others he enslaved. Not for work, you see, but for sport,” he snarls setting down the jug of milk on the table. “Caging Skin-Changers and torturing them seemed to amuse him.”

“Are there others like us?” Bilbo asks, craning his head back to look up at the older Skin-Changer. He is suddenly lifted up from his seat while Beorn grabs the bowl he was eating from; ignoring Dwalin’s snarls at him to release his brother and moving to the large wooden chair in the corner.

“Once there were many,” he says softly as he sits, placing the Hobbit against his side and handing him the bowl; ignoring the grumbling warrior.

“And now?”

“Now there are only us.”

Bilbo’s hands tighten around the large bowl as he stares blankly into it.

“Only us?” he rasps out.

“Yes.”

The mood turns sour as the Dwarrows continue eating; Beorn running a hand continuously through the Hobbit’s hair as he eats slowly. Looking up, the Man addresses the Dwarrow King.

“You need to reach the mountain before the first days of autumn do you not?”

“Before Durin’s Day, yes,” Gandalf speaks for the Dwarf as he puffs on his pipe.

“You are running out of time,” he grumbles.

“Which is why we will take the Elven road through Mirkwood. It is safe-”

“Safe?” Beorn scoffs watching the Dwarf separate himself from the table. “A darkness lies upon that forest. Fell things crawl beneath those trees and the Wood Elves are not like their kin. They are less wise, and more dangerous. They will not have kept it clear. But that matters not.”

“What do you mean?” Thorin asks.

“These lands are crawling with Orcs and their numbers are growing. You are on foot. You would not reach the forest alive even with Bilbo’s aid.”

Beorn stares at the Dwarf before his gaze travels around the rest of the Company.

“I don’t like Dwarves,” he says with a growl, pulling Bilbo tighter against him. “They are greedy… blind to the lives they deem lesser than their own.”

He pauses, loosening his hold on Bilbo before he speaks.

“But Orcs I hate even more. Whatever you need, I will provide.”
Some of the Dwarrows cheer at the Skin-Changer before the Man speaks over them.

“However, you will stay a week. Rest. Heal. The mountain is not going anywhere.”

“That sounds marvelous.”

“We need to keep moving.”

King and Hobbit glare at each other over the heads of the Company.

“We can afford a week, Master Dwarf,” Bilbo growls.

“Aye, Thorin, I agree with Bilbo. Ye both are injured and ye need time te heal. We stay,” Óin snaps at Thorin.

The King’s lips curl in distaste, but nods his head.

The decision made, the Dwarrows continue eating with gusto.

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The days pass in leisure for the Company; filling their stomachs, filling packs with non-spoiling foods, and lazing around in the sweet smelling grass in the field around Beorn’s home. Many of them considered the highlight of their stay to be the spectacle of Dwalin and the Princes sparing with Bilbo, or the tussles between Beorn and their Hobbit in their skins.

For Bilbo -aside from playing chess with RatSlasher-, it was during the nights where he lay in the field in his Warg skin, looking up into the clear night sky or patrolling with Beorn through his lands. He used that time to absorb the magic flowing beneath for his stores. His wounds had healed by the third day since he had been shifting to aid Beorn in his runs -Gandalf almost had kittens when he found out Bilbo had been slipping out in the night and shifting- and the constant supply of food and sleep helped him regain some of the weight he had lost in the mountains.

“Little Kitten is growing fat on honey and bread,” Beorn had chuckled one day as he lifted him up on his shoulder; Skin-Changers were a very tactile race as Bilbo was learning.

“I’ll have you know I’m an adult! Nor have I ever been ‘fat’!”

“Really? How many summers?”

“One hundred and sixty-nine winters, you brute!”

“Still but a kit!” Beorn laughs as he ignores the young Dwarves caterwauling for Bilbo to join them instead and Bilbo’s sputtering at the address.

It made the worry in Beorn’s chest loosen with how possessive some of them were being. At least they would keep an eye on his kin-cousin. Especially the ones Bilbo called brothers, his Dwarflings, and the Dwarf King. Beorn had not missed the Dwarf’s need to keep the Hobbit in sight.

For Thorin, it was the quiet moments when he could approach their Skin-Changer alone. The Bear Skin-Changer had taken to hoarding all of their Hobbit’s time, and his sister-sons, the younger Rí’s and himself were not at all happy with that arrangement -Dwalin and Balin were oddly silent on the matter. As he had decided to try and get to know the Hobbit during their stay, Beorn was making that nearly impossible.

The first time he sought him out he approaches cautiously; the Hobbit was lazing against a tree in
Beorn’s garden -legs crossed and a pair of daggers laying beside him as he reads.

“Can I help you?” the Hobbit asks, never taking his eyes off the words, yet Thorin has no doubt most of his attention is on him.

His tense shoulders give him away.

Before he could reply, a deep roar echoes from across the field. The Hobbit tilts his head before he climbs to his feet, tucking his daggers away -Thorin could not see where- and gave him a little nod.

“Excuse me.”

He walks off.

That first time, Thorin thought nothing of it and tried his luck at other times. However, somehow the Hobbit had evaded all of his attempts at conversation; slipping away with a polite “Excuse me”, or some roundabout spiel that left Thorin unable to do anything but agree to let him walk away.

It was frustrating.

“He will not let me speak with him,” Thorin growls as he destroys the bread in his hand.

It was the morning of the fourth day, and all of his efforts -subtle and straightforward- had all been rebuffed or avoided with a mastery Thorin envied.

Dwalin chuckles beside him.

“Yer not the only one he’s blacklisted.”

Thorin looks over at him curiously.

“Aside from Glóin, the others have tried speakin’ te him too.”

“No luck?”

“None. Can’t blame him though. Last time he… well… last time let’s just say it didn’t go very well.”

“What-”

“Not my story te tell.”

“He can’t tell it if he’s avoiding us either,” he King growls, viciously ripping the loaf in half. “And whatever happened to your ‘concerned-older-brother’ routine?”

“Beorn’s the only one of his kin-folk he’s ever met; I’ll not take that from him,” Dwalin growls back. “If ye all stop acting like jittery ponies, ye’d have better luck. He’s not going te reach out te any of ye, yer goin’ te have te be the ones te do it. Otherwise he’ll make due and just trail us like he had with the caravans. Of which Balin an’ I don’t approve at all.”

Dwalin leaves him alone at the table with a huff and leaves the house, hollering for Bilbo to “Come here so I can kick yer furry arse!”.

A heavy thump and a string of Warg-ish from a Hobbit’s throat informs Thorin that Dwalin had been tackled to the ground and subsequently lectured.

“Don’ lecture me in a language I don’ understand!”
“Well you certainly know me well enough to guess.”

“Brat!”

“Quartz roller!”

Silence.

“Balin! How dare ye tell him about that!”

The Hobbit’s laughter drifts into the house and Thorin smirks. His resolve to get to know their Hobbit growing even stronger.

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He gets to know Bilbo, at least a little bit.

He had to approach the Hobbit unarmed and demanding a spar before their Burglar would say more than a few words to him if he wasn’t countermanding him. Even then, at times Bilbo would only allow his presence while in his Warg skin.

“He’s desensitizing ye, laddie,” Balin had told him. “As much as a cart to the face can desensitize anyone anyway.”

The others upon seeing his success followed suit. All of them were baffled by Bilbo’s fighting techniques and quickly subdued -Bifur bowed out of approaching the Hobbit this way, muttering something about night-terrors. Dori came close to winning through brute strength and the reach of his bolas; and Nori with his sleight of hand and his staff. Otherwise the Hobbit was unlike any warrior he had seen. Quicker than even Elves, he wielded his daggers -and the Elven letter opener- like swords and came up with cunning plans to defeat his Dwarrows. He used everything at his disposal in order to win, even his skins. But, after watching so many spars, Thorin sees a striking difference between his kin and the Hobbit.

The Hobbit always treated the spars with the Company -sans Balin, Dwalin, and; as he calls them; his Dwarfling’s- as a fight for survival. His eyes were... sharp with intelligence yet burned cold like blue flames. He and his Company were seen as potential enemies, not tentative allies; and that made his gut twist.

“He may let you close, Thorin, but he has not forgotten how you all have treated him,” Gandalf tells him on the fifth night.

They are watching Beorn and Bilbo spar out in the field; Dwalin down there with them playing overseer. Their roars and snarls echo on the wind.

“Dwarrows have treated him... unkindly in years passed.”

“I have thought as much. But he is part of this Company, surely he knows we will not harm him.”

Even Glóin had eventually attempted to make amends with Bilbo with some success -his brother had nearly made his ears bleed with the lecture he roared at him-, and the Hobbit would now let the Dwarf near enough to speak at him. Glóin had learned from Balin that Hobbit’s valued above all else younglings, family, and food. As the Dwarf loved regaling anyone who would listen with tales of his son and wife, Bilbo became his new target for such stories.

Bilbo’s rapt attention to his tales quickly endeared him to the fire-haired Dwarf, seemingly erasing all
doubts from his mind about their Hobbit.

Yet still the Hobbit was very reserved with his words and actions, only letting loose when sparring.

“We had thought so before.”

The wizard leaves him on the porch, ambling down the small hill to the two Skin-Changers where he gives a zealous wave and cheer, distracting Bilbo from Beorn who tackles him to the ground with his fangs at the Hobbit’s throat.

“Yer out, Bilbo!”

The Hobbit snarls and growls at his brother in indignation as he shoves the bear-Man off of him with his back legs before shoving his brother to the ground in a heap of fur and steel.

Thorin stands and watches as Bilbo gives Dwalin a tongue bath before turning back into the house. He had much to think on.

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The sixth day, something horrible happens.

Remember that trickster spirit?

Yes. It was back.

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“Uncle!!” his nephews cry out as they rush into the common room.

They stop before him and Thorin feels his stomach hit his feet with dread.

“It’s back!”

“It changed our hair again!”

“What’s going on?” Bilbo asks as he comes in from the garden littered with leaves and grass in his hair and dirt all over his hands and trousers.

The Hobbit pauses when he sees the state of Fíli's and Kíli's hair.

“That trickster from Rivendell followed us here!”

“We have to warn everyone. No one use the soap! It’s probably spelled. I don’t want to turn fuchsia again!”

“Don’t eat any of the apples either; they’ll surely be onions.” Fíli bemoans -the Dwarf had a sweet tooth for the fruit, which Bilbo had not known of.

“Beware of doorways and doors as well, then.” Thorin growls out. “Least we get covered in feathers and sticky water.”

And this is when Bilbo cracks.

The Hobbit clutches his gut, doubled over, he’s laughing so hard. He can feel his ears and face turning red with his glee as he listens to the Dwarrows continue planning how best to avoid being
tricked again.

“You think this is a joke?” Thorin snaps at the Skin-Changer.

Bilbo just falls to his knees as he continues to laugh. Balin and Dwalin enter the room, drawn by their brother’s laughter and look in askance at their King.

“The trickster has returned and your brother only laughs!”

Balin only looks more confused as Dwalin looks at Bilbo for a long moment before a thunderous scowl erupts on his face.

“Oh, you little shite,” he growls, taking a menacing step toward the Hobbit.

Like a gutted candle, Bilbo stops laughing, taking a deep breath, and a positively feral grin stretches across his face.

“Oh, Dwalin, I’m sure father said you’d have to _catch_ me,” he snickers before shifting into his fox skin and darting off back out of the house.

Dwalin doesn’t bother giving chase knowing full well that though he may be small in this skin, Bilbo was twice as fast.

“I’mma wring his scrawny neck, jes watch me.”

“What did he mean, brother?” Balin asks, setting a calming hand on his shoulder.

“Yes, explain,” Thorin huffs out. “He can be more cryptic than even the wizard at times.”

“That ‘trickster spirit’ ye were talkin’ about? We’ll you just saw it.”

Balin is the first to realize what Dwalin is getting at, chuckling as he marvels at Bilbo’s knack with words and trickery. A fine diplomat or politician he would be for Erebor, that is, unless Nori sinks his claws into him first.

“You’re joking,” Fíli says faintly as he too connects the dots.

“What do you mean we just saw it?”

“It seems Master Baggins is more adept in deception than any of us realized,” Thorin growls out.

Despite his embarrassment and anger that came with the realization, Thorin can’t help but be impressed.

“What does- Ohhhh! Are you serious?!”

“Indeed,” Dwalin snaps, hands twitching in anticipation of throttling a certain Hobbit.

“Well that certainly explains a lot,” Kíli muses before a wide grin spreads on his face. “You know what this means Fí?”

“Most certainly!”

The princes dart out of the house, wicked grins on their faces.

“I don’t have a good feeling about this,” Balin says, eyeing the door the Dwarfling’s fled out of.
“Should we warn the others?” Thorin asks, realizing just what his nephews were planning -the unholy matrimony of two heathens and an expert trickster.

The three Dwarrows look at each other before they all huff out a few laughs.

“Nay, let them have their fun.”

And so over the next two days, the Company was bombarded with tricks, pranks, and general mischief by two Dwarfling’s, a Hobbit, and -surprisingly- Beorn.

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"Are you really a hundred and sixty-nine winters?"

"Yes, I was born in... 2772 I think is what your calendar would say."

"So you're the youngest."

"Our calendar?"

"We Hobbits go by a different calendar, and yes, I am."

"Ah."

“Beorn and yourself use these things called… wards was it?”

“Yes.”

“Can you teach us?” they ask eagerly.

“Do either of you have even a speck of magic in you?”

“Well, no.”

“Not that we know of.”

“You don’t. Therefore I can’t teach you how to use them.”

The Dwarfling’s whine and pout for all of ten minutes before they’re dragging off the Hobbit and grabbing the Bear Skin-Changer in order to cause more mayhem.

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The week passes; mischief and all; and on the morning of the eighth day, the Company; lighter of heart and getting along better; fills their many water canteens and finish their packing. As they saddle up the ponies Beorn supplied, Thorin watches as Gandalf and Bilbo speak with the older Skin-Changer some ways off. Something churning in his gut as he sees the Man run his fingers through Bilbo’s hair for the umpteenth time since that morning a week ago.

He doesn’t like it.

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“You will leave my ponies before you enter the forest,” Beorn tells the wizard, running his fingers through Bilbo’s hair.

“You have my word.”
“I’ll be sure to remind him.”

The wizard scoffs and glances at the company. A rustling and a birds cawing as it takes off draws the wizard’s gaze up into the trees.

“We’re being watched,” he murmurs, dropping his gaze to Bilbo to see his friends eyes glowing gold; he must smell something on the wind.

“Yes, your hunters are tracking you. They are not far behind”

“But why now, what has pulled Azog from his hole?”

“There is an alliance between the Orcs of Moria and the Sorcerer at Dol Guldur."

"You're sure of this?" the wizard asks with wide eyes."

"Each day, packs have been seen traveling there with more coming up from the south."

"What have you heard of this 'sorcerer'? The one they call the 'Necromancer'?"

"I know that he is not what he seems. Fell things are drawn to his power and Azog pays homage to him in exchange for hunting the Dwarves.""

Gandalf sighs shakily as Bilbo grips the bottom of Beorn’s tunic.

“Gandalf, Bilbo, time is wasting. We must go.” Thorin calls out to them.

“Before you leave... Not long passed, word spread that the dead had been seen on the paths up near the High Fells of Rhudaur.”

“The dead?”

“Yes. Tell me, are there tombs in those mountains?”

Gandalf remains silent for a moment before answering.

“Yes… yes there are tombs up there.”

Beorn heaves a sigh.

“I remember a time when these lands were ruled by a great evil. One powerful enough to raise the dead. If such a power has returned, I would have you tell me and bring Bilbo back to my lands.”

“Saruman the White says that it is not possible. That power was wiped out long ago.”

“But what does Gandalf the Grey say?” Beorn growls at him, grip tightening in Bilbo’s hair briefly before releasing.

Gandalf looks at him helplessly before Thorin’s voice calls out to them again.

Beorn looks down at Bilbo.

“Go now, while you have the light. Azog will not stop in his hunt until the Dwarves are destroyed.”

He shifts into his bear skin and Bilbo into his Warg, shoving their foreheads together tightly before Beorn backs off and into the forest. Bilbo follows Gandalf to the Company, looking back only once before trotting after the ponies as the Dwarrows spur them on, keeping watch and guarding their
They run hard and fast, only resting for an hour at a time until they finally come to the borders of Mirkwood. Bilbo shifts as Gandalf dismounts his horse, the light furrowing down his back standing on end as his senses pick up the foul air and the sickness of the land beneath his feet. He would not be absorbing any magic within this forest, not unless he wanted to become corrupted and sick himself.

“This forest is sick, Gandalf. The land reeks of it, and the magic roils like snakes against my own,” he murmurs to the wizard, shuffling his feet against the dry grass as he follows him to an ornate arch. The sickness is spreading.

“Yet this is our way through Mirkwood.”

“Is there no way around?”

“No unless we travel two-hundred miles North,” he says distractedly. “Or twice that distance South.”

Turning back and giving Bilbo a long look, he addresses the Dwarrows.

"Set the ponies loose. Beorn will be most cross if they aren't returned.

The Dwarrows ignore the Hobbit and the wizard after that as they unload the ponies and begin to unsaddle them. Bilbo watches Gandalf travel further into the woods, something drawing him in. The wizard comes to a statue covered in vines and yanks them off, staring at a symbol of some kind upon it. His senses start screaming at him as he hears the whispers; whispers he had only heard when he touched that blasted ring; and a flash of fire within his mind.

It makes him want to find the deepest hole and hunker down until the danger has passed.

Gandalf hurries back up the path and passes Bilbo to his horse.

“No my horse! I need it!”

“You’re leaving us?” Bilbo asks frantically as he follows the wizard, grabbing onto his robe to stop him.

“You know I would not if I had another choice, my boy.”

Bilbo bites his lip and fiddles with the edge of his pocket. He had forgotten to speak to Gandalf about the vile ring while they were at Beorn’s. Now it was the only thing he could think of.

“There’s something… off about you Bilbo. I sensed it briefly in the mountains, yet now…”

“I found… something in the Goblin tunnels.”

“Really? What did you find?”

“It’s… it’s this gold ring,” he forces out on a whisper, ignoring the snapping and snarling of his senses and magic to just drop the bloody thing, as he pulls the ring from his pocket to present it to the wizard. “It doesn’t feel right, Gandalf. My magic… it…”

He studies it for a time, his hand reaching to touch the gold, before pulling away as though shocked before even touching it. He curls Bilbo’s fingers back around the ring.
“It is old magic, my boy, do not fret, but heed my warning. Do not use it unless absolutely necessary,” he says with a frown. “Old magic is wilder and more prone to corrupting newer magics.”

“Oh… Oh, that’s fine then. Good to know.”

“Chin up, Bilbo. Only prolonged exposure would taint your own. As for the magic of the land, I’m sure I don’t have to tell you not to absorb any while you’re in there.”

“You’d be right.”

“That’s good. Now, I will be waiting for you at the overlook on the slopes of Erebor,” Gandalf says as he passes through the gathered Dwarrows, stopping to look at Thorin. “Keep the map and key safe and do not enter that mountain without me.”

He proceeds to his horse, checking the straps and stirrups as he continues to inform them of the dangers Beorn had spoken to him of.

“If you remember the Greenwood, this is not it. The air within the forest is thick with illusion. It will seek to enter your minds and lead you astray. There is also a stream that carries a dark enchantment, do not touch the water! Cross only by the stone bridge.”

The Company shifts about nervously as they watch the wizard prepare to leave.

“You must stay on the path and do not leave it. If you do, you will never find it again. Conserve your provisions and water. The path is not a straight one.”

He turns his mount around and begins to gallops away just as it begins to rain.

“Whatever may come, stay on the path!”

Bilbo watches him go before turning back to the Dwarrows, making his way to stand beside Dwalin and Balin; the weather was getting colder.

“Come on, we have to make it through before Durin’s Day. It’s the only way to find the hidden door,” Thorin says as he leads them under the gate.

Bilbo looks back and takes in the blue sky despite the rain and the green of the grass in the distance.

He has a feeling it will be a long time before he will ever see such a sight again.

Chapter End Notes

Khuzdul:

shaikul rukhs - cowardly orc

More size charts for you! Beorn is about the same length as Bilbo in this skin but more muscular and heavier, hard to tell with this pick as it’s a stock I found of Beorn online. I’ll eventually get around to drawing up Beorn proper to give a better visual.
This is RatSlasher

And this is Bilbo when he's angry:

So if anyone has done/wants to do fanart for this story, by all means do so and send me a link! I'd like to see whatever you guys come up with aside from what I'm providing!
Chapter Summary

Like the fading of the day into the night, so too does the tale of Fundin and Bilbo's change with the twilight.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Letter # 32

April 25, 2807 T.A.

Dwalin,

I… Mahal…

They took him, Dwalin… Our Hobbit!

I did not even know until Gandalf…

Tadâ dashatu rakhsân! (Those sons of orcs!)

They’ve had him for three months … maybe longer…

They’d best pray he’s alive when I find him, Dwalin. If he’s not…

(Several lines of words are scratched out and Dwalin can’t make head or tails of them; not even when he had first received the letter; the ink is so dark. He can imagine the curses and promises of retribution his Father must have written in his haste. Raking a hand through his beard, he reads the last lines.)

I will write again when I find him.

Fundin

His ram barely keeps up with Gandalf’s horse as they race across the plains. The wind beating harsh against his skin and the clouds threatening to unleash a downpour. Not long after, the clouds burst, the rain torrential and preventing them from proceeding any farther. They were lucky to have made it to the Grey Havens just as the rain started to come down.

When Gandalf had arrived in Ered Luin, haggard and in a temper, Fundin did not know what to expect. The disappearance of Bilbo was beyond anything he could have imagined.

Taken from his home in the Shire; hadn’t been seen in more than three months.
At first he did not even know who to blame until Tharkûn started making accusations against some of his guards. Sitting in the common room of the inn they have hunkered down in, the Dwarf hazily remembers spitting curses at the wizard for slandering his kin.

Then the wizard presented his evidence.

Two of his captains; both of which were there when Bilbo had first changed into his Warg skin; had taken leave four months ago. Three guards had taken theirs two weeks later; backgrounds the same - how the wizard came by this information… Fundin nearly pitied the poor Dwarf who had to deal with him in that state.

Gandalf had been to visit his favorite Hobbit last week only to find him not at home, which was most unusual.

“I had sent him a letter informing him when I would arrive for a visit and he replied in kind. He would not have wandered off, Fundin, he’s an exceptionally proper Hobbit! Not greeting his guests is most rude!”

Asking around, the wizard learned that a group of Dwarrows had been in the Shire nearly four months before looking for Bilbo, claiming they were friends who have stopped in for a visit before they returned to Ered Luin.

Bilbo was not seen again.

The captains Harphel and Ruphel; brothers from Garfel’s line; and the guards Heingl, Jarvin, and Kargis had been Bilbo’s friends… at least they had seemed to be. They acted like they had before his change… what had happened?

Fundin’s blood had run cold and his stomach threatened to rebel when Gandalf was finished.

“They may have stopped here before heading to Hobbiton. I will go speak with the innkeeper,” Gandalf suddenly says, pulling Fundin from his thoughts.

Some time later, Gandalf returns to Fundin’s side, more livid than when he had arrived at Ered Luin. He sits down roughly and huffs on his pipe like a furious dragon for some minutes before Fundin supposed he was calm enough to speak.

“It appears this group has been coming here for some time. Only recently did they really catch the good Elf’s attention when they were mentioning the caves in the Far Downs and a ‘Halfling’,” the wizard growls out the word. “He said they only visited twice a year for nearly five years now until over three and a half months ago. Two of them were here for two weeks before the others arrived and then they departed.”

“Maybe he’s escaped them? His fox skin is small and quick, he could have escaped them and has been in hiding,” Fundin asks, a small flicker of hope within him.

“He would have sent a sparrow to me if he had.”

“What?”

“It is a system we devised when he was younger. If he sends me a sparrow, he has escaped whatever peril he has landed in and is waiting for me five miles in whatever direction he happens to have run.”

“And if he has not?”
“He howls.”

Fundin breathes out shakily.

“Normally I would be near enough to hear him, but as I had no clues until now…”

Fundin nods as he runs a shaky hand through his hair before pulling it down his face and beard.

“We’d best sleep then so we hear him.”

The wizard nods and takes his leave of Fundin, the Dwarf following moments after he has downed the rest of his ale.

He falls into restless, nightmare filled dreams.

His dreams force him into the waking world before the sun has even started to peek through the clouds over the horizon. He stares out his window -it is drizzling-, time passing him by without his notice before there is a knock on his door. The sun is still not awake.

“Fundin?”

With a heavy sigh, the Dwarf grunts at the wizard from his bed.

“We leave in thirty minutes, be ready.”

The wizard’s footsteps fade down the hall.

Fundin is ready in fifteen.

Letter #33

April 26, 2807 T.A.

We have a lead.

F.

(Dwalin’s hands shake, the letter rattling with them as he remembers this day. He had never been so afraid for someone he had only heard of in stories. Someone his father spoke of so fondly as if he were speaking of Balin or himself.)

Fog and spattering rainfall accompany them throughout their travel to the Far Downs. They arrive at high noon, though you wouldn’t be able to tell with the thick clouds blotting out the sun. That is when they hear it.

The long deep howl of a Warg.

Fundin’s heart starts pounding as he shares a look with the wizard before they are off, following the howl as it sounds again. It takes hours, but eventually, they find a cave entrance, the howls near deafening as they are amplified by the tunnels. The shouts of voices can barely be heard over the din.

“Shut yer yap afore I stick my axe in yer gut!”
Leaving their mounts tied to a tree, Fundin and Gandalf make haste down into the damp tunnel, tracking the snarling and furious shouts of at least one of the traitors. They keep an eye out for the others on the way, the tunnel lit only slightly by Gandalf’s staff so they don’t give themselves away.

“Stop that, Harphel! Ye’ll just get him going again!” a voice snaps.

The clang of a dropped weapon echoes down to the hopeful rescuers.

“I’ll kill that beast!” comes snarled words echoed by a more dangerous growl from a Warg’s throat. “Ye killed him! My brother! I’ll gut ye when yer too sick and weak; can’t do anything te stop me just like Ruphel couldn’a stopped ye!”

Bilbo howls at Harphel who roars back. The sound of chains clattering and pulling tight echo within the cave.

“Ye’d like that, wouldn’t ye, ye bloodthirsty mongrel. Te rip my throat out? Yer not gettin’ outta those, even if ye manage te kill me. Ye’ll die here; no one knows yer here.”

The Skin-Changer roars, dust falling from the ceiling, helpless to remain there against the power of the Hobbit’s voice.

“I said shut it!”

A yelping snarl reverberates in Fundin’s ears as something heavy strikes their Hobbit and clatters to the ground; setting his blood anew with rage.

Another roar leaves the Skin-Changer’s throat.

“Try forcin’ him back again,” Harphel sneers. “Let him heal. We need his skin in one piece.”

“I’ve tried six times teday alone, ye git,” the other Dwarf snaps back. “Either the magic’s run dry or it can resist the enchantment in this skin now.”

Fundin hears a small hiss of air pass through Gandalf’s lips. Looking up, Gandalf’s eyes seem to glow in the low light from his staff; his face shadowed and blank. Too blank.

“Follow me,” are the only words he whispers before gliding through the tunnels like the shadows are aiding his steps.

They reach the end of the tunnel as it opens up into a cavern. Gandalf’s staff suddenly goes out, leaving them in darkness. Or not quite…

Firelight flickers from the shadows behind a copse of boulders.

They step lightly until they can peer around the stones. The sight before him almost causes him to rush these… these binakrâg Khazâd had it not been for the heavy hand on his shoulder. (honorless Dwarrow)

Bilbo is chained to the far wall. Cuffs and chains covered in glowing runes circle his limbs with a large collar around his neck. Old and new blood stains the ground around him, whether it is Bilbo’s or the Dwarrows he killed, they cannot tell. But they can see fresh blood glinting in the firelight on his fur.

“The runes still glow, there’s magic yet in them,” Harphel growls.
“Then he’s stronger than the magic in these then. We’ve already had to replace one of the cuffs and they ain’t cheap.”

Gandalf bends and picks up a large stone, throwing it behind them where it clatters against the rocks, before pulling Fundin into the shadows behind the boulder.

“What was that?” Harphel whispers. “Kargis, go look.”

“It’s probably nothing.”

“Ye’ve been giving’ me nothing but cheek since that beast killed Ruphel! I’m still yer captain. If I say go look, ye go look!”

A string of Khuzdul curses comes from Kargis’ mouth, but the sound of shuffling armor and cloth echoes in the cave. Heavy footsteps approach the stone they hide behind and the Dwarf and the wizard watch as the guard passes by them.

Then Gandalf moves, making nary a sound as he trails behind Kargis. Fundin watches as the wizard clocks the Dwarf upside the head with his staff and the traitor drops. He would have hit the floor if Gandalf had not caught his collar. Carefully, he lowers the coward to the ground, and in Iglishmek, tells Fundin to bring him some rope. Once the Dwarf is tied, they go back and wait for Harphel to come looking for his companion.

They don’t have to wait long. Harphel curses and spits at Bilbo before stomping his way to where Kargis went. Fundin is upon him before Gandalf can do anything.

“Ye binakrâg Khuzd! Dashatu rakhân!” Fundin roars, striking the Dwarf’s face with all of his strength, sending him to the ground. “Ye dare take my son?!” (honorless Dwarf! Son of Orcs!)

The Dwarf, bloody mouthed, grins up at him and spits blood.

“No less than the lying beast deserved!” he cackles.

FUND in loses himself to his rage. Blows rain down on Harphel’s face and he only comes out of it when he is violently pulled away from his son’s tormentor.

“You can meet out punishment later!” Gandalf snaps. “Tie him up and grab the other one. We need to get Bilbo out of those chains!”

Fundin breathes harshly through his nose, kicking the unconscious Dwarf before tying him up and leaving him there while he grabs Kargis and drags him back into the cave. He drags Harphel over every rock he can. Throwing the bastard on top of Kargis, he turns as Gandalf uses his staff to light the cave fully.

What he sees breaks his heart more than he thought possible.

In the gloom of the fire, Fundin and Gandalf had not seen anything but some blood and the glowing chains. In the light, the true damage is revealed.

Bilbo stands, emaciated, snarling, and glaring at them through one golden slit eye. The other is swollen shut, a long cut bisecting it and continuing down to his chin; infection and blood leaking from it. Lips raised in a snarl, they see broken teeth and where a fang should be set on the left upper and lower jaw, are only bloody holes. His left ear tip is barely hanging onto the rest of it; it wasn’t bleeding.
“Oh, pup…”

Fundin walks numbly forward; Gandalf stands as still as stone.

The Hobbit’s entire left side is littered with gashes and cuts, and as Fundin paces left to see how much more damage his son has sustained; several stab wounds along his flank leak blood sluggishly into his fur. A flap of skin and fur is folded over along his back; cut away from the muscle. A large patch of fur is missing along his ribs; the skin and fur are singed.

They tried to skin him.

They had tried to burn him.

That must have been when he snapped.

“Fundin…” the wizard chokes out his name; gaze far off to the left where the fire was.

The Dwarf follows the wizard’s gaze to see a pile of bloody furs and fangs off to the side. Another stockpile had been cleaned and in the process of soaking for tanning or sharpening some time ago.

Fundin says not a word as he draws his axe and turns, advancing on the unconscious swine that lay defenseless where he put them.

“Fundin! Not! Now!”

Gandalf’s rage buffets against his skin.

“They deserve it!” he snarls back, his own rage uncaring of the wizard’s power buffeting his skin. “They treated him like… like a mine for their greed!”

“It is Bilbo’s right to them!”

The Skin-Changer snarls and lunges at them, pulling the chains taut; the skin that was once on the other side of his spine finally shifting back onto the correct side, covering the hole in his flesh exposing his muscles with a wet slap.

The Dwarf fights to keep his meager breakfast down.

“Fundin, think! Bilbo has been in these chains for over three months! They are enchanted to force a shift on command, but right now his magic is blocking it. He must shift back in order to begin healing!”

Fundin sheaths his axe, tears beginning to fill his eyes.

“I must place my hand on his head to put him to sleep. Make a muzzle from what rope you have left; I will handle the rest.”

So he does.

It is a struggle, getting the rope around Bilbo’s snout -he was larger than when he last saw him, which was only six months ago- was like trying to tie down a were-worm with how he thrashes, but he manages. Not seconds later, Gandalf places his hand on Bilbo’s brow and chants, holding onto Bilbo’s snout as he struggles to throw off the wizard. The spell eventually takes yet Bilbo fights to remain awake, but unable to resist the power of the enchantment in his weakened state.

Both the Dwarf and the wizard are exhausted and take a few moments to breathe.
“He’s always surprising me,” Gandalf sighs out.

“Aye… He shouldn’t have been able te stand much less fight us off.”

Gandalf inspects the collar, placing his staff upon it; nothing happens. With a grumble, the wizard goes to each cuff, repeating his actions and getting better results. Fundin raises a brow when he pockets one of them.

“Research.”

Fundin nods before eyeing the collar.

“It’s more powerful than the cuffs. They didn’t want him breaking out of it,” Gandalf says.

“He would have escaped long ago if he had. Would have torn them to shreds…”

“Indeed… Perhaps our prisoners have a cypher on them…”

Gandalf shuffles over to the Dwarrows, ruffling through Harphel’s and then Kargis’ bags, tensing up so suddenly that the hairs on Fundin’s neck raise in alarm, but before he thinks to ask the wizard what is wrong, he moves on to their tunics after shoving Harphel off of Kargis.

“Aha!”

Gandalf returns to Fundin’s side, face shadowed by his hat and a piece of parchment in his hand. He reads through it before grumbling and stepping back to the swine. Ruffling through Kargis’ tunic again, the wizard pulls out a large key.

“Lift his head. The lock must be on the other side.”

Fundin complies; lifting Bilbo’s head with a bit of difficulty -he was bloody heavy- and does his best not to move as Gandalf chants and inserts the key. The collar opens with a snap and Gandalf is quick to remove it.

“Should we not have tried to shift him?” Fundin asks as he looks over Bilbo lying unconscious at his feet.

“As I said, his magic would have blocked it.”

Shuffling behind them and a throaty, vile laugh echoes against the stone. They turn and see Harphel pushing himself to sit up.

“Ye think we’re safe? Ye jus let him loose! Hahaha!”

A feral snarl freezes them both before they are violently shoved aside. Black and white fur shove passed with a howl, knocking Fundin off his feet. Harphel roars back before mutilated jaws fall upon him and Kargis’ unconscious body.

The sounds of ripping flesh and bones echo in the cave as the many bloody, tattered pieces are flung about like some savage ritual dance. Fundin and Gandalf try their best to dodge the blood and viscera. They aren’t terribly successful.

When the Hobbit is done, covered in their gore, he howls in victory for his survival.

“Bilbo-”
The Skin-Changer stills then whips around, two fangs dripping with blood, and lunges at them, eye burning with rage and without recognition. He roars with jaws held wide to snatch Fundin up and rip him apart like he had the other Dwarrows. Only Gandalf stepping between them and shouting out something in some rasping, guttural language makes the Hobbit pause; snarling and looking warily at the wizard. He says something else, and Bilbo steps back, Gandalf following him. The Hobbit snaps at the hand Gandalf reaches out with; the wizard continues forward unflinching; crooning in that horrible language.

Gandalf carefully lays his hand on Bilbo’s brow again and chants. His entire body shudders before he collapses. Gandalf steps aside and a wet golden eye looks at Fundin clearly for the first time that day.

“Bilbo,” Fundin chokes out.

The Hobbit lets out a long, pained whine as he tries to crawl to him, and Fundin darts forward, wrapping his arms around the bloody snout in an embrace. The Dwarf weeps into black fur as his son whimpers and keens beneath his hands.

They had found him.

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Letter #34

April 28, 2807 T.A.

Dwalin,

We found him… by Mahal’s grace we found him…

He’s... he’s in a bad way, Dwalin.

Stuck as well… He can’t change to heal himself.

His body… They… Mahal Dwalin, the things they did to him! They treated him like a gold mine to line their pockets! He’s but a pup!

They broke him Dwalin! They (whatever Fundin had meant to write is unintelligible before it was crossed through).

I… he can’t even let me near for long before he starts trembling…

(There are blots of ink on the page; Dwalin can imagine his father’s own hand trembling.)

Gandalf wants to take him to Rivendell… says his magic is dangerously low and his wounds still bleed. The wizard cannot help him anymore and Elrond is the only one West of the mountains who can now. I pray we get there in time; he’s skin and bones, he can’t… he might not…

Rivendell is so far…
Dwalin puts the yellowed letter back in the stack with slightly trembling hands. The date printed on the front will always haunt his thoughts when they wandered to his wayward brother.

He prays to Mahal to cast his gaze on the Hobbit; to keep him safe.

Chapter End Notes

So yea... this happened. I'm sorry Bilbo!

Khuzdul:

*Tadâ dâshatu râkhsân!* - Those sons of orcs!

*binâkrâg Khazâd* - honorless Dwarrows

*binâkrâg Khuzd! Dâshatu râkhsân!* - honorless Dwarf! Son of Orcs!
They've been avoiding him. Not overtly, and really more like they were stepping on eggshells around him as the days they remained in this sickened forest increased. Even his Dwarflings were cautious of him and his moods, but could he blame them? He was the most dangerous amongst them and they all knew it. Ever since Bombur was cast under the river's spell; Thorin chasing off that white stag - a bloody good omen, Mr. 'We make our own luck'! - right before he fell under was an ill omen indeed; and being bullied into his Warg skin in order to carry the rotund Dwarf around meant his temper had been shorter than ever.

They’re treating him like some beast of burden!

_Calm! Calm down, Bilbo. What on Arda is the matter with you?!

Taking deep breaths - and having to consciously keep himself from absorbing this cursed earth’s magic once again-, the Dwarrows nearby look at him with apprehension from where they rest against the trees along the path. It was his own fault really. Just... two days? Maybe three... However long ago it was - it hadn't been long enough for the Company to forget-, Bilbo had almost bitten Thorin's head off.

He didn’t mean that figuratively either.
They had stopped for a rest. Bilbo, still carrying a sleeping Bombur, had put him down before shifting back. He was then pulled by his shoulder to settle beside Thorin -who had been unexpectedly tactile the past few days- when the Dwarf started talking. The Hobbit, barely listening to him, had heard something else in the forest. Voices that grated against his ears like cutlery against his fine Westfarthing plates had set his instincts on edge.

"What is that? That... chattering... Can you hear them?" he asked, thoughts hazy and fleeting.

"I hear nothing," Thorin huffed, tightening his hold on Bilbo’s shoulder before he started rambling again, mind hazy and tired like the rest of them from the dense forest air. "No wind... nor birds... What hour is it?"

"I don’ know," Dwalin drawled. "I don' even know what day it is..."

"This is taking too long!" Thorin's snapped, his voice echoed in Bilbo’s head like he had roared in his ears.

His temper had flared as darker whispers filled his head; the chattering like nails against his skull and pounding behind his eyes.

"Is there no end to this accursed forest?!"

"None that I can see," Glóin fretted. "Only trees and more trees!"

Thorin moved beside him and Bilbo had looked up. The Majestic Sod had stared at something back the way they had come but somewhere off the path, eyes fixed on it.

"There..."

The Dwarf stepped forward, grip still tight, and intent on going backwards when Bilbo had grabbed him.

"What are you doing?" he slurred, grip tight on the Dwarf's long coat as he pushed back against the hand trying to pull him forward.

"This way," he huffed, his hand slid down and grabbed Bilbo's arm, pulled him up and along behind him as he pushed passed the rest of the Company.

"But Gandalf said-" Óin had started saying when Thorin interrupted him.

"Do as I say! Follow me!"

Bilbo had jerked back as he dropped the coat and stopped the King in his tracks; his temper dangerously close to exploding out of his skin at that point and being dragged around by the blasted Dwarf with his senses being bombarded in too many ways wasn’t helping.

"Wait, stop! We can't leave the path," he had snarled as he snatched his arm from the Dwarf and stumbled back into a trunk covered in something white and sticky.

He had yanked his sleeve from it as it had gotten stuck and glared at Thorin.

"We stay on the path! And in case you have forgotten, I can't leave Bombur just laying there as you all so graciously decided I am to be the only one to carry his weight and mine!"
"If I tell you to carry the burden of another, then you carry it. You are the strongest of us in your Warg skin, Master Baggins. As leader of this Company, you will do as I say. If I say to follow me, you follow!" Thorin snapped as he stepped forward trying to cow him.

Bilbo had shifted and was upon Thorin before anyone realized what was going on. A giant paw held the Dwarf down as jaws opened and nearly closed around his head. Fangs grazed against his cheeks as moist, hot breath sours the air. Thorin stilled and hardly breathed.

It was only a moment before Bilbo had thought -in his temper- the pompous arse cowed himself. With a deep rumbling in his chest and a snap of his jaws mere inches from the Dwarf’s face, he stepped back and shifted, eyes still Warg and narrowed at the downed Dwarrow King.

"I am not one to follow blindly as you well know, Oakenshield, leader though you may be. My contract is not with you," he growled. "We stay on the path."

He walked between the other Dwarrows -who parted as they would for Thorin-, intent on getting through this vile place alive and with as many Dwarrows as he could. He turned and looked back, narrowed gaze settling on Thorin who had lifted himself enough to sit up, looking at him in shock.

"Leave the path if you wish, your eminence, but I will heed the advice given by those far older than us. Bombur, the Dwarflings and I will be following it," he says coolly. "Come! You younglings may take your rest upon my back."

Bilbo shifted and had laid down, waiting for the Dwarflings to climb up. He waited for some minutes before he felt them scramble up his sides. Once they were settled, he looked back at the Company and watched their eyes dart between him and the Dwarrow King in indecision. He had huffed, picked Bombur up, and continued on the path.

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Obviously the rest of the Company had followed, but ever since then, they were more apprehensive around him and careful in what they said. It did not slip his notice that they were acting as they had back at Beorn’s before Thorin grew some stones -as Dwalin so eloquently put it. Except this time the Dwarrow King would huff and gruff as normal, but had taken to thinking before he spoke and had followed Bilbo's lead. Naturally the Company followed his lead on the matter.

For now at least. As the days had passed -they had been traveling for nearly a week if he had been keeping track of the rise and fall of the sun correctly- and their food stores grew slim, Bilbo saw Thorin grow more and more frustrated with his lead. It didn't help that many of them were having hallucinations of lights in the forest or smelling hot food where there was none -Yavanna what he would give to smell again. He had snapped his jaws at several of them when they had thought to stray from the path to follow either; it was slowing them down. It is worse when night falls. Skittering and hissing comes from the woods around the path, but it's the eyes in the dark -not the other eyes, mind, but the bulbous, shiny things which reminded him of insects but much too big- that make him jumpy and more prone to listening to the whispers. Whispers he once knew the source of, but for the life of him, he cannot remember now...

Last night they had eaten the last of the food.

Earlier this morning it rained, and parched as they were, no drops fell from the trees above them for them to try and quench it -they dared not but sip from their water skins-, nor did any trees bare any nuts or fruits to quiet their stomachs. He didn’t risk leaving the path to hunt for anything in this noxious place either, despite the Company’s pleas. The few animals he had seen were emaciated, covered in spores and blackened fur, scentless like most everything in these woods, and likely to
make them ill. His conclusions were founded when Kíli, hungry as he was, had managed to shoot down a squirrel from above the path. Trying to cook the pest only resulted in black smoke and a sneezing fit for Bilbo, who could see the disease on the carcass, followed by black moths as big as his face swarming the fire.

"You should have followed me when we had enough food," Thorin growls at him, though is cautiously out of direct reach should the Hobbit change skins as they stop to rest.

"Of course I should have," Bilbo drawls from where he sits on the path, Bombur laying next to him as he stares out into the dark woods with hooded eyes, lazily tracking the orbs that stared back from the gloom. "Then we would have certainly had more food and water after we had wasted energy climbing over rocks and roots, lost in the middle of this Valar forsaken place. Certainly, Master Dwarf, I'll listen to your well informed lead once we get out of here."

Despite the haze in his mind, Thorin obviously caught the heavy sarcasm in his tone.

"I'm in no mood for your snark, Half-Hobbit!"

"Nor am I in the mood for your prideful tongue," Bilbo says coolly, snapping his teeth at the Dwarf as narrowed green eyes lock onto bleary blue ones. "You may not see them, but something is out there, and they are waiting for us to leave the path. Why they haven't attacked us whilst we travel it, I do not know, but I'd rather stay on this road than become supper for those creatures."

Thorin steps back even further, his expression stony, but unwisely does not retreat, still too used to having his orders followed without any true complaint. The Hobbit was not an entity he has ever had to deal with in such dire affairs nor has he become used to his irreverence even after all these months. Thorin had a habit of likening the races to things he could understand. Dwarrows were stubborn stone, Elves were twisting woods -much like this wretched place-, Men like placid lakes, and Hobbits like their rolling hills from what he had seen. Skin-Changers -at least Bilbo and Beorn- did not fit into any of those. He could only liken them to the Belegaer Ocean. A tricky beast. As calm as the surface appears, it conceals the depths beneath or blinds you to the violent temper it can be brought to. Three days ago proved just how volatile their Hobbit's temper could be. Like the Belegaer, there had been no warning, or if there was, he had not seen the signs. Thorin had been put in his place like an errant Warg pup challenging his alpha's right to the best parts of the kill that were for the alpha and the younglings.

Like the Hobbit had only been humoring Thorin in his willingness to follow his commands until they had reached that stream. And hadn't he been? He has never made it secret that he is not under contract to Thorin, Son of Thrain.

"You think this Company is yours to lead, Master Baggins? Has Dwalin given you leave to do so?" he snaps, taking a heavy step forward, heart starting to thump within his ears, leaving his mind almost as clear as it had been when Bilbo's temper had reached its shattering point.

Their Hobbit gazes at him, eyes steady and calm as they stare him down; a predator staring out from the depths. Long ignored and mastered prey instincts clamor against his pride, trying to force him to back down; plead with him to flee from this dangerous creature wrapped in sheep's skin. Instinct wins as Bilbo rises smoothly from the ground to his feet and Thorin backs off without hesitation.

"Mine to lead? No, no, I have no desire to lead, your Highness," Bilbo soothes in a tone that is equal parts condescending as trying to be reassuring. "Mine to protect? Now that is where they are mine, Thorin Oakenshield. Mine to protect from our enemies... or from incredibly stupid decisions made by their leader who is just as weary and affected by this place as the rest of them."
"You say you are not as... as {effected} by this accursed forest, yet you attacked me, their leader, without provocation after I gave an order!"

"I was most certainly provoked, Oakenshield! You were trying to lead {my} Dwarflings out into {that}," -Bilbo thrusts out his arm in the direction of the woods- "where something foul lurks in the shadows, waiting to devour any who stray from this path. You were not of sound mind and you would not listen. I had no other choice to keep us from straying!"

"My mind is-

Dwalin walks up and stands between them -arms ready to hold them both off-, halting Thorin's words that would surely get his friend and King reintroducing himself to fanged jaws at his neck if Bilbo's flashing gold eyes and twitching, clawed fingers were anything to go by. He glares at them both as his loyalties war with each other. While he agreed with Bilbo's judgement -as he seems sounder of mind than the rest of them most of the time-, Thorin is his King through triumphs and failures alike. Watching them snap and snarl at each other was entertaining as long as it hadn't gone any farther. What happened days past was when it ceased to be. Bilbo's actions had been extreme even for the Hobbit, and Dwalin wasn't so sure Bilbo was as unaffected as he seemed. The few times he had seen his brother claw at his head in some kind of distress and keep his feet above the ground when they rested only confirms his doubts. In his heart he knew Bilbo would not have harmed Thorin that day, but... he could not deny the cold fury that had burned within those golden eyes; all of it focused upon his King.

He could almost swear the gold had bled crimson.

It was no secret his King had been on Bilbo's shitlist since day one despite their tentative camaraderie and -one-sided- interest that had been growing between them after the Carrock and Beorn’s. Bilbo wasn't one to hold someone's behavior against them if they sincerely apologized for it after the he’d set them to rights and continued to prove themselves true. Considering Thorin hasn't apologized for his treatment before his brother had risked everything to save his prideful King, Bilbo wasn't likely to follow Thorin's lead without extreme persuasion or coercion. Neither was it helping Bilbo keep his temper in check when Thorin was irrationally reverting to old habits and tossing his authority in Bilbo’s face like the Hobbit was one of his Dwarrows. An honorary Dwarrow Bilbo had come to be, but raised as a Dwarrow he was not; he had not the same reverence for Kings as those born under one was despite their father’s influence. Bilbo’s painful history with Dwarrows in power only made the tension between them roil like molten gold in the forge. Had Thorin ignored how ill Bilbo got on with the Company from a higher class than those like Nori and Bofur?

"Yer like a pair o’ wolves fightin' fer the last piece o' meat from the bones," Dwalin snaps. "As yer brother and friend, I'm askin' ye both te just shut yer mouths and see what yer squabblin' is doin’ te the rest of us!"

Bilbo steps back with his head bowed and eyes off to the side in deference, cowed by his brother's words. Thorin’s jaw clenches as the Hobbit retreats under his Guardsman's gaze but not his own; inexplicably furious with his friend for interfering in his business with their Hobbit. He steps forward only to be frozen in place by a golden glare. He sneers at the Skin-Changer, but steps back. He would-

"I can't take this anymore!" Kili wails, mussing his hair before looking wild eyed out into the woods, seeing something Bilbo could not. "That smell is driving me crazy!"

Then he’s off, dodging between the shadowed trees as most of the Company follows in equal desperation.
"Fíli!" Bilbo yells after the youngling as the prince takes a look back over his shoulder before following his brother.

"Wait!!" Thorin and Dwalin roar in kind.

None of them listen and the Dwarrow King and his brothers take off after them. With a howl of frustration, Bilbo shifts, snatching up Bombur and pursuing them, hoping to cut Kíli and the rest off before they got too far from the path. It was no use. With Bombur to think of as he leaps and climbs over limbs and rocks, he doesn’t head them off till they’ve already stopped, faces gaunt and full of despair as they stare at the small clearing they stumbled upon.

"It was here, I was so sure..." Kíli whispers sounding close to tears. "The lights, the food, they were here!"

Bilbo growls around the mouthful of leather and wood that is the sling for Bombur as he comes to stand before the Company. Setting the rotund Dwarf down, he shifts.

"Of course there is nothing here, you miserable, dirt-eating, clouts! It is an illusion! This forest, this-this magic tainted death-trap, has been trying to lure us off the path since we first set foot in here," he roars, his voicing reverberating against tree and bush, more Warg than Hobbit and frightening the Company and any creature within hearing range. "I told you to stay on the path. Gandalf told us to stay on the path. Now we have lost it with no way of getting back!"

"You can track our-

"Do not tell me what I can do Thorin Oakenshield! I have not been able to catch scent of anything in these woods. Not you, not the Company, not even the beasts lurking around waiting for us to stray. Nothing!" Bilbo snaps, eyes glowing golden in the gloom, reflecting what little light filters through the canopy above, freezing the blood in their veins.

They watch their Hobbit as he huffs and puffs in his anger as he paces, something they would normally find adorable and josh their Hobbit for, but in this situation, not even Bofur wants to risk the ire of the Skin-Changer. He looks ready to maul them all for their folly. Dwalin and Balin, in the end, are the ones to approach their brother first.

"If only I had my frying pan to knock some sense into you lot!"

They approach slowly, frankly ridiculous sentiments and plans flowing out of Dwalin's mouth with Balin backing them up or adding his own. Things like how Dwalin’s going to have Bilbo make him those honeyed scones he made back in the Shire, or how Balin would like that sweet mead he served with dessert. How Dwalin was going to wallop Thorin and the princes for him so he can take a rest or how Balin was going to increase the princelings teaching for three weeks once Erebor is reclaimed. That they were going to get out of this Valar forsaken forest alive and with everyone intact if a bit slimmer.

"There may be tracks we can follow back te the path, brother," Dwalin murmurs as he carefully lays a hand on the Hobbit's curly head when he sees his brother's shoulders relax some. "Let's try that, aye?"

"Aye, our brother is right. There may not be a scent te follow, but we Dwarrows are heavy of foot, as I'm sure ye've seen. Let's try at least?"

Bilbo’s breaths slow as his brothers talk, eyes fading back to their calm summer green, though his glare doesn’t lessen any.
"Fine," the Hobbit finally says.

The tension the Company held within their bodies eases like a great stone sliding off their backs. None liked it when their Hobbit was angry with them, especially the younglings who still shift nervously on their feet, gazes only darting to Bilbo then away in shame. With one more glare to the lot of them, Bilbo shifts back and picks up Bombur before shoving Dwalin's shoulder to get him going. The quicker they returned to the path, the less likely he was to bite some beards off.

Ten minutes later, in an attempt to soothe Bilbo’s ire -he was growling around the the wood and leather in his mouth-, the Company offers to carry Bombur for a time. The Hobbit brings up the rear, staying shifted and ears open to those horrible chitters in an attempt to keep them all safe.

They stop when they reach a glen some hours later. Bilbo flops himself down at the highest point -an outcrop of stone- as the rest of the Dwarrows fan out, staying within sight.

“I don’t remember this place,” Balin says with frustration as he paces just below. “None of it’s familiar. There should be footprints at least.”

Dwalin has taken a place beside Bilbo, hovering and casting worried glances at him when his brother just stares out into the darkened woods. Bilbo ignores him as he tries to remember his maps. He’s certain they’ve strayed too far South and are at the foothills of the Mountains of Mirkwood.

“It’s got to be here,” Dori frets as he stumbles about down below the rocks. “It can’t have just… disappeared!”

“Unless someone’s moved it,” Dwalin says as he keeps an eye on the Company when Bilbo shows no signs of moving.

The Hobbit snorts at his brother’s comment. Because of course someone managed to move an entire path before they could find it again.

They would not find the path.

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Some days later, grumbling and grudgingly following the lead of that miserable Dwarrow King, Bilbo is exhausted. Carrying Bombur and his packs for days without food was not helping his condition at all. Starvation was not a new feeling for Bilbo, unfortunately. The Fell Winter and various other... incidents with the caravan Dwarrows taught him how to ignore his gnawing hunger and push through it long enough to survive until he was able to eat again. The Dwarrows, most especially the younglings, were not so... lucky. They grumble and complain nearly every hour. Their only reprieve happened some days ago when a heavy rain actually pierced through the canopy, heavy streams of chilly rain water falling from the leaves and into their greedy mouths. They filled every available waterskin, container or what have you with the Valar blessed liquid to the brim and kept miserly eyes on them. None of them wanted to fear for the longevity of it again until they were out of these woods.

Being lost in this blasted forest was not something Bilbo had wanted to endure. Yet here he was… enduring it. I should have bitten his pretty face off, he muses as he trails behind the Dwarrows with Bombur -still asleep- in his jaws.
Of course it gets worse the next day. Bilbo was starting to think the line of Durin was cursed with bad luck at this rate.

Bilbo shifts after setting Bombur—still asleep much to Bilbo’s rising frustration—down and all but collapses to the leaf littered ground in exhaustion. He had felt like he had actually been walking backwards for hours now, and his eyes had been telling his senses that as well. It was disconcerting. Even more so when he had to force himself not to startle when whoever had been walking behind him looked exactly like him. It was only that he was carrying Bombur that kept him from yelping in surprise.

“Is there truly no end to this?” Thorin snaps as they sit once again to rest.

Bilbo snorts from his place at the far back of the Company.

“I imagine we wouldn’t be in this mess if, say, we hadn’t left the path.”

Thorin pointedly ignores his snark.

“Somebody must climb a tree and see if we’re near the bloody end of it!”

Heads swivel and all eyes land on Bilbo—for he was the lightest of them and the high branches would bare his weight—who flashes his fangs at them.

“Of bloody course,” he growls as he stands, swaying slightly when he gets light headed.

He paces around near the Dwarrows, looking for the tallest tree close by. When he finds one, he looks back at them pointedly, and raises a hand, pointing a finger at them.

“Don’t move,” he snaps as his nails become claws—many averting their eyes at the display of aggression—and turns to climb the tree.

He has to stop many times on his way up to catch his breath and clear the spots from his eyes. The moment his head breaches the canopy and into the late afternoon air, he heaves in several breathes, exalting as his mind can finally think again.

Down below, the Dwarrows pace restlessly as they wait for their Hobbit. Ori makes an inquiring noise as he bends to pick something up off the ground.

“Look,” he says as he shows his brother what he found.

“A tobacco pouch,” Dori slurs out. “There’s Dwarrows in these woods.”

“Kin from the Blue Mountains, no less,” Bofur mumbles as he grabs the pouch. “This is exactly the same as mine.”

“Perhaps it is yours,” Dwalin grumbles, never taking his eyes off the tree Bilbo disappeared up into. “Could be goin’ round in circles fer all we know.”
“We’re not lost,” Thorin snaps. “We keep heading East.”

“We’ve lost the sun… how do we know which way is East?” Óin grumbles.

“We sent Bilbo to see, remember?” Kíli snaps feeling as though his smallest Uncle was being slighted in some way.

All of them bristle and tempers flare along with the youngling’s. They push and shove at each other, hurling insults and just general bad tempers.

Thorin ignores them, gaze also set upon the tree Bilbo had chosen, when he hears something over the din of his Dwarrows.

Chittering laughter.

Attercop.

“What was that?” he mumbles as he strains to hear it better.

The Company’s shouting finally registers in his mind and dread fills him. Hadn’t Bilbo said something about voices? Chattering? Something in the dark watching them? Why hadn’t he listened?!

“Enough! Quiet! All of you!”

They silence immediately, all eyes falling on him.

“We’re being watched,” he whispers.

“I can see the Long Lake!” comes Bilbo’s voice from above. “And the Forest River! By the Valar, I see it! The Lonely Mountain! We’re almost there!”

Dwalin’s eyes widen before they dart to the tree then back to Thorin. His Guard doesn’t get the chance to call out to his brother before something ploughs into his back, sending him sprawling and crying out when what feels like a dagger jabs his leg. Thorin only catches a glimpse of what was attacking them when more swarm out from the trees as he is dragged away before darkness takes his sight.

Spiders!

“Thorin!”

Bilbo startles when his brother’s cry reaches him up in the canopy. Brow furrowing, he ducks back beneath the canopy where the battle cries of the Company meet his ears. Alarmed, he starts to climb down when cracking branches catch his attention. He steps to climb further down only to trip when the sticky webbing he had seen everywhere catches his furry foot.

“Oh, come on,” he groans as he pitches headfirst down with a shout.

He manages to catch his grip some feet down after falling onto a collection of other branches. He groans as his ribs and shoulder protest at their treatment only to freeze when the branch he grabbed moves. Twisting, he watches as the branch turns out not to be a branch at all. No, of course not. It has to be the leg of the largest spider Bilbo has ever seen! It chitters as it turns to face him before hissing with mandibles opened wide, revealing a many fanged mouth he would not like getting
hold of him. Letting go of the leg, he falls through thinner webbing until he lands on a thick sheet of it. He tries to free himself with frantic jerks, only to look up and see the spider scrambling down the web after him, chittering and hissing like it was laughing. As it falls upon him he shifts, sinking his fangs into the creature’s head and tearing out of the web as his weight changes.

Shifting, however, proves to be a mistake. The web had been strung between trees and was not built to hold his increased weight it seems. As he falls he twists so the spider’s corpse is beneath him and he sees the company fighting more of the arachnids below. Shifting again, he yells out in warning as the ground approaches. Through luck he feels is his due at this point, they all manage to move out of the way and the corpse cushions Bilbo’s abrupt meeting with the ground. He wastes no time in shifting back and lunging at the closest spider and ripping into it.

At its death he leaps for another, catching the attention of the spiders attacking the rest of the Company. They hiss and screech, most retreating while others swarm to attack the Skin-Changer. The Company recovers and aid Bilbo in disposing of them. The Dwarrows keep their distance as he tears into them with a dark sort of satisfaction he loses himself in, blind to all but their enemies. The survivors retreat into the woods when their numbers thin. He gives chase with a delighted howl.

“Uncle!” Kíli’s voice cuts through the fog of his blood rage.

His mind snaps back into the present, confused as he sees nothing but the trees of the forest. He turns his massive head and sees the fear and grief in his Dwarfling’s eyes some yards behind him.

“Not you too,” he gasps as he clings to Fíli. “We can’t lose you too.”

Confused, Bilbo trots back to them, counting the Dwarrows as they gather tightly together.

“Where is Thorin?” he asks once he’s shifted back. “Has he been injured?”

Dwalin and Balin approach, eyes red and beards wet with tears.

“He’s gone, lad,” Balin breathes out.

“What?”

“One o’ those beasts got him,” Dwalin chokes when Balin cannot answer. “Dragged him off into the dark. We could’na… we…”

The words stutter in his throat and he grips Balin’s shoulder as they look at Bilbo. The Hobbit stares at them with wide eyes as his hands start to tremble. Dwalin grabs onto his younger brother’s arm when his gaze drifts over to the gloom between the trees and clenches his fists.

“No!”

“But I can try-”

“We’ll not be losing you too! Curse it Bilbo, they ambushed us. They would have taken more of us had you not been here. We need you with us!”

Before the Hobbit can argue with his brother, he’s yanked from Dwalin’s grip by his clothes and held aloft by Fíli.

“Do you not hear what he is saying? We need you, Bilbo! Without Un-... without our King, the map and key are lost,” the Dwarfling nearly wails and giving him a firm shake. “Our quest has failed. We need your help getting out of this cursed place! We have to bring the news to our Kin in the Iron
Hills and Ered Luin.”

Bilbo stares into Fíli’s wet eyes before he nods, setting his hands upon the elders prince’s shoulders. The Dwarfling lets him down before gathering the Hobbit into his hold, shoving his face against his neck. Bilbo encircles the Dwarfling with his arms as much as he can and grips him tight, the younglings grief bringing tears into his own eyes.

Though Thorin and he couldn’t seem to get along for any period of time, Bilbo had never wanted the Dwarrow King’s death. The bastard had started to grow on him.

Two sets of arms come around Bilbo and Fíli. Twisting his head, dark hair nearly smothers him as Kíli buries his face on the other side of the Hobbit’s neck. Ori shoves his own against his shoulder. He gives them a few moments before he squirms against them, trying to free himself for at least a moment. Their sobs grow louder.

“Shh, shh, my Dwarflings. I’m much too small for this. Give me a moment.”

Distraught, they reluctantly let him go and step back, the princes clutching at each other as Ori wraps his arms around himself. The Hobbit gives them a shaky smile before taking Fíli’s sleeve in hand and pulling the Dwarfling and his brother over to the rocky outcrop nearby. It was hollowed underneath, and large enough for him to fit under with them. He shifts, feeling his magic reserves drop lower than he was comfortable with, but for his Dwarfling’s comfort, he ignores it. He lays himself under the rocks and leans his side against the back, curling into a semi-circle. Gently he grabs Fíli’s sleeve between his front teeth and pulls him forward. The prince catches on quickly and grabs Kíli’s arm, dragging him over and shoving them both against Bilbo’s massive chest. Kíli wastes no time in burying his face into the Hobbit’s fur and sobbing anew. Ori darts in behind Kíli, his tears silently falling down his face and into the thick coat. Bilbo lets out a long, soft whine before curling around them, engulfing them with his bulk. Fíli climbs over his front paw and shoves himself under Bilbo’s head, burying his face against the Skin-Changer’s throat.

“I’m not ready to be King,” come a harsh, nearly silent gasp from the eldest Dwarfling.

Bilbo keens higher as he curls more tightly around them. He barely acknowledges the other Dwarrows as they come and lean against him; their tears wetting his fur just as thoroughly as his Dwarfling’s. Nori clambers up and onto his back, draping himself there. Dori, Óin and Glóin lean in various positions against his thigh, while Bifur and Bofur drag Bombur over to lean against his neck. Dwalin sits and leans back against his cheek, throwing back his arm to wrap around his muzzle and digging his fingers into the short fur. His brother wraps his other around Balin as the eldest slots himself against Dwalin’s side and against the Skin-Changer’s jaw.

Tears fall silently, loudly, and everything in between as what little light from the sun filtering down between the canopy drops beneath the horizon, leaving them in darkness. Slowly, the Dwarrows falls silent as they drift off into Irmo’s embrace. Bilbo’s eyes sweep the area, his ears twitching with every sound that comes from the forest.

“I’ll take first watch,” Dwalin whispers, patting his brothers’ muzzle while Bilbo just heaves a sigh; they both know he would not sleep this night.

And he doesn’t. Every sleepy whimper his Dwarfling’s give, every hitched breath catching in the Dwarrow on watch’s lungs, keeps him awake the entire night. His stomach knotting and rolling in his own grief for them and what could have been something between Thorin and himself.

He has never felt such contempt for a place of nature.
He prayed to the Valar to be free of it soon.

The Dwarfling’s, Balin, and Óin ride upon his back as they traverse the leaf strewn ground once enough sunlight had filtered through the trees while Bombur -still asleep in his sling- is carried by his jaws. The mood of the Company is dour and filled with grief so thick, not even Bilbo could find anything to try and make it lighter. Not even the thought of food filling his long empty stomach helps.

Another two days go by like this. The weight of their despair only growing more heavy as the hours passed until they were taking more breaks than walking. With no food to give them strength, and the water supply nearly gone once more, their lives being claimed by Mirkwood seemed more likely than not.

Bilbo despises the hopelessness in the Company.

His temper is growing short once more. The lack of life his jubilant Dwarflings once had chafing against him like burrs so deep into his fur they scratch and poke at his flesh. It doesn’t help that his magic refuses to let him shift back into his Hobbit skin. With the knowledge that those creatures could attack at any given moment and take his Dwarflings away forever, his magic was getting harder to wrangle enough control over to change back. It is aware enough to sense that any of the Dwarfling’s deaths would send Bilbo spiraling into the darkness he fell into when his parents were killed during the Fell Winter and again when those… Dwarrows captured him.

His magic would not allow that a third time. Not if it had the power to stop it. Keeping the Dwarflings safe is how it’s going to keep it that way.

But Bilbo knows eventually he will have to change back. He cannot get stuck again like he had when… then. Not in this place; not ever again.

What he needs is to sleep; restore some of his magic if he is to keep shifting into his Warg skin. But he fears the taint this forest leaves will burrow deep into his magic if he does so. What that would do to him… he would rather not think of it.

For another two days they travel the forest, desperately searching for the end before Bilbo can no longer stay awake. By the afternoon of the third day, Bilbo’s limbs are shaking with the strain of carrying Bombur, Balin, Óin, and the Dwarflings, starvation, and dehydration. It is as he stumbles over a fallen log, nearly throwing off his precious cargo, do the others notice the state of him.

“Uncle, you should have said something,” Fíli sighs as he slides down Bilbo’s side to the ground, his boots hitting the dry leaves with a solid crunch.

Kíli moves to follow his brother, but yelps when Bilbo’s shaking hindquarters buckle. The Skin-Changer sets Bombur down and, ignoring the grumbling from Balin and Kíli, quickly lays himself down, only waiting long enough for them to dismount before falling onto his side.

“Bilbo?” comes Dwalin’s voice from between the cotton in his ears.

The Skin-Changer grumbles, awareness drifting away as his brothers’ worried voices fade away.

Crimson swirling like mist against the darkness.
Dwalin looks to Balin as his older brother tries to rouse their brother with no success.

“What do we do?” he asks. “We canna carry him like this.”

“We’ll have to wait for him to wake; keep him safe until then,” Balin sighs, grunting when his joints pop as he sits down by Dwalin’s feet. “He’s far passed exhaustion and we didn’t even notice.”

“Harder te tell when he’s not a small, pale thing.” Dwalin grumbles before moving away from his brothers to do a quick check around before they camp.

Balin sighs before addressing the rest of the Company, “All right lads, we’ll not be making any more time today. Get yerselves comfortable, and Nori, you take the first watch.”

“Aye.”

Balin watches as the Kíli and Ori curl up against Bilbo’s stomach and chest while Fíli shoves himself between Bilbo’s spread forelegs and against his throat. Truly, he felt for the princes, but for Fíli most of all. The crown was still too heavy for the lad, and with Thorin gone… as his heir apparent, the throne falls upon Fíli’s shoulders now. The only comfort Balín can pull from this tragedy is that Fíli felt he could lean on Bilbo enough to keep going. Balin trusts that Bilbo would not steer him wrong and will guide him through the trials he will face from their Kin once they’ve returned to Ered Luin.

He has to believe Bilbo would overcome whatever it is that kept him from them for all these years for the prince. It is the only thing giving him a scrap of hope in these woods.

As the others settle in for a long night, Dwalin returns, grim of face and slightly paler. Balin frowns, opening his mouth to ask what has his brother so concerned when he shakes his head. The white haired Dwarf quiks a brow at him, but nods in return. Dwalin will tell him soon enough. Balin stands and makes his way back to Bilbo, shuffling around around his face and listening to the deep, even breaths from his great lungs as he makes his way around. He settles against the back of the Skin-Changer’s neck, right against his ruff where the fur is thickest. The chill of the nights were driven away only when he lay here, and -had he the will or energy- he would have gloated over taking the warmest place against Bilbo aside from the Dwarflings.

One by one, the other Dwarrows come and lean against Bilbo’s sleeping form, curling as close as they can to keep warm and to give warmth back. Nori takes his place up on Bilbo’s side, a perch he - the cheekiest of them- had claimed when Bilbo had taken to sleeping in his Warg skin. The motion of Bilbo’s deep breaths must soothe the Thief.

The Hobbit never stirs. If it weren’t for the great up and down of his lungs, he could be mistaken for dead.

Balin relaxes against his brother as much as he is able, soaking in the heat of him and closing his eyes. As he drifts between the world of dreams and the living, he feels Dwalin come and sit close beside him, grumbling as he gets comfortable. It’s the last thing he remembers before memories of days past play with his mind as he slumbers.

Thorin’s warm laughter is all he remembers when he is woken by the Khuzdul cry to arm themselves.

He jerks awake, years of training and battle dragging him from the bliss of sleep into a heart pounding state of wakefulness. Looking around he swallows shallowly as he sees what is going on.

The spiders have returned!
“Bilbo! Wake up ye great lump of fur!” Dwalin roars at their brother as he fights off two of the beasts near Bilbo’s head.

Balin only has a moment to wonder if they had been trying to drag their brother away before two more come upon the unconscious Skin-Changer from the rear. He charges them with a vigor he hasn’t felt since they entered this cursed place. They would not take his brother from them!

The Dwarrows fight with all they have against the spiders, but in the end, each falls against them as more spill from the forest.

Balin and Dwalin are the last to fall, watching in despair as each of the Company are stung and dragged away. Howling in rage and grief as they watch Bilbo being absconded up a tree by four of the beasts.

Dwalin falls first.

The last thing Balin sees is Dwalin being wrapped in their webs, his yells growing quieter and his struggling growing weaker as whatever these creatures have poisoned them with sets in.

Several hot tears fall down weathered cheeks.

Then darkness.

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Bilbo comes to and immediately knows something is wrong. The first thing he notices is that he’s sore all over, and most worryingly, he’s back in his Hobbit skin. The second is that he’s surrounded by that awful chittering and clattering he’s come to associate with those wretched spiders. A shadow passes over him. He cracks open his eyes only to see a shadowy thing above him from behind the webbing that covers his face.

He tenses up, heart pounding as he realizes what must have happened. He has been taken by the spiders! Where are my Dwarflings?!

Bark scratches against the back of his tunic as the creature drags him somewhere by his feet. Slowly, he moves his arms, miraculously unbound by the web, and searches for any weapon he can grab. His hand brushes against the Elven blade. Unsheathing it as quickly and quietly as possible, Bilbo readies himself to try and get up on his feet when the beast stalks over him.

Chittering and clicking, the spider’s mandibles full of deadly fangs and venom wave over his face as it leans ever closer. With a snarl, Bilbo cuts through the web and stabs the spider through its chest. A horrible screech comes from its grotesque mouth, and as it dies, it shrivels and starts to curl around him. Using the blade and all the strength he can muster, he tips the beast over and off of him. It falls to the ground below with a sickening splat. How on Arda had the bloody things drag him into the trees?!

Righting himself, he tears and pulls off the web coating him like an oversized coat. He can only guess he had still been a Warg when they wrapped him. Getting up on his feet, he almost topples over as the blood rushes to his head. He keeps his eyes on the branch until the spots leave his vision before he looks around. What lays before him can only be described as an enormous web-nest filled with a dozen or so of the wretched beasts and what looks to be bodies hanging around in cocoons. He prays to the Valar the others are alive if they are inside those things.

Clicking from below has him scrambling to hide behind a thick branch. As a spider crawls up the other side, none the wiser of Bilbo’s escape, the Hobbit considers his options. He can’t shift. Not into
his Kit skin or his Warg skin. One doesn’t have the strength to kill them and the other is too big to
navigate the branches without breaking them under his weight. Dragging his hand down his face, he
grunmles under his breath and buries his instincts as far down as he can.

Shoving his hand into his pocket, he grabs the ring and slips it onto a finger of his sword hand,
engulfing himself in its shadowy, dark world.

The chittering that was once disjointed words, becomes a clear and gravely Westron.

“Kill them! Kill them!”

“Eat them now, while their blood is still running,” says a spider much larger and older looking than
the rest, and missing a front leg.

“Their hide is tough, but there’s good juice inside!” a younger one cheers in anticipation.

“Stick it again. Stick it again! Finish it off!”

He watches as they gather around a rather large cocoon, pawing at it in their excitement. Muffled
yells start come from it. Bilbo watches with wide eyed hope as red hair flashes beneath the webs and
begins to squirm, managing to kick one of the spiders in it’s fat face.

“The meat’s alive and kicking!”

“Kill him, kill him now!” the older spider says. “Let us feast.”

“Feast.”

“Feast, feast!” several others cheer.

“Feast!” another screeches as it passes over Bilbo, who ducks enough as not to collide with the beast
and give himself away.

“Eat them alive!” more spiders cry as they swarm around the web-nest, pawing at other cocoons
hanging around.

In a bid to try and thin the swarm and give himself enough time to save whoever is trapped in the
webs, Bilbo breaks off a branch as quietly as he can, keeping an eye on the beasts as they bicker
among themselves as to who would get the first bite.

He hurls the branch as far as he can, satisfied when it thumps and clatters against several things on
it’s way down. Almost as one, the spiders all turn toward the noise. It sends a chill down his back.

“What is it?”

“What is it?”

They swarm forward, using web and tree in their pursuit of the noise.

“Eat them alive!” one screeches as it passes over Bilbo.

Grinning when he can no longer see or hear them, Bilbo turns back to the nest in time to see the elder
spider has stayed behind.

“Fat and juicy,” it purrs, cutting down the large cocoon.
With all of the spiders out of the way, Bilbo can finally see who is caught in the web.

It is Bombur. Finally awake after nearly two weeks of sleep. *And what a thing to wake up to,* Bilbo thinks as he darts closer.

“Just a little taste,” the beast croons as it leans over the Dwarf.

Baring his fangs, Bilbo slides up behind it, raising his blade high before bringing it down upon the things fat behind. The spider hisses in surprise and pain as it turns around jerkily, flailing its legs wildly about. It charges forward blindly, jaws held wide as it screeches. Bilbo slashes at a flailing limb, cutting it off at the joint. Another slash across its face, blood gushing out as the blade blinds it in four eyes.

“Curse it! Where is it?! Where is it?!”

Something dark bubbles beneath his skin, unnoticed as the blood-haze starts tunneling his vision. He grins wide, fangs on full display.

*Old fat spider spinning in a tree!*
*Old fat spider can’t see me!*
*Attercop! Attercop!*
*Won’t you stop,*
*Stop your spinning and look for me?*

He hums the next two verses as he plays keep away from the old things legs, his taunting spurring on the tar beneath his skin; dancing and growing with each line. The spider screeches and rages at this invisible foe, becoming more desperate as the thing continues to chant that horrible song.

… *but still they cannot find me!*

*Here am I, naughty little fly;*
*You are fat and lazy!*
*You cannot trap me, though you try,*
*In your cobwebs crazy!*

He ducks in close while the spider shifts its head from side to side, losing him once he stopped chanting.

“Where is it?!”

His eyes glow a feral gold before he slips the ring off and grins at the beast merrily, “Here I am!”

He pulls back his arm as the enraged spider lunges forward. The blade sinks into the creature’s skull like butter, blood spurting from the wound as it screeches.

“It stings! Stings!”

As the beast dies, Bilbo withdraws the blade and the spiders’ body falls from the branches, landing in a heap far below. The blade, covered in black blood and spider bits, gleams silver among the mess.

“Sting? That’s actually a decent name,” he muses as he twists it about.

Eyeing the cocoons, he grins.

“Too bad there aren’t more spiders to test your mettle against, Sting.”
With the tar roiling beneath his skin and violence still singing through his veins, Bilbo hacks and slashes at the cocoons, making sure that there was enough give to slow the fall from the trees to the ground for his Dwarrows still drugged from the spider’s poison. One by one, the cocoons land safely down below, all thirteen of them accounted for.

Looking over the branch he watches and listens as the Dwarrows groan and curse as they struggle to free themselves from the webs.

“You all right there, Bofur?” he hears Glóin ask the miner.

“I’m all right!” Balin’s voice comes next.

“Get it off me!” Kíli yelps, his arms flailing wildly against the web.

“Where’s Bilbo?!” comes Bofur’s concerned cry. “Bilbo?!”

“I’m up here!” he calls down to them just as a spider lunges at him from beneath the branch.

Eyes wide, he yelps in surprise as he throws himself backwards to escape the snapping jaws. He lands on his back against the tree and the spider is upon him! It goes to bite as he thrusts Sting up into its chest. The spider screeches and curls around him as it dies and, in trying to escape from its caging legs, inadvertently sends himself and the corpse over the side of the branch. Once, twice, thrice he and the body slam into the limbs of the sick trees. A fourth collision jars his hand and the ring he clings to slips from his fingers. Desperately he reaches out to catch it with no luck.

No!

His mind screeches as he is pulled further from the ring by the accursed spider's corpse.

With a final thud, the air bursts from his lungs and pain shoots up and down his back and legs. The spider’s corpse has landed on top of him with as much force as Dwalin's hammer upon his chest. He lays stunned for a moment, the shouts and cries of his companions as they battle the rest of the nest is background noise to the ringing in his ears. He gasps as he is finally able to draw breath into his lungs before coughing violently. As he gets his breaths under control, he cracks open his eyes only to see the corpse laying atop him. Panic overcomes him and it shoves the bloodlust in his veins aside as he thrashes around, severing the legs closest to him with Sting and making a way for him to get out. Scrambling away from the body on all fours, he pauses when he is far enough not to feel enclosed among its spindly limbs. With his limbs trembling so hard they barely keep him up, he decides to flop down onto his belly, resting his forehead against the leaf littered ground. He heaves in deep, shaky breaths before raising his head. A deep longing to finally smell the earth seizes his heart as his gaze wanders.

He stares at the corpse for a few seconds before pushing himself onto his hands and knees, using a nearby boulder to pull himself up onto shaky legs. He then pats himself down to make sure nothing had broken in the fall or when meeting the forest floor. As his palms pat against his vest pockets, alarmingly empty vest pockets, his eyes sweep the area frantically, remembering why he had panicked.

The tar thrashes against his magic.

Where is it? Where is it?! Come on! The frantic thoughts beat against his skull as he moves away from the dead spider, eyes focused on the ground and darting around erratically in search of the ring.

No, no! It can’t be lost!

Something glints from within the gloom several yards to his right. Slit gold eyes, tarnished with red zero in on the disturbance.
There it is!

He shakes his shoulders out in relief and sighs, the battle behind him a distant thought. He steps forward to retrieve his precious ring.

The earth stirs a few feet from his treasure before a large, white, elongated and fanged creature emerges from the ground and heads right for him. Dagger like legs hitting the ring as it stalks closer, the clinking echoing in his ears.

How dare this... thing touch his ring!

He barely realizes his vision is clouding in a red haze or the tar taking place of his magic as he shifts skins, lunging at the beast. The next few flashes of consciousness are nothing but copious amounts of pale red blood, various pieces of the creature's legs laying strewn about leaking the fluid, and parts of its armored hide crushed with monstrous clawed hands coated with gore.

What fights the white creature is not a Warg; not precisely.

Black as deep night with the spotted and striped pelt of Bilbo's skins and glowing red eyes, rages a creature born from the mind of Morgoth many ages ago and twisted to the Ring's needs. Crouching, it is nearly twelve feet high and appears half Man, half Warg with hulking shoulders and arms long enough to touch the ground; shorter back legs from which it stands as a Man with a tail for balance. The front extremities are a mix of paws and hands equipped with long, talon like claws and large enough to grasp a Man around his entire body. Its head is that of a Warg's with elongated fangs and a snout long enough to rip a chunk out of a fully grown Warg with ease.

A Werewolf stalks amongst the Free Folk once more.
As the white creature falls dead, its head mangled beyond recognition and oozing blood and other bodily matter, the Werewolf stands tall and lets loose a deep, blood chilling howl at the dead creature that echoes against the trees. With a huff thrown at the corpse, the creature scoops up the ring and sits back against a fallen log like a Man after a hard days labor. It gazes at the ring, the red glow of its eyes glinting off the gold, eyes darting to the mangled and mutilated carcass of the centipede like creature and back. Gaping holes in the corpse ooze pale red blood, the chunks of flesh laying mere feet from where they were torn out.

Awareness slams into Bilbo as his eyes dart to the body. He startles as he looks down at his hand where the ring sits and drops the cursed gold to the forest floor. He springs to his feet, looking down upon the body he has changed into, using the travesty this skin calls hands to feel his face. When padded paw-hands encounter fangs the length of Sting, he jerks them away in horrified surprise. What on Arda had he become?! He shifts back, shock and panic at this change fogging his mind. The ring glints innocently from the ground. His eyes gravitate to it once back in his Hobbit skin. His tainted magic thrashes against and purrs for the magic of the ring. Panic gives way to anger and he bares his teeth at it, wanting nothing more than to bury it so deep he would not feel the brush of its filthy, tar-like magic against his. It brushes harder and he can feel a partial shift trying to push out from beneath his skin.

“Not listening,” he snaps at it. “I’m onto you, you wretched thing.”

Fili’s voice cuts through the forest like a sword against flesh in his mind. Kili’s distressed cries for help soon follow. It sends his frozen limbs into motion, flying over the roots and rocks to where his
Dwarfling’s yell, distracting him from his hand scooping up and shoving the ring back into his pocket. Headless of the noise he makes, he pushes his exhausted body harder. As he comes upon the hollow, he sees a spider coming upon his Dwarfling’s unguarded back as an Elf battles two others. Fear and rage surfaces again as he shifts.

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“Throw me a dagger! Quick!” Kíli demands frantically as he turns and sees the spider getting closer.

“If you think I’m giving you a weapon, Dwarf, you’re-”

A vicious howl nearly deafens him before a ground trembling thud and ripping chitin comes from behind him. Heavy, panting breathes ruffle his leaf-strewn hair from above. Heart pounding as chills creep up Kíli’s spine, he starts lift his head when a massive and muscled, fur-covered arm shoots over him. It knocks aside the frozen Elf -who shrieks in fear- to sink talon-like claws into the spider’s body and squeezes. The creature flails as it dies with an agonized screech. Deep, growling rumbles fill the air.

The clawed hand flings the spider’s corpse away and withdraws, curling around his waist and pulls back. Kíli yelps as he is dragged under whatever creature has caught him. His hands tremble as the beast leans over him, releasing his waist to stand on all fours. White spots on the arms gives him pause before it clicks in his mind.

“Bilbo?” he asks, but no answer is given as this... skin -that looks like his Warg skin but like it got stuck halfway through changing- stares ahead and growls.

The Elf has knocked her bow, aiming it at his Uncle’s head.

“Wait! Stop! He’s not going to hurt us!” he tries reasoning with the Elf, shoving at Bilbo’s arm when he just growls louder. “You’re not helping, Uncle!”

Bilbo’s rumbling cuts short as he snorts, ducking his head down and wrapping a hand around Kíli. The Dwarfling endures his Uncle’s inspection, clawed fingers surprisingly gentle and fangs carefully kept away as his large nose sniffs before he whines, the Elf watching it all disbelief.

Elven voices from over the ridge causes the Skin-Changer to tense, paw hand tightening around him as he begins growling again. Fear for his Uncle spreads through him as he imagines a small army of Elves arriving and killing Bilbo on sight.

“Uncle, you must leave,” he insists as he shoves at his massive arms.

Bilbo doesn’t move, still snarling at the ridge and occasionally at the flabbergasted she-Elf.

“Bilbo! They’ll kill you if they see you like this!”

The Hobbit's whole body jerks as if struck by lightning. A large nose shoves into Kíli’s hair before inhaling deeply, whining again when no scent can be found. With one last shove and a plea from the Dwarfling, his Uncle flees back into the forest, disappearing into the gloom as Kíli turns back around to face the Elf.

“Please… Don’t send your people after him. He’s… He’s my Uncle, my family. We already lost…” he begs, the words catching in his throat as he drops to one knee.

He knows it is probably useless begging for Bilbo’s life. He’s seen first hand how even his own Kin react to his Uncle of choice when they saw what he is, what he can be… realize just how dangerous
he could become. He witnessed fear and anger turn those Bilbo counted as friend against him.

“Please.”

“Stand up,” the she-Elf says, her voice breathless and shaky, before she clears her throat. “I am to bring you back to where we have gathered your comrades.”

Tauriel grabs the Dwarfs’ arm and hauls him up onto his feet, binding his hands together with rope and leading them out of the ravine. She keeps a watchful, wary eye on the shadows of the forest as they walk. The beast the Dwarf calls ‘Uncle’ could just be waiting to attack. She has no doubts that her guard would be able to fell the beast if given proper warning, but… even with that, she fears a great many of them would perish beneath its jaws before the creature drew its last breath. She looks back at the Dwarf and startles as silent tears fall down his scruffy face.

Her heart wavers as her eyes return to the forest. She knows the ache of loss only too well.

“What is he? Your Uncle,” she asks, keeping her voice low as not to alert the beast of her questions.

Silence meets her query and she stops to look at the Dwarf. His wet glare is defiant and she feels a rising curiosity and respect for him and his beast.

“I will tell no one of his presence if you but tell me what he is.”

Uncertainty wavers his resolve, biting his lip as his eyes wander to the gloom between the trees and back to her as though looking for a sign from someone. He must still be young to still be so uncertain.

A series of sharp yips echo against the trees. She watches in fascination as he squares his shoulders and locks eyes with her.

“How can I trust your word?” he asks almost petulantly.

“I am the Captain of the Guard. If he is not in my report, he does not exist.”

She lets him mull over that as she gently tugs him along again. Another yip comes from the darkness.

“He’s a Skin-Changer,” he says softly, rubbing his face against his shoulder to wipe his face. “and the bravest, most kind-hearted being I have ever known.”

Glancing over her shoulder she sees the soft smile playing at his lips. She nods, remembering how gently the beast had handled the Dwarf and how fierce its eyes had been as it stared her down from the other end of her arrow. The Skin-Changer would not have moved, not even had she let her arrow go in order to protect the Dwarf. That the creature dismissed her even as the arrow remained trained on its skull… The Dwarf’s Uncle was indeed a brave soul.

“I have never met one of his kind before. Are they all… “

“No. He is cousin to one who changes into a great black bear,” Kíli replies, using the conversation as a distraction from his grief and worry.

He makes sure to keep his answers vague and is relieved as they come upon the clearing where the others are gathered. The Elf’s demeanor changes as she shoves him into Bofur. His worries wrap their claws back around his heart.

“Search them!” the single, blonde Elf commands before he turns and approaches the Elf who had
retrieved him.

“Gyrth in yngul bain?” (Are the spiders dead?)

“Ennorner gwanod in yngyl nanyrn,” she says, a apprehension stark upon her face. (Yes, but more will come)

Kíli bounces on his heels and wishes he had asked Bilbo for Elvish lessons.

“Enguin nar…” (They're growing bolder...)

Another Elf calls out a name -Legolas- and the blonde Elf turns. The red-haired she-Elf meets his eyes from over his shoulder and tilts her head up, just an inch, her eyes challenging. He nearly sags against Bofur, who looks at him in concern. She has said nothing of Bilbo. As everyone stops talking, Kíli shifts his focus to what is going on.

“Enwenno hain!” Legolas commands the Elves. (Bring them!)

The Elves grab and cuff them together with more rope before pulling them along in a line of twelve. Half of the Elves vanish into the trees while the rest flank and surround them. The air is tense amongst them as their eyes and ears twitch at any sound coming from the forest. They were acting like prey instead of the predators he saw the She-Elf be before Bilbo arrived. They must have heard his howls. Kíli prays to Mahal that Bilbo remains out of sight and safe until they can get out of this predicament.

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Once out of sight of the Elf and Kíli, Bilbo had shifted straight into his Kit skin -thanking all the Valar that this skin hasn’t been warped by the taint in his magic- and followed them from the cover of the roots and brush. He watches as his Dwarrows are herded and lead through the trees and still he follows unseen. He's beginning to question the famed sight and hearing of the Elves if even they had not caught a hint of him. He is sure there were wandering eyes that must have seen him, but nothing impedes his stalking.

As they reach a bridge over a fast moving river, Bilbo knows his luck as run out. The ring -which he curses for compelling him to keep- weighs heavy on his mind and only when they have his Dwarrows halfway across does he decide to shift back and quickly slip it on. He shoves his instincts -which are finally all for getting rid of the blasted thing once again- into a corner and darts over to the bridge and across just as the last of the Elves step closer to the guarded sanctums doorway.

The blonde Elf -who had taken point as they crossed the bridge- stands guard and watches over the Dwarrows as his guards lead them into the kingdom, pausing at the door to turn back and gaze into the forest. Bilbo nearly growls, sure the Elf can sense something of him even if he could not see him.

He would have to tread carefully in these halls.

He slips around the Elf -ignoring the temptation to slip between his legs- and between the two guardsmen, darting to the nearest dark corner. Once the gates close, his sense of smell -that for the days… weeks?... they had been wandering that cursed wood and smelt nothing- is bombarded with the scent of iron and stone, wood and water...

Food.

He’s unconscious before he realizes his vision is hazier than the shadowy world of the ring.
Bilbo is unsure how long he was out. He only knows that he can’t hear his Dwarrows and that his stomach will give him away, ring or not, when he comes to. He decides to follow his nose and ears - having dearly missed his sense of smell, and by the Valar the food smelled divine- until he comes upon the kitchen. Supper must have been served not long past if the dishes of food upon the nearest serving table is anything to go by. Unfortunately for his stomach, several Elves inhabit the kitchen preparing some other fare for their ‘masters’. He bares his teeth and moves on, slipping between shadows as he goes.

He wanders for some while before he catches a very familiar scent.

*Dwalin!*

The scent pulls him along by his nose further down into the kingdom, the halls twisting and confusing if he didn’t have such excellent spacial awareness. The scent gets stronger as he does and he has to keep himself from darting around bends and risk running into a guard or worse, a dog or whatever these Elves used to hunt. As he passes another hall on his journey down, scuffling and Khuzdul curses draw his attention from Dwalin’s scent. Curious, and positive he would not lose his brothers trail, he slinks down the hall. The voice gets louder the closer he gets, and recognition starts setting in.

*Could it be?*

He hall ends, and a single Elven guard stands stoically by a door as more Khuzdul slurs echo from behind the bars.

*By the Valar, Thorin had survived the spiders!*

Bilbo shuffles as close as he dares to the door, moving so that he could peer between the bars into the cell. The Dwarrow King is exceptionally huffy and harried looking, but no worse for wear. The Hobbit heaves a quiet relieved sigh, the weight on his heart he had shoved aside finally gone. His Dwarflings would be ecstatic!

Deciding to return when the guard was gone, Bilbo shuffles as fast as he can down the hall, once again following his nose to Dwalin. He notices fewer and fewer guards as he descends down once more. As the air grows moist and his ears pick up the echoes of flowing water, the scents of the rest of the Company bombard his nose. He catches himself against the stone wall and shakes his head to try and get rid of the dizziness. Oh, how he hates losing his senses and going without food for so long.

Stalking closer once the world stops spinning, he slips into a nearby alcove and pulls off the ring. His magic rushes forth, nearly burning his veins as it tries to cleanse him of the forests and the rings taint. He ignores it as he can’t purge the toxins like Elrond had shown him -should he ever need to- without a still body of natural water.

Shifting into his Kit skin, he looks around, ears swiveling atop his head as he makes sure no guards have arrived while he recovered. Slipping from shadow to shadow, the Hobbit creeps towards Dwalin’s scent. The closer he gets, the louder the grumbling of his Dwarrows becomes.

“Ye could have stuffed him in yer coat, Kíli,” comes Dwalin’s rough voice.

“Oh, aye, and they would have turned a blind eye,” his Dwarfling snaps back.

“Could’a claimed him a pet.”
“And be bitten for my trouble? No, thank you.”

“Our brother would have seen sense enough not to at the time,” Balin’s calm, but warbling, voice says. “He’s alone out there, lad.”

“He was seen in his Warg skin, Balin! The Elf guard would not have let him live if she had seen Uncle change into his smaller skin so I could stuff him in my coat. Not after she saw how dangerous he can be!”

The Dwarrows fall silent for some minutes as Bilbo looks around to evaluate their cells, wondering why the lad had not mentioned the change his Warg skin had gone through. It was, frankly, more terrifying than his Warg skin had ever been, whatever had happened to it. The bars are thin enough that the Dwarrows could see through, but too thick to slip between. He’s small enough to fit through the bars, however.

“Still should’a stuffed him in yer coat,” Dwalin says petulantly.

The Dwarfling lets out a most aggrieved groan.

Bilbo pauses in the shadows to weigh his options. Though he wants to see his brothers and his Dwarflings, their noise would attract the guards.

“Would ye lot be quiet,” Nori snaps at the lot of them. “Our Hobbit knows more about survival than most of ye. He’ll be fine. He’s prolly tracking down that Ol’ Badger as we speak.”

… Nori it is.

Darting passed the Dwarrows’ cells between he and Nori’s scent on silent paws, the Hobbit does his best to make sure no one else notices his passing. He slips through the bars of Nori’s cell and ducks behind the surprised Dwarf’s back just as three pairs of Elvish footsteps echo off the walls from above.

“Bil-”

The Hobbit sinks tiny fangs into the fleshy part of the thief’s questing hand to keep him silent. Thankfully the Dwarf does when the sound of cell bars opening and the smell of food floats down to them. Bilbo’s stomach growls its displeasure.

“I’ll give ye some,” Nori whispers as he strokes thick fingers against one of his ears.

The Elves come and Nori jeers at them when they leave the tray on the floor at the door. They are quick to retreat to the next cell and repeat their delivery. The Thief and his Shadow wait for their footsteps to fade before Bilbo crawls out from behind the Dwarf and shifts.

“By Mahal, are you a sight for sore eyes, my Shadow Thief,” Nori gasps out as he hauls the Hobbit into an embrace.

“Good to see you too,” Bilbo says, lips quirking up in amusement as he pats the Dwarf’s back. “I have news, by the way.”

“Sneaking inte kingdoms and stealing secrets now are we?”

“Some larger than others. It’ll be something to brag about in any case.”

The Dwarf looks at him, face wiped blank for but a moment before a toothy grin splits his face.
“I’ve missed yer cheek.”

Bilbo huffs at him before eyeing the food by the bars. A loud rumble erupts from his stomach and Nori chuckles as red blooms across the Hobbit’s cheeks.

“Have at it. They gave us all a meal not long after they locked us up.”

“But its—”

“Ye haven’t eaten,” Nori says as he goes and picks up the plate and cup before shoving them at Bilbo. “I can tell. Eat.”

The Hobbit smiles at the thief, taking the plate and sitting down on the hard bed the cell provided. The urge to scarf it all down is great, but he knows from experience that it would end up on the floor if he rushed. Slowly, he takes small bites of the meat provided and sips the water. He moves then to the yams, then to the bread, picking at them carefully and slowly as not to upset his stomach.

“Ye’ve starved before.”

Bilbo startles, nearly knocking over the water that the Dwarf’s large hand catches. Summer green eyes meet deep bronze. The Hobbit stares at his friend, debating whether he should say anything of it. He hasn’t asked anything after all. Nori just stares back, patient and calm. Bilbo lets out a shaky sigh, glancing at the cell bars, listening for anymore guards before focusing on Nori again. If any would understand his issues aside from Dwalin, Nori would be the one.

“Yes… Yes, I have,” he says before picking at the bread and eating some more. “Once during the Fell Winter and again when there was an… incident when I was still aiding the caravans for Ered Luin. It was nearly… four months with little food, I think.”

Nori’s brows furrow, “I don’ remember an incident like that with any of our caravans.”

“I never said I was with them at the time.”

“Did somethin’ happen in the Shire?”

“No. Nori, it’s not—.”

“Travelin’ with the Ol’ Badger? Travelin’ without ‘im?”

The Hobbit sighs and shakes his head, hearing the frustrated curiosity starting to color Nori’s tone.

“Then when—”

“Not all Dwarrows are as… forgiving as the Company has been,” Bilbo says a tad wistfully. “Sometimes we trust in our protectors, our friends, more than we ought.”

“Dwarrow soldiers would not—”

“Fear and a perceived betrayal gives them reason enough to act. Greed and desperation makes even the best of us into monsters.”

“What are ye talkin’ about?” the Dwarf demands, his voice tight in his throat, eyes narrowed in disbelief.

“I’m sure you’ve noticed how… exotic my other skin’s pelts are.”
Bronze eyes widen and stare at him in horror.

“My fangs… my teeth… my claws… They must have been worth something as well. They made sure everything had healed well each time, at least.”

The Dwarf’s face pales as he nearly falls on his arse to the floor. His hands are shaking as they rub at his face and through his disheveled hair that’s usually so meticulously formed. Several shaky breaths pass his lips before he looks up at Bilbo again. He had wondered why Bilbo’s pelt looked so familiar…

“They skinned ye? Alive?”

The Hobbit stiffens, but nods his head and sets the tray on the bed when his own hands start to shake.

“Pulled out yer teeth n’ claws… yer fangs and made ye heal te do it all over?”

“Yes,” he grits out as the phantom pains of that time tease his skin; make his mouth ache and his fingers burn.

“Fer four months?”

“Yes, Nori.”

“How?”

This Bilbo could barely answer without choking on the air in his lungs.

“They… they had some… shackles that forced my magic to change me. Getting bigger, getting smaller it didn’t matter, the collar and cuffs changed with me… kept me chained to the rocks; forced me into one skin or the other until they were done. Nearly everyday they did that. Gave me scraps and water on off days… I tried to escape so many times…”

Bilbo chuckles, but there is no mirth in it. Only pain and self-loathing. He should have been strong enough then. Beorn had managed, why could he not…

“Never did turn out well for me, obviously.”

“But you did escape,” Nori presses, setting a shaky, unsure hand against his knee.

Bilbo stares at it, head tilting to the side as he contemplates it.

“No… Gandalf and Fundin found me.”

Gently, Bilbo pushes Nori’s hand off his knee, the weight of it bringing forth memories of similar hands in that cave, setting his teeth on edge. The Dwarf says nothing, just stares at him with wide, pained eyes from his place on the floor. Beard covered lips twitch up as bronze eyes close.

“Well no wonder yer such a willful, cheeky little shite te us, especially Thorin. Were ye tryin’ te piss ‘im off?”

Bilbo startles at his words before mirth bubbles up from his stomach and shoves out the painful thoughts. He slaps a hand over his mouth just as he starts laughing, trying his best to stop, but unable to.

“You know how it is, Nori,” he says between breaths as his laughter dies down into snickering.
“That bastard is the worst of you, anyhow. The rest of you lot are tolerable.”

“Was,” Nori sighs out, his grief for their lost King still staining his words.

“Oh, Nori,” Bilbo says with a wide grin, blatantly changing the subject. “Have I got something to tell you.”

The Dwarf raises a brow at him as Bilbo leans down and whispers into his ear.

“His royal arse’ness is here, in a cell two stairwells up and cursing all and sundry like he’s covered in feathers again.”

“Yer jokin’,” Nori chokes out. “We saw that spider take him.”

“The Elves must have rescued him. Maybe be woke up and managed to fight his way free and wandered around till they found him. Who can tell us but him,” the Hobbit says with a shrug, leaning back and tucking his feet under his thighs. “But he is alive and well, though mad as a hornet.”

“Did ye speak with him?”

“No, a guard was at the door. I’ll watch and see when the Majestic Sod is unattended, but I doubt it’s for long.”

“Aye,” the Dwarf sighs as he pushes himself up onto his feet and sits beside Bilbo, careful to leave room between them for the Hobbit’s sake.

Nori watches Bilbo as the Hobbit picks at the food still left on the plate.

_Mahal, starved for four months, and the rest of them were complaining about two weeks. Their Hobbit is stronger than any of them could fathom_, he thinks as Bilbo finishes the plate off in slow increments. _And too experienced by far…_

“Ye know, when Ori was a wee Dwarrow, Dori and he came home one night with an exotic lookin’ cloak, a dagger and a necklace made of a fang and teeth -all of which were te big fer ‘im mind-, I was curious as te what creature it came from. Curious enough to track down who sold them.”

The Hobbit turns, the light from the hall throwing deep shadows over his face as gold slit eyes look out from behind bronze curls.

“Imagine my surprise te see Fundin handing them te those with Dwarflings fer nothin’ and denying those with wealth any of ‘em.”

Feral eyes stare at him defiantly. Their Hobbit was most certainly stronger of heart and soul than anyone Nori could imagine.

“They had quite a few not ready for sale when Gandalf and Fundin came; their pockets would have
been overflowing, I imagine. Pity they did not live to see what I did with what belonged to me.”

Before Nori can say anything, the Skin-Changer shifts into his Kit skin and darts away between the bars, disappearing into the shadows of the hall.

“Mahal, we’ve got a bloody long road te walk before that one’s tied to our side,” the Thief sighs as he makes himself comfortable on the bed. “Lot of arse kissin’ too.”

Over the next few days, Bilbo watches the guards, learning their rotations. Slowly, he visits each of his Dwarrows and lets them know Thorin lives and is within the kingdom with them - the princes could hardly let go of him as they cried into his shoulder and stomach-, all while mapping the halls and rooms in his mind, trying to find the best possible escape route.

He leaves Thorin for last. During his information gathering, he learned that a guard is only posted at his door for some hours after the Dwarrow King is taken out and returned some time later for a purpose the Hobbit could not gather. Curious, Bilbo follows as the guard drags the Sod through the halls. He paces along behind them using that blasted ring, but sticking to the shadows until they were crossing the path leading to the throne. As the guard leaves Thorin standing before the Elven King, Bilbo moves off to the side and crouches down, watching as the Elf approaches the Dwarf.

He waits patiently as the two size each other up. Fundin had told him of Thranduil and his betrayal when Smaug took Erebor. Bilbo had always thought there was more to the story than that and was curious to see if the Elf would reveal anything to redeem himself in Thorin’s eyes. Doubtful - the Dwarf held a grudge like a dragon protects its hoard- but still, Bilbo could hope.

“Why did you and your kind trespass on my lands?” the King asked.

“We did not realize we had strayed so far from the path.”

“The path you speak of resides on my lands. What were you doing in my forest?”

“We were traveling to the Iron Hills. We lost our way looking for food and drink, because we were starving,” Thorin says, staring at the Elf with a look of complete boredom upon his face; perhaps this is not the first time the Dwarf has done this song and dance with the Elf?

“And where are they now?”

Bilbo frowns at the Elf. Surely someone had told Thorin of their survival and their imprisonment within the King’s halls. Would he be so cruel as to leave Thorin to grieve for them?

“I do not know. If they live, I expect starving in the forest.”

“Why leave the path at all?”

“Because we were starving.”

It seems he can be. Bilbo can’t help but roll his eyes. Both of them were nothing but attention neglected Fauntlings poking each other with sticks and calling foul. The Hobbit narrows his eyes at the Elf, anger bubbling under his skin when he still tells Thorin nothing of their survival.

“Indeed,” Thranduil says as he steps passed Thorin. “I have heard whispers that a noble quest is at hand. A quest to reclaim a homeland… and slay a dragon.”
Thorin stiffens, but says nothing as he continues to face the throne. The Elf turns and prowls back, closer to Thorin than he had been. Bilbo tenses where he sits. He doesn’t like how this Elf speaks to Thorin. All condescending and know-it-all that Bilbo wants to nip his arse with his fangs.

“I suspect a more prosaic motive,” the Elf drawls. “Attempted burglary… or something of that ilk.”

Bilbo’s fangs itch to drop and sink into pretty Elf flesh. His taunting is annoying.

“It seems you have found a way in. Someone skilled enough to find that which would bestow upon you the right to rule. The King’s Stone: the Arkenstone.”

Thorin’s face is apprehensive as his gaze drops to the floor. Thranduil makes no comment of it, just continues talking with words that slide into Bilbo’s ears like snakes. The tar under his skin thrums as the Elf’s speaks; it knows something, though Bilbo knows not what or how.

“It is precious to you beyond all measure, is it not?”

Thorin looks up, but still says not a word.

“We understand each other,” the Elf says, smiling at Thorin las if they were allies. “There are gems in your mountain I too desire. White gems of pure starlight.”

Thorin raises a brow at the Elf, humor barely hidden in his eyes. Bilbo’s own narrow.

“I offer you my help.”

The offer is demure, the Elven King lowering his head and closing his eyes as though he is some gracious being. Bilbo has to keep himself from snarling at the Elf, his words like tar and lies against his skin. Something else is at play here and it’s sending all kinds of bad signals at Bilbo’s instincts.

“I am listening,” Thorin says, amusement coloring his words as a quick smirk twists his lips.

The Elf opens his eyes and meets Thorin’s.

“I will let you go, if you but return what is mine.”

“And how would I do this? My Company is lost, and the one who was to steal the Arkenstone lost with them. You will provide me soldiers and a thief?”

“I will provide what belongs to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you agree to my terms?”

“I may, provided you disclose what belongs to me that you will return.”

Thranduil observes Thorin with eyes-an eye?- that make Bilbo’s teeth ache harder to sink into Kingly flesh yet at the same time his instincts are clamouring beneath his skin to get as far from this Elf as he can. He knows that look. It gleamed in the eyes of his torturers as they pulled out his fangs and set knives to sensitive flesh.

Greed and anger and hate.

“I have come into possession of a company of Dwarrows. You would wish them returned, I assume.”
Thorin had stiffened the moment the first sentence left the Elf’s mouth. Eyes wide and jaw clenched to try and reign in his reaction, Bilbo supposes. Kingly politics always left him with a headache, so Bilbo had left that mess to Gandalf whenever the need arose on their travels.

“You captured them?” the Dwarf grits out. “How long have you had them?”

“Only some days. They were being attacked by spiders when my Guard found them,” the Elf droles. “You should be thanking me. I could have sent them back into the forest.”

“You would have sent my people back to die!” Thorin snaps.

“It was a tempting notion. However, I had more to gain in keeping them here.”

Bilbo watches as Thorin’s fist clench tightly against his legs as he takes in a slow, deep breath and lets it out.

“None were injured? They made it within your halls well?”

“Well is relative when they were suffering from starvation.”

Thorin’s gaze casts around the throne for a moment before he speaks.

“*Only* twelve were recovered?

“Correct,” the Elf says, his face blank.

Thorin’s fists clench behind his back as he stares long at the Elf, “You were saying?”

“I will let you and yours go so long as you return that which is mine.”

“A favor for a favor,” the Dwarf muses as he turns and paces, his lips twitching with wry humor.

“You have my word. One King to another.”

Thorin freezes, his face wiped of all emotion not rage as his brows furrow. Bilbo’s heart pounds faster as he realizes what Thorin is about to do. No, you bloody idiot!

“I would not trust Thranduil, the Great King, to honor his word should the end of all days be upon us!” the Dwarrow King’s words echo throughout the great hall. “You, who lack all honor?!”

The Dwarf whirls around, his anger and pain stark against his face.

“I have seen how you treat your friends. Your allies,” he rages, gesturing wildly at the Elf. “We were starving… homeless. We sought your help, yet you turned your back on the suffering of my people! Left us destroyed by the inferno! *Imrid amrâd ursul!* (Die a fiery death!)

“Do not talk to me of *dragon fire!*” Thranduil hisses, moving more quickly than Bilbo had anticipated, to shove his face in Thorin’s.

One side of the Elf’s face changes. Burned and shredded; his left eye milky with blindness.

“I have faced the Great Serpents of the North! What do you know of their wrath and ruin when but one descended upon Erebor?”

The illusion on his face returns and Bilbo can say he’s honestly terrified of this Elf. Not many survived the wars against those beasts from what little Gandalf had told him.
“I warned your grandfather of what his greed would summon. He would not listen,” the Elven King says as he turns away from Thorin and ascends his throne. “You are just like him.”

A flick of his hand and two guards seize the Dwarf’s arms.

“Stay here, if you will, and rot. A hundred years is a mere blink in the life of an Elf, can you say the same? I am patient, I can wait for your answers.”

Bilbo follows the guards as they drag a struggling Thorin back to his cell, rolling his eyes as he curses at them and Thranduil the entire way. Oh, he is going to have words with him once he’s unguarded. A deal would have been the easiest way to escape these halls, but the Majestic Sod just had to go and ruin it. Granted the Elf had kept their survival from Thorin, but still, needs must!

The Hobbit stays back as they throw the Dwarf into his cell, slamming the bars shut before he can charge them to try and take them out. Green eyes seek askance from the ceiling; do the Valar not see the bullheadedness he has to put up with?

Both guards then retreat, much to his surprise, leaving Thorin to his cursing and tossing about whatever it is he has in his cell. Bilbo waits for half an hour to see if another guard will come to oversee the Dwarrow King. No one arrives. Squaring his shoulders, he takes off the ring out of sight of Thorin, and shifts. He slips through the bars unnoticed as the clot-head continues to tear anything Elven apart. Shifting back, the Hobbit leans against the stone wall near the door, wanting to hear any approaching footsteps while also able to escape should the Dwarf do something incredibly stupid.

Some minutes pass and the Dwarf isn’t slowing down nor has he noticed him at all. Bilbo clears his throat. The Dwarf starts swearing louder. He tries again and a wooden something crashes against the cell door. The Hobbit’s eyes roll so hard, he’s honestly astonished they didn’t fly out this time.

“This is a very… Kingly temper tantrum, your Highness,” Bilbo drawls, picking at his nails as Thorin freezes with the chair he was about to throw against the wall raised comically above his head.

Thorin feels his body begin to quiver as he restrains himself from making any noise. He has to listen; has to pay attention. That voice has haunted him for days above all others but his sister-sons. His voice was always there with a quip when he had to face Thranduil’s interrogations; never faltering, always cheeky; or with words so wise for one still but a pup to Skin-Changers, yet still Thorin doesn’t heed them. Just like he hadn’t listened as they traversed that cursed forest.

He had plead and begged that weed-eaters’ guards to find his Company when they had found him. They ignored him; threw him into this cell and given food and water. He then endured their silence, only to be interrupted when he was dragged before that bastard and asked the same tripe over and over for hours until they left him alone again for days. He’s not sure when their voices started invading his mind, only that they were a welcome reprieve when dealing with the Elven King.

When Thranduil told him only twelve Dwarrows were recovered, Thorin nearly broke. He nearly begged the arse to be taken to his companions and see for himself that Bilbo had not survived. But his pride would not let him. He could not falter before that betrayer. They would find another way out and he would mourn their Hobbit amongst his Kin.

“You aren’t real. Leave me be, spectre,” he pleads with the voice; he can’t afford to break anymore now, not when he has to pin his hopes on Nori getting them out of here. That is, if the Elves had seen fit to inform his kin that he had survived the spiders.

“Did they drug you on the way back from that lovely meeting with his Leafiness without me noticing?”
A pained chuckle escapes him, for Bilbo would have said something like that with a jaunty tilt of his head.

“Though with that crown of his, he would be more of a dainty, queer deer, really. Should I steal it and see what happens, oh King?”

“I said be silent!” he snaps, throwing the chair as hard as he could against the wall, feeling slightly better when it snaps into pieces.

Something painfully collides against the back of his head. Clutching at the spot with one hand, he turns around, ready to unleash his rage on the Elf who dared strike him, only to see umber curls and bright, angry green eyes.

“I will not be silent, you pompous arse!” the Hobbit hisses, waving a piece of the chair at him threateningly. “And how dare you! That deal was our best chance of es-

Bilbo doesn’t get to finish his rant for Thorin approaches him quickly and grabs his face between large hands. Slightly alarmed, the Hobbit drops the wood and grips the Dwarf’s coat covered arms.

“What are you—”

“You’re real,” Thorin chokes out, his voice wondering and so relieved that Bilbo blinks in confusion.

“Of course I’m—”

Chapped lips buried in rough bristles meet his own almost painfully, silencing the Hobbit more effectively than any command ever had. Bilbo squeaks, hands flailing around, unsure of where to put themselves and too shocked to comprehend what exactly was happening. A rough groan from the Dwarf and a questing tongue touching his lips flips Bilbo’s mood from alarmingly confused, to downright livid. The Hobbit’s small fist makes impact against his chin with disproportional force, startling the King into releasing his face and knocking the blighter on his arse. Bilbo darts out of range should the Dwarf try and make another grab for him.

“What do you think you are doing?” he hisses, skin burning from the Sod’s beard, and lips a bit sore as he prods them before wiping them off with a dirty sleeve, glaring at the Dwarrow King.

Thorin, wide eyed, fails to reply before their Hobbit plows on.

“I will not be silenced in such a crass way, Thorin Oakenshield. We’re in the middle of a bloody dungeon where you lot are locked away, and then you declined the easiest means to escape!”

Thorin blinks owlishly at him before his lips twitch in suppressed mirth at their Hobbit’s ire.

“I was not silencing you, Hobbit, merely relieved you and the others survived. If circumstances were different, would you have objected then?” he asks as something warm wiggles around in his chest before rising off the ground and stepping closer to the Hobbit, rubbing his chin -he had forgotten how strong the small being was.

Bilbo hop-skips back, a finger pointed and shaking warningly at the Dwarf as his eyes flare gold when he bares his fangs.

“Ah-ah-ah, you stay right there,” he growls, and Thorin stills, also remembering why they tried not tip the Hobbit’s ire over into anger. “I very much would have objected! You dislike me on a good day for whatever reason -which is very much undeserved, in my opinion- but it is pointless to try and
discuss your issues right now. In case you haven’t noticed, we are trapped here until I can find a way out, no thanks to you. I have other objections -all of which are valid and are going to keep this strictly professional- but they will also be discussed later if you are insane enough to bring this up or force yourself on me again in the future.”

Bilbo stiffens as soft echoing steps reach pointed ears, his eyes narrowing as they dart over to the cell bars. Lips curling in frustration, he glares at Thorin once again.

“This” -he motions between them- “is not happening again.”

He shifts and darts through the bars and into the closest shadows.

“Bilbo!” the Dwarf calls out to him.

The guard reaches the cell door, looking in curiously as the Dwarf devolves into more creative curses and starts throwing things around again. The Hobbit takes his chance to shift back and slip on the ring before making his way to Nori’s cell, rattled and furious.

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Nori listens with some amusement as their Hobbit works himself into fits trying to figure out why their King has kissed him. The sad part of it all is that Bilbo is genuinely confused by their King’s actions and equal parts completely incensed with the sod for botching the deal he told Nori was key to an easy escape.

“If he wanted to silence me, all he had to do was ask nicely,” Bilbo hisses before taking another vicious bite of the night’s meal and leaving more than enough for Nori to get his fill, worrying the Dwarf more than he had been.

Their Hobbit’s clothes hang off his frame like sheets out to dry, yet trying to get him to eat his fill was impossible if Óin’s cursing was anything to go by.

“He doesn’t know how,” Nori murmurs as he tries to discreetly push more food into the Hobbit’s hand, hoping that Thorin’s behaviour would distract him enough to eat the rest without noticing.

“He doesn’t even like me! I’m useful. That’s why he barely tolerates my presence. He didn’t need to use such tasteless measures to shut me up. If nothing else he could have thrown another chair at me!”

“I doubt that’d keep ye quiet for more’n two seconds if he did that again.”

“Shut it, you.”

His ranting, however, only distracts him for so long before he notices what Nori is doing.

“I’m fine,” he growls, shoving the bread against Nori’s mouth.

The Thief rolls his eyes and snags the bread with his teeth, grabbing it with his hand when the Hobbit let’s go.

“Yer skin and bone. Makes it worse that yer familiar with it,” Nori grumbles after swallowing his bite. “So what are ye going te do about him?”

“Nothing. I already told him it would not happen again. I’m not so crass as to take my pleasure with someone trying to silence me and who can’t even stand me for more than several minutes,” Bilbo grumbles back, flopping against the Dwarf and soaking in the heat he gives off.
He couldn’t seem to get warm while in these halls. He greatly suspected it was the ring and whatever magic was seeping into the root foundation of Thranduil’s kingdom. It, like the stain on his magic and most of the words coming from the Elven King’s mouth, felt like tar and lies; deceit and betrayal.

“Never said ye did.”

Bilbo hums in agreement, shuffling around until his head was in Nori’s lap.

“Wake me when you hear any guards,” he says as he yawns, a satisfied little sound escaping him when Nori starts to run a hand through his curls.

He asleep within minutes.

The days go by and Bilbo can only keep track of them by what little light enters the kingdom near the throne. He spends a majority of them hidden by the ring as he scours the halls for a way to escape. No luck so far. It is disheartening and frustrating as Thorin becomes more surly with him by the day. Like he could conjure up an escape route with a snap of his fingers! Ha!

The Hobbit also declines entering the Dwarrow King’s cell again after that… incident, no matter how much the Dwarf tries to cajole him into resting within. The bastard even tried to bribe him with food that was obviously of better fare than the rest of the Dwarrows.

Bilbo had not been amused.

“No.”

“Bilbo, you are tired and hungry, even I can see that and I’m trapped behind these bars,” Thorin growls as he rattles the metal.

Ever since that kiss and the resulting fist to his face, the Dwarf had taken to pawing at him through the bars until the Hobbit got fed up and either left or moved across the hall to stare at the Sod through them. He needs the bastard to focus! Surely he has been within Thranduil’s halls before and could at least provide some insight as to where a possible exit could be. But no, the Dwarf had to be waited out before he even managed to be of any help at all.

“There must be some other way into this place!” the Hobbit snaps at the King.

“If there is, I know not of it,” he snaps right back, rattling the bars again in his frustration and growls when the Hobbit rolls his eyes at him. “I was only shown the upper halls and that grass eaters’ wine cellar some years before Smaug stole Erebor from us.”

Could the cheeky creature not understand that he needed to at least touch his shoulder to make sure he was still real? Still alive? The messages he gives the Hobbit to send to his Dwarrows were all well and good, but the touch of Kin he needed more. Bilbo is as close as he can get to that for now.

“Would you just… at least come sit against the bars.”

“Why should I? You’ve been pawing at me like a Faunt at his mother’s skirts looking for sweets.”

“I need… Can you not just…” he tries to put into words what ails him that the Hobbit would understand to no avail and he nearly sobs in his frustration; his hands trembling as he rubs them over his face.
“Oh!” the Hobbit breathes some minutes later.

Through his fingers he watches Bilbo lift his arms and reach behind his neck. His hands fiddle with something there before dropping his arms and twisting whatever is it between them. The Hobbit trots over to the bars, hesitating only a moment before sticking a hand through, palm held up. Thorin, however, can’t stop staring at him.

“Are you going to take it or not?” he huffs.

The Dwarf comes back to himself after marveling at how close the Hobbit is after so many days and looks down at what Bilbo is offering him.

“What is that?”

“It’s the same as my earring,” the Hobbit says, moving his hair away from his right ear to reveal a similar green gemmed stud. “It’s where my pack and anything not my clothes go when I shift.”

“How?” the Dwarf asks as he slowly drags his fingers against Bilbo’s palm as he scoops the bar with a gemmed head on each end into his hand, fingertips lingering against Bilbo’s as the adornment falls onto his other palm.

“Magic, of course.”

“Of course.”

Green eyes stare into blue.

“Why give me this?”

“Proof,” Bilbo says with a shrug. “You’ve never seen it before, how else would you have gotten it if I were not alive to do so?”

Thorin’s fingers curl over the bar, gripping tight enough that it digs into his flesh, grounding him like the messages and Bilbo’s voice could not.

“I expect that back, you know. Can’t exactly carry around my pack in my Kit skin.”

“When we escape,” Thorin says, his eyes burning with renewed purpose.

“Seems fair,” he says, grinning before taking a seat on the cold stone floor where the bars press into his back, but he will endure it to give Thorin this; at least for today. Skin sickness had become an old friend before Fundin had claimed him his son.

Thick calloused fingers sink into burnt gold curls before migrating down to cup the back of his neck, causing him to jerk forward to dislodge it, lithe body poised to flee.

“No,” he says firmly, waiting for the Dwarf to agree before carefully leaning back and sighing when that hand sinks back into his hair and run its fingers through.

“Why?” the Dwarf questions, yet his voice is soft and slightly dazed.

“A story for another time.”

Thorin grunts in agreement, the motion of his hand slowly lessening as the minutes pass. Only when the motion stops all together, the fingers gripping his curls loosely, does Bilbo carefully look back over his shoulder to see the Dwarrow King has slid down the bars and fallen asleep. The Hobbit
snorts softly at the picture -the Sod was going to have some lovely imprints on his face when he awoke. Carefully, he removes Thorin’s hand from his curls, shushing the Dwarf back into deep slumber when he becomes restless once he’s free.

“Sleep. You need as much as you can get, you arrogant sod.”

Bilbo leaves him where he is, slipping the ring on and vanishing into the shadows once again.

There is still work to be done.

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It’s two weeks before Bilbo has a breakthrough. Well… he found the Dwarrows weapons -sans *Orcrist*, but *Deathless* is there at least. They lay, surprisingly unguarded, in some nondescript room further passed some anteroom he found in his exploring. He makes note of it, planning to return and retrieve the weapons when they make their escape. The likelihood of this happening looks more bleak by the day, however, and the rest of the Dwarrows are starting to throw their displeasure at him like rotten fruit despite the news. He decides to visit Dwalin to try and chase away the waning hope he has for their escape and -hopefully- feel something other than the cold that bites down to his bones and the skin sickness creeping up on him.

“Have ye found anythin’ else of use, Bilbo?” Dwalin growls as his hand tightens on the Hobbit’s arm. He’d been listening as his brother regales him with another bit of gossip from the Elven throne and the bit of mischief he’s managed to cause while snooping around for the last half hour, and Dwalin couldn’t take his chatter anymore. ‘Findin’ our weapons is all well an’ good, but useless while we’re stuck in these cells. None of the other information is useful te us and yer wastin’ our time with yer tricks. Stop dawdling and be of some use! Find us a way out!”

His brother had slipped through his cell bars after several nights of staying with their resident Thief, much to his annoyance. Barely a ‘hello’ before he had all but collapsed against Dwalin’s side, burying himself as close as possible and shoving his feet under his legs. The lad was shivering, but Dwalin couldn’t be arsed to care right then. They’d been stuck in this dungeon for too long and Bilbo had nothing to show for his efforts but the location of their weapons!

Bilbo stiffens against him before jerking his arm out of Dwalin’s hand and his body out from under his arm; shifting and slipping back out between the bars and into the night shadowed palace like Wargs were on his tail.

None of the Dwarrows see or hear from him for two weeks.

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Nori is lazing about on his cot, foot tapping against his knee as the horrible thoughts he’s tried to suppress about his Shadow Thief’s whereabouts flit through his head. A soft click of what could be claws against stone reach his ears after days of listening. He tenses, barely daring to hope that their Hobbit has returned. He turns his head when the clicking comes to a stop outside the bar doors.

Bilbo looks horrible.

His large golden eyes are sunken in, barely open with fatigue, and his fur is dirty and tangled; his tail matted worse than when Nori saw it after the princes took a comb to it back at Beorn’s -Bilbo had been livid for hours. Ears drooping and head held low, their Hobbit looks like he had been beaten down and debating whether or not to just roll over and *die*.

Only the defiant spark in his eyes shows any of the spirit Bilbo usually so proudly flaunts.
Nori flies off the cot and rushes over to the bars just as the Hobbit shifts. Outside of the cell.

“What are you doin’?!” Nori hisses in surprise, reaching through the bars to grab the Hobbit and pull him out of sight.

Bilbo steps back, green eyes alight with that wariness the Thief had hoped to never see again, looking at him from a too thin face.

“Bilbo—”

“I’ve found a way out,” the Hobbit says, his voice raspy and dry.

Nori blinks at him blankly for a moment before trying to grab him again.

“Right, come here.”

The Dwarf watches as the Hobbit’s brow furrows in confusion, head tilting to the right as it always does, and something falls heavy against his heart.

“Bilbo, come here,” he says again. “Ye need to sleep. Mahal, ye need to eat. When was the last time ye ate, lad?”

Bilbo’s brow etches deeper into his forehead.

“I… I can’t remember.”

Nori curses under his breath, pressing himself up against the bars until it’s nearly painful in order to grab Bilbo’s vest. The Hobbit startles, shifting into his Kit skin and keeping out of reach.

“Bilbo… Bilbo, please, get in here. Get warm. Eat something. Then ye can tell me what ye’ve found.”

A large ear twitches before the Skin-Changer takes a hesitant step forward. Mahal, who had sent their Hobbit into such a downward spiral? They were back to when his Warg skin was revealed to them with no Gandalf to act as a buffer.

Their Hobbit is nearly back to the bars when Elven voices are heard, steps echoing off the stone as they descend from above. Heart racing, Nori looks to where they are coming from, trying to calculate how much time he has to get Bilbo into his cell and hidden before they arrive. He looks back to Bilbo.

Their Hobbit is gone.

Twisting around, bronze eyes search for dark fur or golden orbs. Scrambling over to his cot, he pats the blanket down, praying to Mahal the Hobbit has slipped under it.

Nothing.

The guards hurry passed as loud, feral sounding Khuzdul erupts from the cell beside them and echoes throughout the halls.

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Nori listens as the she-Elf and Kíli talk of his stone-Nori can only be grateful the runt has some
sense not to mention what the stone actually means- and some feast the Elves are partaking in at weeks end. Something about stars and light and other Elven hogwash Nori had no interest in. Obviously bored, the Dwarfling then mentions one of his own adventures as a guard for some traders years ago. The others may harp on the young prince for falling for an Elf, but Nori doesn’t think that is the case for either of them. Kíli, for all his traveling during his time as a guard, had never met an Elf. Going by the she-Elf’s continuous visits since they’ve been captured, it’s obvious she has had little to no interaction with Dwarrows and Kíli was the most approachable of them -that he is an adorable little Dwarfling is neither mentioned or spoken aloud in his presence of course. Making nice with the Elves’ Captain of the Guard wasn’t too bad an idea either. To make the most of the situation, listening to them kept his thoughts from straying to more troubling occurrences.

Bilbo still had yet to be seen again in four days, and Nori did not know what the Hobbit had found to get them out of here so he couldn’t prepare the others.

Nearly an hour later, the Captain left the dungeon hall to return to her duties.

“Anyone want te fess up now and tell me what’s put our Hobbit back inte lookin’ at us like rival predators?” Nori drawls loud enough so the others hear.

“We told ye te ask Dwalin, Nori,” Glóin snaps. “He was the last te see the whelp.”

“Watch yer tongue, son of Gróin,” the Guardsman’s snarl ripping through the air and against the stone like a blow.

“Well ye were! I heard ye snap at him ta be ‘useful’.”

The hall gets silent but for the noise the Elves were making at their party up above.

“Ye did what?” Balin’s voice echoes in the hall like a dropped anvil.

More silence.

“Dwalin, I swear on our Father’s grave, if ye don’t answer me-”

“I dunno why I said it alright! Nadad-mâ hikhthuzul mahmanakhi tada akdâmuthrab, nê mâ! Uzraku shumr, hu muneb inkhî dê! (Our brother always visited that thief, never us! I’m in charge of our safety, he should have come to me!)

“Agrâthul,” Nori sneers. (Greedy)

“Mê binakrâg-“ (You honor-less-)

“Are you all quite done?”

The hall once again goes silent as Bilbo’s voice reaches them all.

“Bilbo?!” Balin cries out.

Nori springs from his cot and plasters himself against the bars -and from the sound of it so does the rest of the Company.

“Quiet! There are still guards nearby, you Oliphants!” the Hobbit snarls at them, the sound of keys rattling a bell to Nori’s ears.

Bilbo appears before his cell, looking even worse than he had four days ago. He looks fit to fall over
dead.

“Bilbo—”

“Not now, we don’t have time,” Bilbo says, sticking the key into the lock and opening the door. Taking a key off the ring, the Hobbit shoves the rest of them at the Thief. “Unlock everyone’s door, but stay in them until I return. I have to go get your King.”

“Bilbo—”

“Do it, Nori!” he snaps before darting off into the gloom of the hall.

Nori swears under his breath and hastens out of his cell.

“Stay in here till Bilbo’s back with Thorin,” he growls at each of them as he unlocks their cells. They all wait in tense silence after Nori returns to his cell; hold their breath when two guards descend the stairs some ten minutes later. Nori concentrates on blocking out any sounds that aren’t clicking nails or heavy bootsteps. He exhales in slow relief when the sound of heavy Dwarrow boots echo softly against the stones from above.

“Could you walk anymore like an Oliphant, you fur faced sod!” comes a hissed whisper against the stone followed by a deep grumbling noise that could only be Thorin. “Stop pawing at me!”

“Would you rather I took the time to unlace these boots?”

“No, nevermind. Stop! I will knock you out and have Dwalin carry your arse!”

One by one, the Hobbit and their King stop at each cell, motioning for the Dwarrows within to exit as quietly as possible. Each Dwarf touches Thorin in some way, assuring themselves that he has in fact been alive and that the letters Bilbo brought were not, in fact, an elaborate plan to get them motivated to escape this place—not that Bilbo knew this is what they had been thinking with how long it took the Hobbit to find a way out, mind you. Nori was the last to be retrieved as his cell is the last in the hall.

“Where to now, Bilbo?” the thief asks as he drapes an arm over the Hobbit’s bony, stiff shoulders.

“This way” —he motions to the stairs that traveled further down into the kingdom— “follow me.”

Bilbo brushes off Nori’s arm and takes point, leading them passed empty cells and rooms the further they get.

“You’re supposed to be leadin’ us out, not further in, Bilbo,” Bofur hisses.

“Quiet,” Bilbo snaps back.

Several flights down they finally seem to reach the end of their journey and Kíli—who had, at some point—has managed to make his way up to Bilbo and was keeping a tight grip on the Hobbit’s jacket. Nori could understand. Bilbo had a horrible ability to evade when he wanted to at the least opportune times, and usually when his health was involved.

The rest of the Company look around in confusion at the rows and stacks of barrels around them. They freeze when then see two Elves laying face first on a table not too far from the stairs.
“They’re passed out drunk. I didn’t realize the Sindar were such lightweights in this part of the world,” the Hobbit whispers. “I may have also pushed something a little stronger onto the table.”

The Dwarrows cast the Elves weary glances before continuing to follow the Hobbit.

“This way,” Bilbo says, stepping further into the area with Kíli being pulled along by his jacket, motioning them along with a quick, beckoning arm. “Come on.”

“Uncle, why are we in the cellars?!” the Dwarfling whispers frantically at their Hobbit.

“There’s no way out of here!” Bofur hisses as he pushes passed the rest to face Bilbo.

“I know what I’m doing!”

Ignoring the Dwarf’s scowl, he pushes him to moved passed him, and motions the line of Dwarves following Bofur to a stack of barrels sitting in the middle of the room.

“This way, this way!” -he holds his right arm out in the direction he wants them to go, motioning with the other to get them all moving faster- “Move any slower and I’ll grow roots. Come along, Dwarrows!”

As all of them gathered behind the barrels limited cover, looking at each other in askance and question just what it is they are supposed to do now when Bilbo speaks up.

“Everyone, climb into the barrels, quickly!”

Dwalin pushes passed Glóin and Óin and shoves his face close to his brother’s.

“Are you mad? They’ll find us!”

“No, no. They won’t. I promise you. Please, please. You asked me to be useful. You must trust me to be so!” the Hobbit begs his brother.

Nori’s gut turns as he overhears them, turning to glare at Dwalin as the Guard turns without a thought for Bilbo’s state of mind to discuss the issue with the rest of the Company. The thief hangs back, watching as Bilbo’s face crumbles before looking towards Thorin who stayed standing next to the Hobbit.

“Please. There’s no other way.”

Thorin only takes a moment before looking at his Dwarrows, expression stern and commanding.

“Do as he says.”

All the Dwarrows but Nori roll their eyes, shoulders sinking as they follow their King’s command.

“Move yer big ginger head,” Dwalin growls at Glóin as he shoves passed him.

Nori watches as Thorin’s gaze lingers long and hard on the Hobbit before joining them beside the barrels. One by one, Dwalin helps his companions into the higher to waist level barrels, shushing them when they groaned too loud. Once settled, the star-haired Dwarf watches furry Hobbit feet pace up and down beside the barrels as everyone else settles in. He can hear him counting each of them too.

“Everyone’s in,” Dori says, and Nori declines mention Bilbo is not.
The Hobbit makes one last count before moving back to the stairs.

“What do we do now?” Nori hears Bofur ask, poking out his head to see what Bilbo has planned now.

The rest of the Company follows and Nori is positive they all look a sight, poking sideways out of barrels like some demented prairie dogs.

Their Hobbit ignores him, reaching for what looks to be the barrel lids before he freezes. Bilbo’s head snaps over to look towards the stairs they came down, his eyes widening. He turns back toward them, his coat twirling about him like a gown, and Nori sees his skin pale even further than the Dwarf thought possible.

He grabs a huge metal contraption sticking up out of the floor with one clawed hand.

“Bilbo?”

Gold, unfocused eyes barely meet theirs as he listens to something they cannot hear.

“Hold your breath.”

The Hobbit yanks back on the metal contraption.

The floor shifts and dread fills Nori as he realizes what Bilbo had planned all along.

“Bilbo, no!” he shouts as his barrel is jostled and shoved by the others as they roll down the plank.

He’s airborne not moments later and his stomach tries to escape through his throat. The last thing he sees is Bilbo’s glowing eyes before the plank rights itself cutting their Hobbit away from them before freezing water washes over his head.

“Bilbo!!”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Gyrth in yngul bain? : Are the spiders dead?

Ennorner gwanod in yngyl nanyrn, : Yes, but more will come.

Enguin nar... : They're growing bolder...

Enwenno hain : Take them!

Imrid amrâd ursul : Die a fiery death!

Nadad-mâ hikhthuzul mahmanakhi tada akdâmuthrab, nê mâ! Uzraku shumr, hu muneb inkhî dê! : Our brother always visited that thief, never us! I’m in charge of our safety, he should have come to me! (basically)

Agrâthul : greedy
Mê binakrâg-: You honor-less-
Interlude IV: Fundin, Son of Farin

Chapter Summary

Hope rises through the ashes of tragedy, one must only look to see the possibilities.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Letter #35

May 7, 2807 T.A.

Dwalin,

I don’t think he’ll make it.

F.

(Dwalin remembers the overwhelming agony those words had infused his heart with the night he received this letter. Every hour that passed was like waiting for an axe to come down upon his neck. He’d known that if Bilbo passed, he would grieve for years at missed opportunities… Their father… their father would never recover from it…)

Fundin was about ready to lasso his son’s legs just to get him to rest. The Dwarf hadn’t slept well in nearly two weeks. Not that he or the wizard could get much sleep…

Bilbo walks as if he were possessed. Walking until he collapses into unconsciousness only to rise mere hours later to continue on, even in the dead of night. Their mounts were starting to have trouble keeping up.

On top of that, the boy’s wounds were growing more infected with how sparse running water was and the lack of fresh bandages and herbs. He was starting to run a fever if the heat rolling off him was anything to go by. Gandalf could do nothing when the Hobbit’s own magic was lashing out and refusing to allow the wizard’s to touch Bilbo. To make matters worse, Bilbo himself could hardly stand their hands upon him for any length of time.

It was slowly killing him.

“It’s why he walks, Fundin,” Gandalf explained to him one night with a weary sigh. “His magic
knows that if he does not reach a powerful ley line soon, it will have to… disarm itself in order to keep Bilbo alive. With me here… well… it is apparently very unwilling to do so.”

“What do ye mean it ‘knows’, Gandalf. Magic ain’t alive.”

“Ah, but dear Fundin, Bilbo’s magic is.”

The Wizard does not elaborate further, and though Fundin would like nothing more than to shake the answers out of the cryptic ol’ badger, there are more important things to worry about.

“But it… knows yer magic, yes?” he asks as he looks over at the Skin-Changer’s unconscious body.

“Yes… But it seems any magic not of the earth is not to be trusted with Bilbo’s life. Not after those Dwarrow used other magic to bind him…”

“What are we te do if he runs himself inte the ground, Gandalf? We can’na carry him te Rivendell!” Fundin growls.

“We’ll have to see when it happens. Hopefully it won’t come to that.”

Fundin decides he’s going to have words with the wizard about testing their luck.

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Letter #36

May 20, 2807 T.A.

Dwalin,

We almost didn’t make it…

He collapsed halfway there as we were crossing the South Downs.

He could hardly walk… could barely breathe by that time. The foolish boy kept trying to force his legs to hold his weight before he just… laid there trying to get enough breath into his lungs.

The only good to come of it was his magic finally decided Bilbo’s life was worth more than protecting him from foreign magics. The wizard did what he could… but with how extensive his injuries actually turned out to be… he couldn’t…

I praise Mahal and whatever Valar were watching over your brother, for aid came as he started to fade. Elrond and his brood arrived; a wagon large enough for Bilbo’s size with them.

His magic tried to take what it could from Elrond and his children; would have drained them dry if they weren’t blocking other magics like his had… His magic must have truly been desperate…

He recovers now in Rivendell under Elrond and his daughter, Arwen. They all but threw him into one of their fountains to clean the infection from his wounds while Elrond chanted some Elven tongue. It was a powerful spell used by the Elves to heal what we could not see, Gandalf said, one
they only use in the direst of circumstances.

The Elf said if they had gotten to him any later, Bilbo would no longer be with us...

(Dwalin can tell his father did not finish the letter when he had first started it; the ink of the last few lines was darker than the rest... less shaky.)

I will write again when his condition has improved... But he won't be healed even long after his injuries have.

His mind... I fear what this... atrocity will do to him...

Keep him in your prayers.

Fundin

P.S.: Tell Balin I was summoned by Gandalf to help him on some errand the ol' badger couldn't be arsed to explain, but that it was somehow for the good of Ered Luin. Inform our King as well if he asks for me.

Bilbo lays in a sea of blankets and pillows as Fundin sits near his son, Elrond casting another spell of healing over his wounded flesh. The Dwarf reads over the letter that had arrived from Dwalin earlier this morn -his younger- eldest son was berating him for leaving him to inform Balin and Thorin of his extended absence with only a vague and partially believable excuse. It has been nearly two months, and Bilbo had finally recovered enough with Elrond’s aid, and regained most of his magic to shift back into his Hobbit skin. The Elven Lord looks over his son’s Warg skin once more before nodding his head.

“Your wounds are not so severe now. You should be able to shift without consequence.”

The Hobbit nods his head and does so without hesitation.

The process is slow… painful and disturbing to watch, yet Fundin can’t look away. It’s obvious to him that Bilbo is forcing himself to shift. His instincts visibly fighting to remain in his more powerful form.

Fundin fears, that deep within his heart, Bilbo would rather never return to his Hobbit skin.

His son’s back legs are the first he slowly starts shifting, moving to his upper body when they stop trying to revert back and starting the fight with his instincts anew. It takes nearly an hour before his son is back in the skin of his birth.

He looks worse than he had as a Warg laying in the mound of bed things, panting from the effort it took to shift.

“Oh, dashatamê,” Fundin nearly cries, finally seeing his son in his Hobbit skin after so long.

His clothes are in tatters and barely hanging onto his thin frame. It would take many more months of careful weaning him back into full, nutritious meals before he no longer looks like a wraith. The cut on his face though is mostly healed now with his shift; only a red line down his face that would hopefully disappear once he shifts a few more times. His other wounds were hidden beneath his clothes.
Walking up to the lad -Bilbo scrambling out of the pillows and sheets that threatened to swallow him whole-, he grabs his gaunt face the moment he stands before him. The Dwarf examines the cut that keeps his left eye shut and gently pulls up the lid. Bright green follows the finger he quietly instructs his son to follow, the pupil contracting and dilating with the change of light. Pushing up the Hobbit’s lips, he sees his teeth are all there. Fundin finally shifts aside the hair hiding his damaged ear. He gives a relieved sigh when he sees that it too is repairing itself.

“Good, this is good.”

Bilbo smiles tremulously, grabbing onto his arms as tears start gathering in his one good eye while the other leaks.

“Adád…”

Fundin pulls his son into a fierce embrace as the Hobbit starts crying. He sobs and wails as he clings to the Dwarf with strength his emaciated body shouldn’t have. Fundin sits on the ground, bringing Bilbo down with him to envelop him fully.

“Oh dashatamê, êneh dê me. Éneh dê me. Eyadi. Aulê ishfitumun me dê ra êneh dê zurlu me ins agnurê,” he croons into the Hobbit’s curls. “Me aznigimê mudtûkund. Me abnur kuthu nunur ishrigifi ra amrud. Me kana, kana aznigi, dashatamê.”

Elrond leaves the room on quiet feet, sharing a glance with Fundin before he is out the door.

It’s an hour before Bilbo has quieted enough for Fundin to look down and see his boy has fallen to sleep. With a soft chuckle, he carefully pulls them off the floor and takes Bilbo to the bed that laid unused after Bilbo had tried to crawl upon it in his Warg skin. He had slipped off in the middle of the night one too many times before Fundin had demanded Elrond provide his son with enough cushioning on the floor so he would not injure himself further. It takes some maneuvering, but eventually he manages to get himself and the sleeping Hobbit onto the bed where he decides to take his rest as well.

His son had been plagued with vicious night terrors even when he had fallen beyond their reach within his mind. In his Warg skin, it had been too dangerous for Fundin to risk trying to comfort his son. It tore his heart apart when Bilbo’s howls had to be muffled with magic to keep the guards from storming Rivendell in search of a perceived Orc invasion.

It seems only Elrond and his brood knew of Bilbo’s Skin-Changer lineage. While this was a relief for Fundin -he’d rather not have a repeat of these months past with Elves instead of Dwarrows- it was also a source of constant stress. Keeping Bilbo hidden from curious Elves or Elflings was a task in itself, and Elrond was not always around to deter them.

“I sent Gandalf back to the… back there to get what’s mine,” Bilbo’s whisper pierces the silence.

“Why,” the Dwarf asks, gently dragging a hand down the Hobbit’s back.

“I… there’s something I…”

Hearing the struggle Bilbo has in putting his reasoning into words, Fundin runs a hand through his hair and quiets him.

“Tell me when ye can, dashatamê. Rest now.”

Bilbo nods, his curls rubbing against his father’s throat before the pull of sleep drags him back under.
Pulling Bilbo further into his chest, but careful of still healing flesh wounds, Fundin allows himself to drift off.

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Letter #37

August 28th, 2807 T.A.

Dwalin,

It gladdens me to say that your brothers wounds have finally healed. All that’s left now is some scarring that will fade with his shifts. However, Elrond has warned Bilbo the scarring from the burns will probably remain, though heavily faded. His skin will never be the same there. Curiously, his other skins, though retaining the cut and burn scars, have regrown the hair he lost. He’ll only have to see them when in his birth skin, yet… I fear that will be a burden he may never be able to accept.

He tells me Hobbits are horrible gossips and those after his birth parents estates and holdings will probably try and use his appearance to seize them. Your brother tells me not to ‘worry your balding head about it, Adâd’. The cheeky whelp!

He’s to remain in Elrond’s care for another month and I am to return to Ered Luin -of which I protested and demanded I remain and escort him to the Shire, but your brother would hear none of that. Though my heart rages against leaving his side, I know I must return to my duties. I have left my responsibilities on yours and Balin’s shoulders for too long, and Bilbo knows this.

I leave Rivendell in two weeks. Inform Balin of my return.

Keep Bilbo in your prayers to Mahal,

Fundin

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“Yer to come up with an excuse for dragging me away from Ered Luin for so long,” Fundin says as he rolls the letter, sealing with wax and the House of Farin seal.

The wizard sputters on his drink, droplets of ale gathering on his great beard as Bilbo lounges on the couch besides the Dwarf’s desk, chuckling.

“And what am I to say?” the wizard demands.

“I dunno, but it has te be something that was fer the good of Ered Luin. Ye can be as vague as ye want. I didn’t leave any details beside that.”

Fundin watches his son try to hold back his laughter with a toothy smile, turning to look at the disgruntled wizard. Unlike Bilbo, the Dwarf doesn’t try to restrain himself.

“You were never this ridiculous before I brought a fauntling along,” the ol’ badger groused, wiping the ale from his beard.
“Oi! No one told you to bring me,” Bilbo snips at the wizard.

The grey-haired Maiar huffs before sipping at his ale again, “I’ll come up with something.”

The three of them drift in comfortable silence before Fundin notices his son shifting restlessly on the couch. He stares at the lad until he catches his eyes -his left finally open and healed.

“What is it, lad?”

The Hobbit was still too thin, but had obviously regained his former energy if his restlessness the past few weeks was anything to go by. The pranks he was pulling on the Elves was also telling in its own way.

Something was bothering his son.

“Did you get what I asked for, Gandalf?” Bilbo asks, looking away from Fundin to the wizard.

“Yes.”

Bilbo gnaws on his lip for a moment before looking back to Fundin.

“You know how I asked him to go back to the cave and get my… things?”

“Aye.”

“I decided what I want to do with them.”

Fundin feels his shoulders tighten as the memories of that gruesome day flash across his mind.

“I thought ye had them destroyed.”

“No, I… I want to use them.”

Disbelieving silence meets the Hobbit’s words.

“No,” Fundin declares, his voice rough with pain.

“But-”

“I said no!” Fundin shouts, shoving his chair back to stare down his son.

“They’re not yours to decide what to do with!” Bilbo snaps, jerking himself up off the couch meeting his stare head on. “They’re my skins. My fangs and teeth. If I want to use them, I bloody well will!”

“Ye want a reminder of what that filth did te ye? Ye’ll drive yerself insane!”

“It’s not for me, it’s for the Dwarflings!”

Wide eyed, Fundin stares at his youngest in disbelief.

“What?”

“My skin… it can be imbued with wards. So can my fangs and teeth I’d wager. I want to do that and give them to the younglings whose families are struggling. Make them into cloaks, necklaces and daggers to keep them safe…” the Hobbit says, rubbing the back of his neck like there’s an itch he can’t get rid of.
“How do ye know it can be done?” Fundin asks him, his voice barely louder than parchment scuffing the floor.

“The… collar was strongly warded, Fundin, and with powerful magic. When those Dwarrows kept forcing his shifts, the activated wards were pressed into his skin constantly, which left behind a magical residue that latched onto the magic flowing within him,” the wizard says, his voice heavy with anger.

“How do you know this?”

“I saw the wards with my own eyes beneath his fur when I used my magic to calm him, Fundin.”

“But his magic blocked that blasted thing!” Fundin snaps. “We saw it in the cave. They tried to force him, and nothing happened.”

“Because my magic was blocking it.”

Fundin snaps his eyes over to his son. The lad had retaken his place on the couch without his notice as Gandalf revealed another atrocity those cretans had done to his son. His hands clench at his sides as thoughts of even more damage appearing that they did not see, could not see.

“My magic stopped flowing in order to block the magic of the collar. If my magic isn’t moving, I can’t shift.”

“We only saw the effects of it when Bilbo was having another nightmare and you had stepped out. I had placed my arm around his neck to try and comfort the lad, but…” the wizard sighs. “Any constant pressure on his neck that can be construed as a collar, even partial, will activate the magic in the wards which will send his magic on the defensive.”

His son and Gandalf watch him as Fundin lets what they’ve said sink in. Despite his racing thoughts, Fundin only comes to one conclusion.

“From now on, lad, yer te train in stealth,” he says, arms crossing over his chest when he sees the lad about to protest. “Ye will, Bilbo. I’ll be askin’ Elrond te get his best spies te do it while yer here.”

Bilbo opens his mouth again, but Fundin is having none of it. His son will not be made helpless because he is unable to shift. The lad already relies too much on his ability and he had put off making him, but this was unacceptable. He glares at the lad.

“After they deem yer training complete, ye’ll train with me in hand te hand, and with another Dwarf in stealth.”

His son seizes, eyes wide as he stares at his father in disbelief and fear. Another Dwarf? No! No, he can’t do that!

“Why?”

Fundin sighs, running a hand down his face as he steps closer to his son. His heart clenches when he flinches back -flinches away from him like he is going to hurt him.

“No, Bilbo… dashatamê… Only when ye can. I’m not goin’ te force ye te be around another Darrow.”

“What if I never can? What then?”
“I’ll find a Man instead. Or another Elf if I have te. If neither can be found, I’ll have te accept what ye got from the Elves here will have te be enough. I just want ye safe, lad. The only way I know how te do that is te have ye train with as many masters as possible to prepare ye for everything I can’t teach ye,” he says roughly, nearly begging his son not to shy from him, nearly begging him to trust he will never hurt him. “No Dwarrow unless ye think ye can, yes?”

Bilbo stares at him with wide summer green eyes before he takes a shaky breath in, releasing it just as forcefully.

“Alright… alright, Adád,” he says, voice warbling as he holds out a trembling hand.

Fundin steps forward carefully, gently grasping the small hand before pulling the lad up into a hug.

“I’m so sorry, dashatamê. I did not mean te scare ye.”

Trembling fingers clench in his tunic in acknowledgment.

The Dwarf heaves a relieved sigh, eyes catching the miffed grey ones of the wizard. He lowers his, knowing he had botched things up a bit, the wizard didn’t have to rub his nose in it.

“I’m going to go prepare the… the things for the younglings,” Bilbo says, his voice muffled against Fundin’s chest. “I want to get as many done as I can before you leave.”

“Alright. I know when I can’t change yer mind.”

Bilbo nods, pulling away from the Dwarf's arms and wiping a sleeve across his eyes. A quick glance at the wizard prompts the Maiar to stand, following the Hobbit out of Fundin’s room. Bilbo turns and looks back at him before he leaves.

“I’ll bring lunch te yer room, alright?”

Bilbo’s bright eyes stare at him.

“You don’t have to be there while we’re doing this.”

“Bilbo, ye’ll have te tie me te the bed te keep me from bein’ there for ye.”

The Hobbit ducks his head, a light blush spreading across his nose as a small grin graces his beardless face.

“Thank you, Adád.”

“Always, dashatamê. Always.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

dashatamê: my son
Adád: Father
Oh dashatamê, êneh dê me. Êneh dê me. Eyadi. Aulê ishflûmûn me dê ra êneh dê zurlu me ins agnûrê: “Oh my son, I've got ye. I've got ye. I'm here. Mahal brought ye
to me and I claimed ye as my own"

Me aznigimê mudtûkund. Me abnur kuthu nunur ishrigî ra amrud. Me kana, kana aznigi, dashatamê : "Ye're my brave wolf heart. Ye survived when others would lay down and die. Ye're so, so brave, my son."
Chapter Summary

White water rapids, Orcs, and the loss of one of their own once more. What's a company of Dwarrows and a Hobbit have to do to get a break?!

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year everyone! I've started to get my life together scheduling wise and am determined to stick to them!

That being said, here are some of my New Years resolutions for my art and writing!
1. Complete One-Shot requests before new chapters of my stories.
2. Complete at least one chapter of Skin Deep/What is Lost every two weeks until the story's completion. This will mean shorter chapters (20 pages maximum instead of my insane 40-50 page chapters), but more of them, so that's a great thing for you, my readers!
3. Post at least one new piece of artwork a week, be they WIP or completed projects on DeviantArt.
4. Be more active on DeviantArt and AO3!

Also, I meant to add this with the were-warg skin reveal but forgot. Just a size chart so you can see just how badly the ring and the tainted magic affected Bilbo's Warg skin. This is his height when he's walking on his fingers. He's about as tall as his Warg skin on all fours when he's flat on his hands (I just haven't made a version of that yet).

So here's another chapter in Skin Deep! Enjoy!
P.S. This is like, only halfway beta'd ><, so if you find any errors please let me know!
The Company’s cries cut off as the hatch rights itself, leaving Bilbo alone with the passed out Elves and the stomping steps of Elven feet as they descend the stairs from above. Groaning from the table draws his eyes to the drunkards. One of them jerks up, eyes blinking quickly to rid themselves of sleep when the Captain’s voice echoes against the stone, her tone angry and sharp. The other Elf groans, burrowing deeper into his arms.

Bilbo slowly retreats backwards to not catch their attention, narrowed golden eyes glancing between the Elves at the table and the stairs where a platoon seems to be coming down. He slips behind a shelf and crouches down, slipping a hand into his pocket and grips the ring. Loathe as he is to touch the blasted thing, he knows it will be his only way out.

He crouches lower into the shadows when the Captain and her entourage descend into the cellar, weapons drawn and with a frown upon her ageless face. She looks around in confusion when she sees no Dwarrows, and narrows them when they land on the Elves still slipping in and out of consciousness at the table.

“What is the meaning of this?” she snaps, causing the Elves to startle and topple off their seats.

Both Elves start talking over one another, fingers pointing and voices growing louder as they disagree with what the other is saying. Bilbo is sure they would have devolved into a fight had the Captain not silenced them.

“Silence! The Dwarves have escaped and the only one with the means to release them is the Keeper of the Keys. Well, Elros?”

The Elf -Elros- pales as he looks over to where his companion had hung the keys earlier in the night. His eyes widen with fear when he sees they no longer reside there. Bilbo almost feels sorry for the Elf.

“We had hung them there…” he says, his voice clear even as he whispers in the cavernous cellar.

“And yet they are not there any longer,” she snaps before taking a deep breath. “Targen, take your men and head to the bridge. Inform our Prince what has happened. The rest of you, with me!”

The Elves in question salute and follow one of their own up and out of the cellar. The Captain then turns back to the Keeper and his friend.

“When we return, I will investigate this severe lack of competence and report my findings. What happens from there will be up to our Prince and our King. Dismissed!”

With that she turns and nearly flies up the stairs, her entourage following in her wake. With a muffled curse, Bilbo slips on the ring and darts after them, ignoring the two Elves and wishing he could shift to give himself the speed he desires -damn long-legged bastards. He pays no attention to where the Elves are leading him, though perhaps he should have when he hears a trill-ing horn echoing into the kingdom from outside.

They had found his Dwarrows.

He follows the Captain and her guard through and out of the kingdom, the fresh scent of running water and the crunch of fall leaves jolting his brain out of the fog the ring induces in him. It’s enough to get him to duck down into a bush, take the blasted thing off, shift into his Kit skin and travel
through the underbrush after the Elves closing in on his Dwarrows.

Frustration nips at his heels. They need to find a way out of this mess because finding another way out of that stuffy Elven kingdom would be monumentally more difficult now that they knew something was able to release them.

Looking toward the bridge over the river the Elves have stopped his Dwarrows at, he sees the guards getting ready to make grabs for the barrel bound Dwarrows. Shifting on pawed feet, he prepares himself to shift into his Warg skin despite the disgust he feels at its new shape.

He will endure it if it means his Dwarrows can continue their quest for the mountain.

Of course, if it’s not Elves, the only other creatures that will appear are Orcs.

Which they do.

“Watch out! There’s Orcs!” Bofur’s cry comes over the rushing waters as three of the guards are felled by arrows.

Bilbo watches as they slaughter the guards on the bridge, swarming over it like locusts and coming from the forest beside the river to engage the Elves. Taken by surprise, the Elves squander for only moments before the blond prince and the Captain are rallying their people and fighting back.

It takes every ounce of focus and will he has not to fall into a blood haze at the sight of so many of these disgusting creatures. He drags his gaze from the beasts to check on his Dwarrows, hardly breathing as Orcs leap from the bridge to try and slaughter his Dwarrows. Lethe muscles tense, ready to bolt from his hideaway and aide them when a deep voice echoes against the stones.

“Gur! Zib! Gol’ig dol’ug!”

“Get under the bridge!” Bilbo hears Thorin command his Company when the Orcs try to grab them from the barrels.

His Dwarrows only manage to defend themselves with the weapons they rip from the Orcs hands. He watches in helpless frustration as an Orc manages to take Nori by surprise, its weapon raised to hack his head off when Fíli manages to stab its throat. Nori grabs the weapon before it falls into the river, stabbing the Orc that’s trying to grab Ori.

He can’t shift. Not into his deformed Warg skin. There are too many Orcs and Elves that will turn their weapons against him should he come to his Dwarrows aid in that form. He can’t shift back into his Hobbit skin for the same reasons. The only thing he can do is get to their weapons that he absconded into the forest over the weeks the were trapped in the Kingdom. If he keeps his wits about him -and uses that thrice be cursed ring- he should be able-

Kíli is on the shore, fighting with his fists against an Orc.

A loud, shrieking yowl escapes his muzzle just before Dwalin calls to the Dwarfling, tossing him the crude sword he had been using. Bilbo can only fretfully watch as his Dwarfling fights the Orcs on his way up the bridge stairs. The Hobbit can only fleetingly admire the Younglings initiative to open the gate as the Orcs continue to try and stop him. His claws dig into the soil as Kíli beheads an Orc and, finding his path clear, rushes up to the lever.

The whistling of an arrow flies over Bilbo’s head. He starts to look back when Fíli calls out his brother’s name in alarm. Kíli’s pained groans and staggered breath hits his large ears like an oliphant crashing through his Hobbit hole. He doesn’t want to believe what he’s seeing.
A large arrow is lodged in his Dwarfling’s leg.

The red haze takes over his vision.

He knows no more after that.

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Thorin only has a moment to worry for his sister-son before more Elves come from the trees to engage the Orcs. He sees the Captain that Bilbo had spoken of attacking the Orcs on the bridge, her red hair whipping around her like fire as she dances around her enemies. He has even less time to understand what he hears ripping through the air, causing Elf and Orc to halt as if frozen by a spell, before a massive white and black blur rips apart three Orcs where they stand. It rises from its crouch, standing on two legs heads higher than any of the tall races hope to be, and dripping black blood from its muzzle and claws. Red eyes peer out from the black fur.

“Nauro!” several of the Elves cry as they turn and aim their bows at the beast.

“Garm-ân!” come from the Orcs.

All Thorin knows is that he recognizes that pelt. What he doesn’t know is what happened to their Hobbit.

The red haired Captain roars something at her people just as Bilbo lunges at another group of Orcs with his jaws opened, ready to tear into more of the beasts. He doesn’t know what she says, all he can see is the Elves turning their attention back to the Orcs.

The gate behind him swings open.

“Kíli!” he calls out to his sister-son, trying to get the lad back down to them and into a barrel before they all fell over the falls.

He catches a glimpse of Bilbo ripping an Orc in two that was trying to stab an Elf in the back before the river pulls his barrel over.

“Obgur-id! Mod hag?! Rang Garm-ân! Abgur-id!” he hears an Orc command.

He prays to Mahal that Kíli gets into a barrel.

He begs Him to help Bilbo survive long enough to escape the Elves and the Orcs if he manages to pull himself from his bloodlust.

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A name pierces through the red haze clouding his mind. It’s only enough to know that what he’s desperately trying to protect has escaped, and their enemies are in pursuit. He ignores the ones that smell like trees and sun-kissed leaves, only ripping into the ones that smell of blood and rotting flesh. They were they ones to harm his pack. They are the ones who will feel the sweet caress of his claws and the gentle nip of his fangs.

He follows with vicious glee and a bloodthirsty howl.

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Despite the bobbing and tossing the barrel is giving him, Nori keeps an eye on Bilbo as the Skin-
Changer tears through the Orcs like a knife through warm butter. It’s fascinating and terrifying to watch as he goes from pursuing them on all fours to being on two legs and ripping the Orcs apart. Despite the instinctual fear this skin’s howls and brutality induce in him, he calls out in alarm when some of the Orcs arrows bury themselves into his Shadow Thief’s hide. The Hobbit seems not to notice, but Bilbo is his chosen brother no matter the form he takes or the misgivings the rest of the Company has with him now. When Bilbo had to beg the Son of Fundin for his trust, it left Nori’s stomach twisted in knots and bile threatening to pass his lips. He had vowed to speak with Dwalin after their easy escape.

So much for easy.

“Ori!” he hears Dori yell for their youngest.

“I’m alright!” the lad calls back just before an Orc leaps from the shore to try and grab his barrel. It misses, thankfully.

Nori turns back when he sees several Orcs fall dead on the shore to see the Elves also in pursuit. He can only appreciate them because they are going after the Orcs and not his shifty skin changing brother. He’ll have to send the red haired lass a thank you basket once they’re all rich. With a bit of his own bloodlust nipping at his heels, Nori hacks at any Orc he can get his weapon near.

A large shadow passes over head, and he watches as Bilbo lands on the right shore, flattening a few Orcs when he lands. A viciously gleeful howl echoes against the river’s stones and Nori feels a wide grin spread across his own lips. Despite the danger, he was having fun on this new battlefield.

“Cut the log!” Thorin’s voice hits his ears from over the river’s roar.

The log has several Orcs lined up on it, just begging them to cut it down. Nori cackles as the log splits and the Orcs fall to their watery graves.

Not moments later he hears Dwalin call out to Bombur and watches the Guard toss him an axe just as a Orc leaps down from a tree, impaling Bombur’s barrel with a spear to hang on. Bombur manages to bury the axe into the Orc, causing it to let go and fall off. What happens next, Nori can hardly believe -well, considering one of his brothers is a small thing that can turn into a large thing, there wasn’t much out of the realm of possibility really…

The spear impales the Orc -that had landed on a river boulder- and lifts Bombur’s barrel clean out of the water and onto the left shore! He bounces twice before bouncing clear over the river and into several Orcs, bowling them over once again bouncing back over the river! He can’t see what happens after that except for Bilbo leaping over with a roar and Bombur tossing the axe to Dwalin and hopping into the empty barrel in front of them, tipping open end first into the river. He and Dwalin quickly right the barrel so Bombur can breath and settle better into it.

The water continues rushing them down the river as they kill Orcs, helping Elves kill Orcs, watching Bilbo kill Orcs -because, really Bilbo needed no help in that area- when the most hilarious thing happens -Bilbo socking Thorin in the jaw is still his number one event, mind you. The sight of the blonde prince standing on the heads of Dwalin and Dori as he shoots at Orcs behind them is absolutely hilarious. Then he hops up and twists around and continues shooting! Oh, he would be telling this to Bilbo once the Hobbit was lucid again!

As Bilbo leaps over the river again -he’s incredibly agile in this skin- the blond Elf grabs onto the Skin-Changer’s fur and is pulled to the other shore with him. Nori watches the plucky Elf climb onto Bilbo’s back before moving to his shoulders when he stands on two legs to rip into the Orcs. When
Bilbo falls to all fours to leap across the river again, the Elf shifts down onto his back, Bilbo either ignoring his passenger, or not even noticing him in his blood haze.

The amount of Orcs running beside them has thinned greatly and as the Elf leaps off Bilbo’s back to engage the few remaining, Nori watches as the Skin-Changer twists around, burying his claws deep into the Orcs and shoving the blond Elf aside to bite the third one behind him.

“Bilbo!” Nori calls out to him in alarm when the Hobbit drops the Orcs form his claws to stare the Elf down after he had put an arrow into the Orc riding Bofur’s barrel.

The Hobbit seems not to hear him as the river pushes them away from their Hobbit.

“Bilbo!”

Legolas did not know what to think of the beast. It came from nowhere that could possibly have hidden its massive form from sight. Werewolves were not known to have magic or any ability to cloak them from perception, and he was loathe to leave such a dangerous creature alive to fight among his people. But Tauriel demanded their warriors to leave the beast alone. Insisted that it would not harm them if they did not harm it or the Dwarves. He had been ready to rescind her order when the beast attacked the Orcs and saved several of his people from death. He had looked to Tauriel before he turned his bow back onto the Orcs.

Watching the creature tear and rip the Orcs apart is a sight he is sure will haunt his dreams for decades to come. That he had been reckless enough to touch the beast, let alone use it as some sort of stead without repercussion, will fill him with a giddy delight he has not felt since he first learned to ride a horse centuries ago. All of that means nothing when staring into blood red eyes once the battle is done.

The Dwarves are long gone down the river leaving only him and the werewolf.

He swallows and it feel thick in his throat.

“Car-elyë hanya-im?” he asks carefully.

The beast snorts before it nods its large head.

“Hanta-d an tulu-lya, Natha-d-”

The twang of an arrow striking arrow startles him and the beast. Legolas turns to see Tauriel attacking the Orc that meant to kill him or the beast. Tempting though it is to let her kill the thing, they need it for information.

“Tauriel! Dartho! Hono-hono o’ebo-cuin.”

He turns back to properly thank the werewolf again, but it is gone.

A shiver runs down his spine as a howl echoes out from the forest.

Clear of mind for the first time since the bridge, Bilbo races back upriver under the cover of the forest. His unexpected shift caused him to leave behind the Dwarrows weapons. It would be irresponsible of him to leave them behind after going through all the trouble of getting them out of
the Elves Kingdom in the first place. The closer he gets to the Elven Kingdom, the more he sticks to what shadows he can fit within. He dare not shift into either smaller skin until he was well away from the Elf and Orc stragglers he’s sure to meet on his way back down river, and certainly not before he could get Óin to pull the arrows out of his hide. Not to mention he barely had any magic left to power a shift back into this hideous form should he need it again. As he approaches the hollow he left the Dwarrows weapons in, he inhales deeply, trying to see if any Elf or Orc is nearby only to growl when he’s back to being nose deaf again.

He hates this bloody forest.

Relying on his eyes and ears and hearing nothing but mosquitoes and moths, he lumbers over to the largest felled tree. Reaching into the hollow truck, he grumbles when he can’t quite reach the weapons. He tries again by laying on his back and reaching again. He barely touches the hilt of on of the weapons. Snarling in frustration and the need to return to his Dwarfling’s to check on Kíli, he gets up on his paws and goes to the center of the log. Raising his furry fists high, he brings them down hard with a crack against the hollow wood. The log splinters in half, the weapons clanging as they fall to the ground in a heap.

Ears alert and red eyes checking his surrounding to see if the noise had attracted anything, he gathers the makeshift cloth harness he stored with the weapons and adjusts it for his current form.

“Only thing good about this bloody form are the thumbs,” he grumbles, his voice deep and feral sounding coming from this werewolf form.

It makes him jump. He hadn’t thought this form could speak anything but Wargish. He decides to never speak in this form again if he can help it, especially if he can’t purge the sickness from his magic to give him back his Warg skin. He may hate his original Warg skin, but he hates this variation even more.

‘Oh, Yavanna, I’ll stop cursing that skin and appreciate that it could have been a lot worse if you but let me return to it,’ he thinks as he dons the harness and carefully puts the weapons in it.

Falling to all fours, he shakes and shifts, bounces and jerks, around and ignoring the pain the arrows cause to make sure they won’t fall out before taking off.

He has Dwarrows to keep out of trouble even if they found him useless.

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“Anything behind us?” Thorin calls out to his Dwarrows as he uses a branch to steer his barrel through the calm waters. “Can you see our Hobbit?”

“Not that I can see,” Balin calls back, worry in his voice as he looks around the shoreline and the cliff side to their left for their brother. “No sign of Bilbo, either.”

“Ye won’t see him if he don’t want ye too,” Nori says, using his hands to steer his own barrel toward the shore.

“At least we’ve outrun the Orcs,” Bofur says after bursting from the bottom of his barrel, spurtng water out of his mouth.

“Not for long. We’ve lost the current,” Thorin says with a grim face.

“Bombur’s half drowned,” Dwalin says as he looks at the quiet ginger Dwarf.
“We’re all half drowned, ye git,” Nori grumbles, paddling faster to land.

“What was that?” Dwalin growls. “What did ye-”

“Make for the shore!” The Dwarf King commands, shooting a glare at his Guard as he follows closely behind Dori and Ori in their own barrels, before keeping an eye on Kíli as the youngling climbs out of his barrel with Nori’s help.

“Aye!” several of the Dwarrows chorus back at him.

“Come on let’s go!”

“Glóin, help me, my brother,” Óin calls out to the other ginger Dwarf as he starts floating away from the group.

Slowly the Dwarrows still within their barrels make their way to land, exhaustion and worry weighing down their every move. Nori climbs further up the rocky shore, looking to the trees for Bilbo, or worse, Orcs.

“He’d have howled by now,” Kíli says to Fíli as they climb further up as well but steps away from the thief.

“No, he knows he’ll give us and himself away if he does,” Nori replies, doing another quick glance before stretching his tired limbs and starting to wring the water out of his hair and beard.

The thief casts his gaze onto the Guardsman as he helps Ori from his barrel.

“Come on, lift yerself!” the Guard growls at the youngling, pulling him up under his arms until that lad is on his feet. “Come on.”

Nori frowns as renewed anger starts bubbling under his skin at how the Dwarf treats his brother. It sharpens when the Guard leaves Ori and he remembers what they had been speaking of before Bilbo had returned to free them.

A sharp groan of pain distracts him from demanding the Guard answer for the state Bilbo had been in. Nori watches as Kíli collapses onto the stone, gripping his leg.

“Kíli!” Fíli calls out in concern, having moved away from his sibling to scout the immediate tree line while staying in sight of the group.

The princeling rushes over as Bofur kneels beside the younger prince, handing him a cloth. Kíli grits his teeth as he dabs at the sluggishly bleeding wound. Nori bites at his nails as he observes it from a distance. He hadn’t gotten a good look at the arrow before the shaft was broken off, but the arrow tip will go a long way in telling the thief what exactly they were looking at.

“The tips still in there,” Óin says, coming to stand beside the lad and procuring the med kit he managed to hide from the Elves.

At least the tweezers are a better alternative than the Dwarf trying to push the tip out like a cyst.

“I’m fine, it’s nothing,” the brat insists, but either Óin doesn’t hear him, or is blatantly ignoring him as he crouches down and bats the lads hand away.

Thorin makes his way through the group heading toward where the thief has made his lookout, his face grim and anxious.
“On your feet,” he demands as he passes by the princelings, the medic, and the miner.

“Kíli is wounded, Uncle. He has to remove the arrow and bind his leg,” Fíli says stubbornly, sending a glare his Uncle’s way.

“There’s an Orc pack on our tail. We have to keep moving.”

“And Uncle Bilbo is still out there with them!” the prince snaps. “If nothing else he will keep them busy enough for Óin to get Kíli back on his feet. He saw what happened. Why do you think he broke cover to shift into that… thing?”

Thorin gazes long and hard at his oldest nephew before turning away.

“Óin, do what needs to be done to get him back on his feet. We need to keep moving.”

“To where?” Balin calls out to his King. “A lake lies between us and the mountain, Thorin. We have no way to cross it.”

“What if we go around it?” Ori pipes in, none of his usual skittishness present in his voice.

“The Orcs will run us down, as sure as daylight,” Dwalin says, as he goes to stand beside his King. “We’ve no weapons to defend ourselves and Bilbo is not here to help us.”

“We could wait-”

“If we wait, the Orcs may find us first,” Balin sighs, running a hand through his white hair. “Bilbo, despite his obvious lack of food and sleep, is a better tracker than any of us. He will find us.”

“Óin, bind his leg, quickly,” Thorin says, stepping toward the forest, eyes intent on the shadows as though to will their Hobbit out from them. “We can only spare ten minutes at most.”

Óin says nothing, just continues working on Kíli’s leg despite his continued protests. The others pace around or sit upon the stone to rest while they wait. The minutes seem to crawl by. It’s making him antsy with each passing second that Bilbo does not appear. To try and take his mind off of their Hobbit and the Orcs, Nori watches as Ori goes to sit by the river further down from the group sometime during their wait, his eyes narrowing as Dwalin sits himself near his brother. Which reminds him…

Dori and Balin grab his arm as he tries to stomp passed.

“Now is not the time, Nori,” Dori says firmly.

“When is the time then, brother?” he hisses. “When we’re bein’ run down again? Captured again? After ye’ve sent my chosen brother down inte a dragon’s lair when we aren’t even sure the thing is dead?”

The others pointedly look away from them and it makes his anger burn.

“He’s supposed to-”

“Nori!”

The draw of a bow catches all of their attention. If Nori weren’t so angry and suddenly afraid he would have been laughing as all of his companions heads turned as one. He relaxes slightly when the archer is a Man and not a pack of Orcs come to kill them. The Man’s bow is armed, but lowered, so the thief feels confident they can speak to him instead of fighting. He fingers the rock he stashed
away in his sleeve just in case. He’s standing behind Ori after all.

Of course, Dwalin has other ideas.

With Thorin’s branch in hand, he stands between the Man and Ori—which Nori would normally grudgingly appreciate if not for the fact the Man had done nothing at all to provoke an attack—and makes to rush the newcomer. The Man doesn’t startle, merely raises his bow and lets loose. The arrow buries itself in the branch’s center, leaving Dwalin to decide whether to break the thing when he swings it or to back down.

Kíli, who would normally follow Fíli’s lead in these kinds of situations, hastily grabs a rock and fumbles onto his feet, arm drawn back to throw it at the Man, but he doesn’t get the chance. Quick as any Elf, the Man has another arrow strung, aimed, and let loose on the rock, knocking it from Kíli’s hand. Nori can image the look of surprise on his face as Fíli grabs his arm to keep him from doing something else stupid.

“Do it again,” then Man says, grim faced and aiming another arrow at Kíli before shifting it to aim at Dwalin again. “and you’re dead.”

Nori starts to worry about how this altercation is going to go. Balin has yet to speak up and Bilbo isn’t here to be the second voice of reason. They can talk as only advisors do and that’s what they need. If Balin will not speak, they need another distraction.

Casting his gaze around he sees the barge docked at the river’s mouth. Nudging Balin, he tilts his head in the barge’s direction. The older Dwarf’s eye widen before looking back at the Man. He opens his mouth to speak when labored, thick growls come from the trees.

All heads turn to see the hulking mass of Bilbo’s new skin emerging from the tree line on all fours.

“Back, beast!” the Man shouts, letting loose the arrow close to Bilbo’s front paws before anyone can think to warn him that the werewolf is one of theirs.

He has another arrow trained on Bilbo in seconds. The Skin-Changer stops his growling, his head hung low and his breaths fast and heavy. It’s obvious to everyone looking at him that he’s close to collapsing.

He snorts.

“I believe your own words can be used here, human,” he says, his voice rumbling and thick like the Wargs his skin imitates. “Though instead of killing you, I’ll just sit on you. I can manage that much at least.”

All of them stare in horrified fascination as he speaks, the Man’s bow lowering in his surprise until the Skin-Changer takes a step forward.

“He snorts.

“I have no quarrel with you, Lakeman,” he says as he rises onto his hind legs. “But if you harm the Dwarrows, I’ll kill you where you stand.”

The Man and the Skin-Changer stare each other down for some minutes before he lowers his bow and glances toward the Dwarrows.
“You know this beast?”

“Aye! He’s our Uncle!” Kíli says, pride coloring his severe tone and only barely masking the pain he’s in if the twitch in Bilbo’s shoulders is anything to go by.

The other younglings agree while the older Dwarrows nod in answer. The Man looks verily confused.

“He’s not a Dwarf.”

“No, I’m not,” Bilbo says, slowly stepping closer to the Man, a massive padded hand held out to him. “My name is Bilbo Baggins; Hobbit of the Shire and a Skin-Changer. These little bastards adopted me in without my say so.”

The Man looks at the clawed hand warily before replacing the arrow in its quiver and grasping one of the fingers, shaking with the Skin-Changer. He steps back once he lets go of the padded finger, thumbing at his bows string for a moment as he observes Bilbo. His eyes linger over the arrows protruding out of Bilbo’s broad back.

“Courtesy of an Orc pack.”

The Company and the Man tense, but Bilbo shakes his head.

“They’re miles off licking their wounds,” he says, lips pulling back from his fanged muzzle in a terrifying grin. “They won’t make it here till sundown at the earliest.”

The Man nods, watching as the Skin-Changer steps away from him and approaches the youngest Dwarrows. The dark and light haired Dwarflings quickly shuffle over to Bilbo, grabbing one huge forearm and tugging down on it. Their Hobbit eventually falls to all fours, grumbling when the arrows shift with the impact before nudging Fíli and Kíli aside. He promptly lays down, his back ridge still towering over them all.

“Those arrows need to come out, lad,” Óin says as he steps near Bilbo’s head.

“Be my guest.”

“I’ll need ye to move, lad. I canna reach yer back without bein’ taller than ye.”

With a rumbling groan, Nori watches Bilbo shove himself forward with his hind legs toward an area where the rocks will put their healer at a higher vantage point like a dog rubbing itself against the ground after being doused in water.

“Get all the itches?” Nori calls out with a chuckle.

“Go sit on a pine cone.”

The thief cackles.

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Bard isn’t sure what to make of the Dwarves. He especially unsure of what to make of the talking beast called Bilbo who claims himself a Skin-Changer. He’s never heard a story of one of their kind being able to speak while in their other skin. He supposes he’ll have to watch him change before he’ll believe them.
He stays a ways off, watching as one of the elder Dwarves uses the terrain to get upon the beasts back and proceed to pull the arrows out of his hide. The beast barely twitches, but rumbles when the Dwarf pours river water into the holes left behind to clean them.

“That’s not sanitary!”

“We canna make a fire to boil it, lad. Ye’ll be fine! It’s running water.”

Once all of the arrows are removed and the wounds cleaned as best as can be managed, the Dwarf demands Bilbo shift back.

“Can’t. I’m stuck.”

All the Dwarves still, eyes wide as they look to the beast at his words.

“Stuck?” the dark haired young Dwarf asks.

“Locked in. Unable. Unchangeable. Do I need to go on, bratling?”

The youngling’s face scrunches up into a pout.

“I meant how are you stuck!”

“Poof! No more magic.”

Now all of the Dwarves look worried.

“I think he needs te sleep,” the one with a mass of ginger hair upon his head says, worrying his lip with his teeth. “He was in a bad way before… well before.”

“I’m fine,” Bilbo grumbles, rising to all fours and shaking his coat out.

The clang and clash of metal draws Bard’s attention to the beast back. Slung across his back like a harness, a cloth… sheath is held. Unease turns his gut and he pulls his bow from his back. The beast turns his head, one red eye peering at him from over a massive shoulder.

“Are those our weapons?!” the nearly bald Dwarf, who had been stalking around the area, demands.

The red eyes shifts onto the Dwarf before Bilbo stands on two feet again.

“They are.”

“Well? Give them to us.”

The Skin-Changer looks at the Dwarf before shaking his head. He turns, facing Bard and approaching him, ignoring the Dwarf’s snarling words and his attempts to shrug off the other Dwarves that are holding onto him.

“That barge belongs to you, correct?”

“Aye…”

“You’re from Lake-town. We would like to know if it would be available for hire.”

Bard holds the Skin-Changer’s gaze for a moment before he shrugs.
“Help me gather these barrels and then we will talk.”

Bilbo nods, nudging the one of the younger, fair haired Dwarves and heading toward the closest barrel. Several of the others aid them and Bard, pulling or carrying them over to his barge.

“I can’t believe you couldn’t have found another way out,” Bard overhears one of the Dwarves say to the beast.

“I suppose I could have found another way had there been one.”

“Says the one who stuffed us into barrels of all things,” the large ginger Dwarf grumbles.

The Skin-Changer doesn’t even bother looking at the Dwarf as all but two of the elders and their younglings make their displeasure known.

“Very well. Why don’t I stuff you back in them, tied up, and send for the Elves to come fetch you. Or, better yet, I’ll sneak you back in and stick you back in your cells where I lock you all in again, and you can sit comfortably while you think up a better plan. I’ll even conveniently forget where I put the keys, which I don’t think I’d be able to get a hold of again, even if I bother to try.”

That silences the Dwarves pretty effectively.

What would have taken him at least two hours is reduced to barely thirty minutes. They leave them on the dock, allowing him to arrange them onto his barge how he likes them.

“Do we have an agreement?” the white haired Dwarf who speaks eloquently asks with a smile on his weathered face.

The Skin-Changer has laid down upon the rocks protecting the dock from easy detection, his red eyes watching.

“What makes you think I would help you?” he asks as he rolls and shoves another barrel onto his barge, ignoring those red eyes for now; he had not promised the Skin-Changer anything but to speak.

“Helping me in gathering these barrels isn’t enough to cover passage into the city, let alone a ferry in.”

“Those boots have seen better days, aye? Yer coat as well.”

He frowns, staring hard at the smiling Dwarf before rolling another arrow scarred barrel on.

“No doubt you have some hungry mouths to feed.”

Bard glances at the Skin-Changer, wondering if he would have anything to say that would be less insulting. He remains silent and watchful.

“How many bairns?”

“A boy and two girls.”

“And yer wife? I imagine she’s a beauty.”

Bard almost wants to laugh at how hard the Dwarf is trying to persuade him with flowery words, almost as much as he wants them to leave him be. But if they have the money…
“Aye, she was.”

The Dwarf smile falls off his face. His eyes wide with understanding.

‘As long as it is not pity,’ he thinks.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to-”

“Oh, come on, come one! Enough with the niceties,” the bald one snaps.

Turning his gaze from the white haired Dwarf, Bard looks to the balding one as he catches his breath.

“What’s your hurry?” though he can guess they are escaped criminals of the Elven court if the scarred barrels are anything to go by.

“What’s it to you?”

“I would like to know who you are,” Bard says, walking off his barge and leaning in close to the white haired Dwarf. “And what you are doing in these lands.”

The Dwarf smiles again.

“We are simple merchants from the Blue Mountains and our Guard,” he says, motioning to the Skin-Changer. “We’re journeying to visit our kin in the Iron Hills.”

Bard can’t help but smirk.

“Simple merchants and a Guard, you say?”

“Aye, we need food and supplies,” the Dwarf with a regal bearing says as he approaches. “Can you help us?”

This Dwarf, along with the younglings, has stayed close to the Skin-Changer, looking at him with suspicion when he stares at the beast for too long. They are protective of their Guard, which is suspicious enough. Returning to his barge, he glances at the Dwarf before deliberately poking at arrow holes in the barrel beside him.

“I know where these barrels came from.”

“What of it?”

“I don’t know what business you had with the Elves, but I don’t think it ended well.”

Glancing at the Skin-Changer, he raises a brow at the beast who seems to be smiling.

“No one enters Lake-town but by leave of the Master,” he continues, bending down to untether his barge. “Especially not a ‘Skin-Changer’ who can’t take on a more… human form.”

The Dwarves shift on their feet at his tone, some of them, he’s guessing, even figuring out where he’s going with this.

“All of his wealth comes from trade with the Woodland Realm. If you’ve stolen something from them, he’ll see you in irons before risking the wrath of King Thranduil.”

He tosses the rope at the elder Dwarf, barely hearing the regal one telling him to offer more and the
elders exasperated grunt. Grabbing his bow and quiver from the dock, he turns, ready to leave them behind when the Dwarf speaks again.

“I’ll wager there are ways to enter Lake-town unseen.”

“Oh aye,” Bard says with a smirk threatening to appear on his face; he’s glad he didn’t turn to face them. “But for that you’d need a smuggler.”

Putting down his weapon, he leans over to untie the last rope and nearly startles when the Dwarf appears beside him.

“For which we would pay double.”

Bard straightens ready to agree to smuggle the Dwarves into the city and argue with them to leave their Guard behind when the beast starts laughing.

“Oh, Balin, you’re being swindled,” he laughs, lips pulled back, baring his fangs in a way that sends chills down his spine. “The Man is starving, and his younglings are getting everything but what he needs to stay strong enough to work, I think. He would have settled for some silvers a piece.”

“What do you know of it?” he snaps.

“I can hear your stomach. I’m very acquainted with feeling your body eat itself to stay alive. Underneath this fur is nothing but skin and bones after all.”

The Skin-Changer slides down from the rock on all fours, the dock groaning under his weight as the beast approaches him and the Dwarf he called Balin. Reaching back, Bilbo grabs the sack of weapons from his back and drops it on the ground before digging within it.

Balin watches the Skin-Changer in curiosity as the others, assuming the beast is about to offer up their weapons, holler and shout that they aren’t for trade.

“Let’s make a new deal. A better one.”

From the bag he pulls forth a medium sized one, a backpack with curious leaf motifs.

“Balin, my… hands are too large for this. Pull out three of everything in there.”

The Dwarf nods and does as asked, the other Dwarves going silent, their faces confused as the first item -a dagger made from a fang- is pulled free. Balin stills.

“Bilbo, what is-”

“I’ll explain another time. For now I’ll tell you what I told Fundin. They are mine to give. Mine to take back.”

Slowly the Dwarf nods his head and continues to pull out two more daggers, three necklaces of teeth, and -with shaking hands- three large, dark pelts. Hesitantly and with tears in his eyes, Balin hands the pelts to Bard. Flipping them over, he can see why. The Skin-Changer’s pattern stands out against the dark fur. He nearly drops them as what he’s holding sinks in.

“These were yours?” he whispers, his voice shaky and rattled.

“From a time best not spoken of now. But I will tell you this. They are imbued with protective
runes and magic. Spelled to never wear or break; to appear as worn and used items to those with greed in their hearts. I offer them as payment on top of the regular toll for thirteen smuggled passengers on a ferry into Lake-town.”

“Why would you offer these?”

“Younglings are treasures to be protected and nurtured. Had you tried to swindle us for your own gain, I would have let the Dwarrows pay your price.”

The Skin-Changer steps back towards the younglings who trailed him to the dock as they gathered the barrels.

“I ask you make sure they come to no harm while in Lake-town until I join you.”

“What? Bilbo, you’re coming with us!” the dark haired youngling demands.

“I don’t exactly blend in, Kili.”

“Then I’ll-”

“Bilbo will join us when he can, Kili,” the regal one tells the youngling. “He will find us, like he always does.”

The Dwarf gives the Skin-Changer some look which Bard assumes he understands for he nods, gathering up the backpack and placing it back in the sack before shrugging the strap onto his shoulder, the weapons and whatever else Bilbo was keeping in there secure on his back.

“How long?”

“We’ll send Nori out when we know.”

The Skin-Changer nods and lopes off into the trees after bumping his snout against the younglings. The Dwarves gather around, one by one boarding his barge as he takes care to store the pelts, necklaces, and daggers somewhere unseen.

“You tell your children to take care of those,” Balin says, the last to board.

“... Aye.”

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From the shadows of the tree line down shore from the dock, Bilbo watches the Man cast off. Humming in satisfaction he lopes through the treeline along the shore. He will need to travel a bit down along the River Running in order to find a safe place to cross before heading back up to Esgaroth. Hopefully he would have enough time to do what he needs to get rid of this magic taint warping his Warg skin. If he can’t….

Gandalf better damn well answer his bird.
Within an hour, Bilbo arrives at the end of the Long Lake and the beginning of the River Running. Tired, thirsty, and -quite literally- starving, he shoves his snout into the river, taking long deep gulps of the cool water with relish. He hadn’t realized how thirsty he was until now. Worrying about Dwarrows and Dwarflings will do that to a Hobbit, he supposes. Wiping the water from his snout - looking at anything else but his Man-like paws- he desperately ignores the tingling in his skin.

“Now’s not the time for you to panic, Bilbo!” he reprimands himself. “Just do what Elrond and Gandalf taught you and everything will be fine.”

He can’t help the snarl that escapes his throat at the sound of his own voice, which does not help the panic he’s barely holding at bay.

*Stop talking aloud, you twit!* He thinks, sharply shaking his body to try and get rid of the tingling.

It doesn’t work.

The laugh that escapes him is only *mildly* hysterical.

*Alright! You can do this! Just get in the water, use the spell, and poof! Taint gone!*”

Taking a few deep breaths to calm himself does nothing either.

Rage infuses his muscles all the way down to his *soul* as he slams his hands against the ground and *roars*. Tearing up rocks from the shore he throws them against the ground, the trees, into the river, snarling and howling his fury at being stuck in a skin not of his choosing for the third time in his life. He wrenches and tears apart anything he can get his claws into before he collapses to the shore, panting and sobbing as only this wretched form can.

He doesn’t know how long he sits there before he can breathe in deeply enough to slow his racing heart and burning lungs. When he manages to calm enough, and the tingling in his skin has dissipated, does he rise up to his feet… paw… things. His stomach twists unpleasantly, reminding him that he needs to eat before he can do anything about his magic. He sighs. Closing his eyes, he listens for anything he can catch quickly.
Of course there’s nothing around, not even squirrels.

“Good job, old boy. Your temper tantrum must have been truly spectacular to chase off squirrels.”

With a huff, he shuffles over to the water’s edge. With any luck, he’ll be able to catch a few fish at least. Wading into the cold water on all fours, he finds -to his surprise- that the water barely hits his chest. Standing on two legs, the water only comes up to his waist, as it were. He huffs again and focuses on what’s going on beneath the ripples, ‘hands’ poised to spear his catch with his claws when they’re close enough.

Ten minutes pass.

Stomach twisting and grumbling under his breath, Bilbo resigns himself to a long wait for lunch.

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Fíli watches the shoreline for their Uncle as the Man steers them through the cove, trying to catch sight of his… Warg-Man skin. He remembers his Uncle muttering to himself several nights about the wretched magic in the earth and worrying about what it would do to his own. Seeing the results, he can understand their Uncle’s fear. This new skin is terrifying, even more so when he speaks. It’s like when he and Kíli were younger and they got lost in the mines, trying to hear their mother calling for them. They only heard sounds in the dark that had given them night terrors for months after Thorin and some miners found them. He fears Bilbo’s voice will haunt his dreams like the sounds had so long ago, but Kíli… He can’t help but think he’s already seen this skin before the Orcs arrived since he had approached their Uncle without hesitation.

“Do you think he’ll be alright?” Kíli asks, his skin paler than it had been hours ago.

Fíli sits down beside his brother who had taken a seat beside Bombur after the Man had set sail, sighing as he tries to get comfortable.

“You know Uncle, he’s tougher than any of us.”

“Yes but…”

“He’ll be fine.”

His brother huffs before shoving himself under his arm, concern growing in his chest as he can feel him trembling.

“He could have come with us.”

“He wouldn’t fit on the boat, Kíli.”

“Then I could have-”

“No, Kíli,” Uncle Thorin says, coming to stand above them. “Master Baggins needs to concentrate on fixing himself before we can continue on to the Iron Hills. Keeping an eye on you would prevent him from doing that.”

Kíli grumbles under his breath before going silent, but Uncle Thorin is right. If Bilbo can’t change back into his Hobbit skin before they reach the mountain, no one would be able to step inside without being detected if the dragon still lives.

“How long until cousin Dain starts to worry,” Fíli asks, understanding why Thorin and Balin wish to
keep their true purpose in these parts secret from the Man.

“Two weeks at least. Enough time I would think,” Balin says as he counts out the coin Bilbo had bargained with the Man. “He’ll let Nori know if he needs more time… If we can spare it.”

Kíli continues grumbling in discontent but says nothing more about their Uncle. Fíli grips him closer when his shivers increase. The chill in the air is usually nothing to Dwarrows, but with his injury…

“Did Óin get the arrow out?” Nori asks as he comes to stand in front of them once Thorin had moved back to speak with Dwalin.

“Yes,” he says, digging into one of his many pockets and handing it over to the thief.

Nori brings it up to his face, inspecting the design as best he can with the fog they’re sailing through, before suddenly taking a deep sniff of it. Before Fíli can question him, he drops it with a curse.

“Nori?”

“Don’t move him,” the Dwarf commands before shuffling quickly over to Óin and having a hushed conversation in the elder Dwarf’s better ear.

“Fili-”

“Watch out!” Bofur cries out as a dark shape comes upon the barge’s starboard side.

The boat is steered from what is revealed to be ruins of some kind before it is again commanded around another with ease. Fíli’s begrudgingly impressed.

“What are you trying to do? Drown us?” Thorin snarls at the Man.

“If I wanted to drown you, I would not do it here,” the Man snips back at his Uncle. “Nor would I wish the wrath of your guard upon my head.”

The Man falls silent as he continues to steer the barge and Fíli can just barely hear Dwalin’s griping from where he stands on the other side of the barge. The princeling casts a worried glance at the Guard. He’s been uncharacteristically short with Bilbo and easier to anger since entering the Elves dungeons.

“Oh, I’ve had enough of this lippy Lake-man. I say we throw him o’er the side an’ be done with it,” he growls.

“His name is Bard,” Ori says, exasperated with all of them, Fíli is sure.

“How do you know?” Bofur asks.

Ori stares at the miner in a way that reminds Fíli of Bilbo staring at the lot of them when they do or say something incredibly stupid.

“I asked him, of course,” the younger Dwarf drawls, not entirely up to Uncle Bilbo’s level of sass, but close enough.

Kíli’s giggles are barely muffled by his fist.

“I don’ care what he calls himself. I don’ like him.”

“You don’t like anyone,” Fíli barely hears Ori growl under his breath, causing the prince to look at
the young scholar.

Ori’s eyes catch his, letting out a small huff before turning away from the group to look out over the lake.

“We don’t have to like him,” Balin says sharply. “We simply have to pay him.”

The older Dwarf goes back to counting the coins he’s laid out on a small chest.

“Come on now, lads, one more coin apiece, and we’ll have what Bilbo’s promised him.”

The Company grumbles before complying. Well, most of them.

“I don’t see why the Hobbit isn’t paying. He made the deal,” Glóin growls, refusing to give any more of his coin.

“Shire money isn’t worth anything in this part of the world,” Kíli snaps at him. “Uncle told us that months ago.”

“Kíli,” Balin says calmly, silencing his brother before turning his gaze to the disgruntled Dwarf. “Glóin, what our brother gave Bard paid for more than half of the fare we would have needed in order to persuade the Man. The least ye can do is help pay the rest.”

“I have been bled dry by this venture!” he starts to rant, oblivious to his brother and the others standing or turning to look at something off the port side.

Fíli twists around to look only to be met with cloth in his face. With a huff, he helps Kíli to his feet. When he sees it, all words leave him.

“An’ what have I seen for my investment? Naught but misery and grief and-” Glón continues, but the princeling has long since drowned him out.

For there she is.

“Erebor,” he breathes.

“Uncle should be here,” Kíli whispers.

“He’ll see it soon enough.”

“Bless my beard. Take it. Take all of it,” Glóin says, awe coloring his voice as he too stares upon their ancient home.

“Only one coin, Glóin,” Balin says with a chuckle as he pulls the required amount out from the Dwarf’s coin pouch.

Nori coughs into his fist deliberately, and Fíli turns to see him shake his head toward the Man. Looking over, the Man is making his way to them, his face tight with something he can’t read. It frustrates him. Bilbo is much more apt at these things.

“The money, quick. Give it to me,” he says, large hand held out demanding it.

“We will pay you when we have our provisions but not before,” Thorin states, his own face tight with anger that Fíli knows well.

“If you value your freedom, you will do as I say,” the Man snaps. “There are guards ahead.”
They all turn when voices can be heard coming through the mists ahead. Balin turns to Thorin for but a moment before gathering the coins and giving them to the Man.

“Now, into the barrels.”

“What?!”

“You cannot be seen!” the Man nearly snarls.

They each look to one another in askance before Nori lets out a disgusted scoff.

“Thought I was done with barrels,” he gripes as he climbs into the nearest one.

As the voices grow louder and the Man’s expression becomes tighter, Fíli decides to trust that Bilbo would not have made a deal with someone he thought would renege on their bargain. Pulling Kíli along, he helps him into a barrel before climbing into the one next to him.

“Bilbo would not have made a deal with him if he thought he’d betray us,” he says aloud, smiling to himself when heavy Dwarrow feet scramble around as they too climb into these death traps.

The Dwarrows chatter among themselves until the Man hisses at them to be silent. The barge bumps and grinds against what Fíli can only guess is a dock before the sound of large feet crosses the deck before they are gone. All he can hear are the voices of Men and contraptions clanging and groaning. Minutes pass. His breathing starts to pick up the longer nothing happens, so when he hears Dwalin’s voice, he nearly leaps out of the barrel in fright.

“What’s he doing?”

“He’s talking to someone,” comes Nori’s voice from nearby. “S’not a guard though, I can tell ye that.”

Another beat of silence.

“He’s pointin’ this way now.”

Fíli’s heart thumps madly in his chest.

“Now they’re shaking hands,” the thief says, soundly unconcerned.

Thorin doesn’t seem to agree with the thief’s nonchalance.

“What?”

“The villain,” Dwalin snarls. “He’s selling us out.”

“You don’t know that!” Kíli snarls right back. “Bilbo wouldn’t.”

His brother is cut off before he can go on a tirade by footsteps and a loud clanking sound.

Heart nearly beating out of his chest, Fíli dearly wishes for one of his daggers or Bilbo to be here. He trusts their Uncle, but even he could be tricked. Only a moment later he wishes for his Uncle in an entirely different way.

“I’m going to muck up his fur coat!” Fíli hisses as pounds upon pounds of fish pour on top of him from above. “My hair is going to smell like fish scales for weeks!”
He can’t hear if any of the other Dwarrow are cursing his Uncle as well over the sound of dead fish slapping together and the clanging of the device filling the barrels up. Some minutes pass before the clanging goes away and the Men’s voices cease as well. Not long after, he feels the boat grind against the dock again before he can tell they’ve left.

“This is revenge. I know it is,” he barely hears Kíli’s grumbles. “I shouldn’t have put those burs in his fur.”

“Kíli, tell me you didn’t,” Fíli groans.

“He wouldn’t let me braid his tail!”

“Your braids are horrible.”

“They are not!”

“Quiet!” the Man snaps, kicking one of the barrels. “We’re approaching the tollgate.”

Moments later a rather cheery voice can be heard through all the fish.

“Halt! Goods inspection! Papers please!”

He feels the boat slow to a wavering stop.

“Oh, it’s you, Bard!”

“Morning, Percy,” their Man replies to the other.

Fíli hates being unable to see what is going on. Unable to know what is happening. Their Man has pulled through so far, but that was before they were actually in the town.

“Anything to declare?”

“Nothing, but that I am cold and tired and ready for home,” their Man says as he walks down the deck but never getting off.

Fíli can imagine the weariness the Man wears like a familiar coat. It reminds him of how his Uncles sound at times.

“You and me both,” the other Man replies just as weary.

A thump sounds before the other Man speaks again, “There we are. All in order.”

“Not so fast!” another voice, this one pitched higher and setting all of the princeling’s instincts on alert.

This Man is no friend of anyone.

“Consignment of empty barrels from the Woodland Realm,” the weasley sounding Man says as though reading from some document, thumping steps coming closer to the barge. “Only… they’re not empty. Are they Bard?”

Their Man says nothing.

“If I recall correctly, you’re licensed as a bargeman. Not a fisherman.”
The barge rocks a bit as the Man steps on deck. He sets Fíli’s teeth on edge. He’s too close to his kin.

“That’s none of your business,” their Man says, his voice as cold as Bilbo’s can be when he’d cowed Thorin back in that cursed forest.

“Wrong,” the Man says, his voice holding a certain amount of glee in it that Fíli grinds his teeth together in order to keep from snarling at him. “It’s the Master’s business, which makes it, unfortunately for you, my business.”

“Come, Alfrid, have a heart! The people need to eat!”

“These fish are illegal,” the Man says, ignoring the plea of their own. “Empty the barrels over the side!”

Fíli sucks in a fish-filled breath, tensing, ready to leap from the barrel and attack.

“Wait!” comes Nori’s voice, unheard over the sound of heavy steps as they thump onto the deck.

“You heard him. Dump them in the canal,” another Man commands.

The head guard.

“Folk in this town are struggling,” their Man -Bard, Fíli, his name’s Bard- pleas with the guards as their thumping footsteps get closer to his and Kíli’s barrels. “Times are hard and the food is scarce. Would you deny them this?”

“That’s not my problem,” the slimy Man says.

Heart pounding, he holds his breath as his barrel is shoved and moved. No, nononono!

“And when the people hear that the Master is dumping fish back into the lake?”

His stomach seizes as his barrel tilts and fish start to fall from the top.

“When the rioting starts?” Bard growls.

More fish are lost and Fíli prays to Mahal the man has as much a silver tongue as Bilbo to pull this off before they are exposed.

“Will it be your problem then?”

He starts to see light beyond the fish.

“Stop!”

His barrel is tilted back, thumping hard onto the deck, but he can’t bring himself to care.

“Ever the people’s champion, aren’t you, Bard? Protector of the common folk?” the weasel sneers. “You have their favor now, but it won’t last!”

The footsteps leave the barge and grow fainter the further away they get.

“Raise the gate!” the Man Bard had greeted amiably calls out.

The grinding of gears and metal reach Fíli’s relieved ears.

“The Master has his eye on you, you’d do well to remember that. We know where you live.”
“It’s a small town, Alfrid,” Bard snarks back. “Everyone knows where everyone lives.”

He hears Nori snort before it’s drowned out by Kili’s quiet shortles.

“Would you please be quiet,” Bard pleads with them.

Fili barely chokes back his own. Bard sounds so similar to Bilbo when he’s dealing with the rest of them. Eventually, they settle down and the barge comes to a stop again. The Man casually greets another before falling silent again. Bard’s boots thump against the deck as the pass his and Kili’s barrels.

Bard heaves in a deep breath before he sighs, “Alright then.”

A barrel crashes to the ground. Nori’s confused yelp barely heard amongst the fish he hears slapping onto the deck. Another barrel thumps and Dori’s barely polite expletives are heard. More shuffling of Bard’s boots but another barrel doesn’t tip.

“Get yer hands off me,” Dwalin growls.

Fili takes that as his cue to surface. Once his head is free of the fish he breathes deep, only to cough as the smell of fish and lake water is even more overpowering. His cheeky brother thumps him on the back as he giggles. Grunts and groans happen all around them as the rest of them appear from beneath the fish. Ori gags, scrambling out of his barrel and leaning over the side of the barge where he heaves and heaves. Poor lad.

Bard strides passed, an intent look on his face as he approaches the other Man.

“You didn’t see them and they were never here,” he says, passing two coins to the Man.

The princeling helps his brother out from his barrel, taking in his worsened complexion with increasing worry. Dwarrow hides are tough and they had bound Kili’s wound in time to prevent massive blood loss. He should not be getting worse.

“You will sit for Óin when we are safe,” he tells him.

“I’m f-”

“You are not! Do not make me tell Uncle when he returns. None of us will like his temper if we ignore this and you get worse.”

Kili swallows thickly before nodding, very well aware of how volatile Bilbo can be when ‘his Dwarflings’ are injured.

As Kili can walk well enough, he follows him to where the rest of the Dwarrow gather along the dock as Bard watches them, urging them to hurry.

“The fish you can have for nothing,” Bard tells the Man before he turns and heads to the front of the pack. “Stay close. I’ll not have you getting lost.”

Ori cuts ahead to the front, following the Man closely before he freezes.

“What is this place?”

“This, Master Ori, is the world of Men,” Thorin says, walking around him with Dwalin following closely behind. “Come on.”
Ori falls back in line behind Óin and before Kíli, wide eyes taking in everything he can while keeping track of the pack.

“Keep your heads down and keep moving,” Bard says as he guides them through what looks like the town market. “Quickly now.”

The market is loud. Filled with the sounds of Men bargaining with each other, moving goods, or just chatting like the few female Men he sees. These people tower over them. It makes him, Dwalin and Nori -if their glares are anything to go by- on edge. The only advantage they have is being smaller than those around them.

“Halt!”

They’ve been found!

Bilbo nearly howls in frustration. Three hours. Three bloody hours and only five fish to show for it. His stomach twists in agony. It’s not enough. He wades out of the river, snarling in frustration but trying to keep as calm as possible so as not to scare anything edible that might have returned. Dropping to all fours he paces for some minutes, trying to decide to try his luck along the edge of the forest or cross over and try the plains between the River Running and Redwater. Looking back into the dark forest, his lips pull back, baring his fangs at the damned place.

The plains it is.

Wading back into the river he swims across, this bloody skin’s powerful front limbs pulling him through the water faster than even his Warg skin can swim. He barely notices the current. Once on the other side, he shuffles onto the beach and shakes vigorously. The arrow wounds twinge, but it’s nowhere near as painful as having his skin carved off.

*Getting morbid, old boy.*

With one last shake, he lopes off the beach and into the tall grass of the plains. The scent of wild boar is on the wind and he means to have his fill. He’ll worry about his Dwarflings and the Dwarrow after he has a full belly and has gotten rid of this vile skin.

They should be able to stay out of trouble for that long at least.
Lake Town Trouble and Moon Magic

Chapter Summary

Where it turns out Dwarrow can't be subtle in any way and magic is a wonderous mystical thing.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long delay. Last month was hard, and this month will be about the same since there's a memorial/family reunion I'll be attending for my grandmother this weekend. Can't seem to catch my breath really. Anyway, thanks to my fans who have been ever so patient with me and leave behind excellent feedback and point out my errors! Love you all!

Also, part of the spell Bilbo uses in the chapter is from a John Milton quote I read in a Marvel fanfic that I thought would fit for a spell chant, the rest is me :P.

Bilbo leisurely cleans the boar blood off of his ghastly hands and claws, licking around his snout equally to try and get it all out of his fur. It's hard to tell if he succeeds with the copper taste thick on his tongue.

Thank Yavanna for dark fur, he thinks, taking one last lick around his nose.

It won't do for him to be attacked by some wild creature or traveling Men just because he can't smell them. Rising to two paws, he casts his gaze around the dusk lit plain, towering over the grass like some demented gopher. He was lucky to catch the boars. They couldn't see above the dimly lit grass until he was already on them. He checks his satchel's security before falling to all fours when nothing can be seen or smelt, he stretches before loping back to the River Running. Full belly or not -and surprised he didn't become sick from gorging himself on boar flesh- he needs to get rid of this skin immediately so he can return to his Dwarflings.

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Of course we get caught, Nori thinks as he looks towards the guard.

"Oi!"

"Come on! Move!" Thorin commands, pulling Ori and Dwalin to where he wants them to move.

"In the name of the Master of Lake Town, I said, halt! Halt I say!"

Though where they were going to escape too, Nori has no idea. Still, he follows the King's lead, confident that if they do get detained, he'll at least be able to break out of a Man prison. They run as best they can in the crowded market, all of them ducking behind a clothier's stall.

"Oi!"
"Get back!" Thorin yells, and Nori growls his displeasure when Óin's back is shoved into his face and Glóin crashes into his back.

"Come here!"

A third guard comes to flank them, and before Nori can get a warning out, his sweet, sweet, little brother grabs a heavy mop and promptly shoves it in the Man's face while Bombur dives behind the Man and causes him to trip backward over the rotund Dwarf. Taking Ori's lead, the other Dwarrow grab whatever they can get their grubby paws on and start knocking the guards on their arses and putting them out. Nori himself took a trick from Bilbo and grabbed the nearest frying pan and clonked a guard over the head.

"Bilbo certainly knows a weapon when he sees one," he cackles as Dwalin and Glóin drag the unconscious guards further behind the stall and out of sight. Looking past the wares, Nori sees dozens of curious Men and Women looking at them.

"So much for stealth," he grumbles, tapping his fingers against the frying pan's handle - he quite likes the deviousness of it after all.

The Men and Women disperse quickly, leaving Nori tense. He passes his eyes over the rest of them before landing on Thorin. Their King, who is barely hidden behind a wooden beam. He's about to hiss at the daft bastard when thumping footsteps reach his ears.

"What's going on here?" comes the voice of the Man who was commanding the guards while they were still trapped in the fish barrels. "Stay where you are. Nobody leaves."

This Man is obviously the Captain. Nori glances over to their Man, seeing him also being barely hidden behind a beam. He nearly drops the pan to rub his face in exasperation. Obviously only Bilbo, he, and maybe Balin know anything about stealth.

Heavy boots stomp against the wooden planks making up the pathways of Lake Town before they stop just near the stall they were all hiding amongst the wares. Nori does his best to sign Iglishmêk one-handed at Thorin to try and get a read on the situation. The bloody arse ignores him. Movement from the corner of his eye draws his gaze away from the bastard only to see Bard stepping into sight of the Captain.

"Braga!" he says with a smile on his face.

"You," the Captain sneers. "What are you up to, Bard?"

Nori can just imagine the guileless face their Man tries to pull when he nearly squeaks out, "Me?"

He's surrounded by amateur actors and stealth-less Oliphants.

"Nothing," Bard says about as convincing as a Dwarfling who got caught stealing candy. "I'm looking for nothing."

Something falls behind him and he nearly leaps out of his skin. Stomping steps get closer to the stall. Turning around carefully, heart pounding in his chest, he sees shards of a broken pot and soil around the head of one of the guards they beat. He looks up into the eyes of the Woman responsible and gives her a jaunty salute. Dark hair held back in a wrap and mischievous brown eyes above twitching lips barely conceal her amusement. Now there's a Woman he wants to know in this smelly town. He's sure she's the one with all the juicy gossip and know how in this town. Bard's good, but obviously, no seasoned smuggler.
"Hey, Braga," Bard calls the Captain's attention onto him again.

The Man walks back over to theirs.

"Your wife would look lovely in this."

Nori can't see what Bard is holding, but he's absolutely sure it's something racy. He grins.

"What do you know of my wife?"

"I know her as well as any man in this town," Bard says casually.

There's a moment and then the stomping boots grow further away, followed by the rest of the Captain's entourage. Bard steps back to his stupid hiding place and watches the guards leave. He sighs before turning to the Woman Nori had been admiring.

"Hilda," he says, nodding at her.

"Bard," she says back with a little smirk.

He shakes his head at her this time before looking at Nori and the rest of the Company.

"Come on now. There'll be another patrol soon."

Bard leads them through back ways and shadowed corners. Nori approves. At least their Man has some sense to try and lose any tail they may have picked up. They are rounding another corner when lighter, but no less loud footsteps approach them quickly.

"Da!" a shorter, gangly, Man-child says as he approaches his voice dropping into a whisper as he continues. "Our house, it's being watched."

Bard turns from his youngling, no doubt trying to come up with some way to get them to his home without further detection. He seems to come up with something for he looks at Thorin with a quirk teasing his lips like Bilbo's when he's about to tell them to do something they won't like but he'll find amusing. By the way Thorin scowls, he recognizes the look too.

"Are barrels involved?" their King asks stiffly.

"No, but you will get wet."

Thorin rubs a hand harshly down his face, "Tell me."

Bilbo gulps down the cool water greedily once he arrives at the river. Being depleted of magic always makes him ridiculously parched and ravenous. Satisfied, he drops his satchel to the shore with a clattering of bouncing metals. Then, he lays down upon his back and stares up at the sky, watching and waiting for the night to eat the last of the sun. He has a bit more of a wait after that. The spell Elrond gave him so long ago is most powerful when the moon is high in the sky.

As his thoughts wander to the Dwarrow, he absentmindedly runs his claws over the various lingering scars from long past, wondering if Dwalin has come to his senses or if his brother truly sees him as nothing more than a burden now. He shakes his head, refusing to allow those thoughts to linger or fester. The incantation takes nothing less than his most vivid and happiest of thoughts in order to work. They are few and far between, and that just makes them all the more precious and beautiful to him. He sighs and continues to let his thoughts drift and recede.
He misses his Dwarflings. He misses Nori and Balin. Dwalin too, but he's not thinking about him right now. He misses Bofur and the rest of the Company. By some confounded twist of fate, he misses Thorin as well, that Kingly bastard. Damn those Dwarrow for worming their way into his wild and beaten heart.

They better be behaving for Bard.

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Bard keeps a weather eye out as the Dwarves slip into the frozen waters of the Long Lake, curtly silencing them when they grow too loud. That they obey without question is puzzling, but he supposes their 'guard' has told them to be so often that they listen without bleating about it. Only when the last one is in the water and following the regal looking one and the white-haired one does Bard motion for Bain to follow him. Leading him back to a few shops, he and his son buy a few things with the money paid by the Dwarves and the Skin-Changer before making their way back home.

"Keep an eye out for the rats, Bain," he whispers to his son as they make their way at a leisurely pace.

Bain nods in understanding as he leads them through the twists and turns of the dock city. Upon arriving home, Bard spies two men in a boat fishing below their front door and has to refrain from laughing at how obvious they are. Every day, more and more of the townsfolk grow more desperate to survive on this heap of wood that they'll even work to keep the Master in charge despite how horrible the man is. In spite of their observation of him and his family, he supposes they are hungry. A show of humanity may barter him more allies when he needs them after all.

Coming up to his door, Bard looks over the rail at the two men and whistles, grabbing an apple from his sack. Once he has their attention, he throws the elder man the apple.

"You can tell the Master I'm done for the day," he says, eyeing the men.

With that, he walks into his home and is greeted with smiles from his daughters. He smiles back at them both.

"Da! Where have you been? You were gone longer than you said!" Tilda cries as she trots over to him, grabbing him around his waist in a tight hug.

He holds her close as Sigrid, his oldest, greets him as well.

"Father! There you are! I was worried!" she says, embracing him tightly.

She's too smart by far. It's obvious she saw the men watching the house and sent Bain out to look for and warn him. He grasps her tightly and kisses her forehead before letting her go and passing her his satchel.

"Here, Sigrid," he says before looking out the window and down to the water to make sure the men have gone.

Not seeing them, he lets out a relieved sigh.

"Bain, get them in but be careful. They'll be a surly lot for how long we've kept them down there."

Bain stomps down the stairs to the bathroom and their own small dock. He hears the boy bang against the bathroom wall and settles in to wait for thirteen Dwarves to invade his home.
As the first Dwarf makes his way up the stairs with a scowl on his face, Sigrid and Tilda look over the rails at them.

"I don' understand why we had te take a dip in the lake," the bald one growls as he crests the stairs.

"We're about as subtle as a brick through glass, ye bastard!" one calls up from the bottom. "Least that's how Bilbo describes you lot."

Bard grins behind a closed fist as the bald one snarls something in a language he's never heard before.

"Da? Why are there Dwarves climbing out of our toilet?" Sigrid asks, her voice slightly accusing. "What have you done now?"

He huffs at her, but can't deny he's done something stupid with wet, smelly Dwarves coming into their home. Maybe the cloak, dagger, and necklace will put him back in her good graces...

"Will they bring us luck?!" Tilda asks him with childish enthusiasm.

"If only," he mumbles as he sifts through a pile of blankets.

Finding as many as he can, he passes them to Tilda as she comes up to him, eager to help. He then looks through his own and Bain's clothes for anything the Dwarves might be able to wear and to keep them warm. Sigrid stands off to the side, looking at him much like their mother did when she didn't approve of his actions but knew voicing her disapproval would do nothing to change it, before turning toward the kitchen. He hadn't even thought about how he was going to feed this scruffy lot. Another market trip, he thinks as he pinches the bridge of his nose. Tilda returns after passing out the blankets and he hands off the clothes to her.

"They may not be the best fit," he says to the Dwarves. "But at least they'll keep you warm."

"Thank you," one of the younglings -the mousy, scribe looking one- says to Tilda as she gives him some clothes.

At least one of them has some manners.

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Fíli sidles up next to his Uncle as the Dwarf looks out one of the open windows. He can't say he appreciates the chilled breeze, but he can understand that they don't smell all that great at the moment.

"A Dwarvish Windlance…" his Uncle whispers, gaze intent on something outside.

"Have you seen a ghost?" the prince asks, leaning around his Uncle to see out the window.

He spots the device atop a tower further into the city. He can't help but gape at the device.

"By Mahal, it is a windlance."

"Aye," Balin says, coming up behind them. "The last we saw such a weapon, a city was on fire."

Thorin looks away from the window, gaze burning with pain and anger as Balin continues to speak of that day.

"It was the day the dragon came. Have I told you the tale, lad? The day Dale was razed by Smaug?"
"Aye, Girion, who was the Lord, had rallied his archers to fire upon the beast,"

Balin nods, "But a dragon's hide is tough. Not even our strongest armor can compare. Only a Black Arrow fired from a windlance could have pierced the dragon's hide... We made so few of them..."

"Girion had only a few left when he made his last stand," Fíli finishes, knowing how the rest of the tale goes.

"Had the aim of Men been true that day, Fíli, we would not be wasting away in Ered Luin like *commoners*."

Fíli looks over at his Uncle sharply, brows furrowed. Thorin had never spoken of Ered Luin in such a disparaging manner before. Sure they were living humbly and at times things were hard, but it wasn't a bad life in Ered Luin he had thought.

"You speak as if you were there," Bard says as he steps over to them.

"All Dwarrow know the tale," Thorin says stiffly.

Bard looks at them with shrewd eyes as his son comes up from behind him.

"Then you'll know that Girion hit the dragon and loosened a scale under it's left wing. He would have killed it if he'd been able to get in one more shot," the child says with conviction.

Dwalin chuckles darkly, "That's a fairy story, lad. Nothin' more."

Thorin pushes him aside as he strides over to their Man.

"You took our money," he says roughly. "Where are we to get supplies?"

Bard gives Thorin a long look before he replies, "It will take several trips into the market to keep the Master from suspecting your whereabouts. If you give me a list, my children and I will do our best to have it all before you depart again."

Fíli shifts on his feet, suddenly nervous and wishing Bilbo was here as a dark look spreads over Uncle's face.

"I'll get started on that list, lad," Balin says to Thorin pointedly. "Master Bard, would you be so kind as to what the date is?"

"September Twentieth, Master Dwarf."

"Thank ye."

With a nod, Bard walks off, disappearing into the back of the upper floor where Fíli thinks the bedrooms are. Thorin pulls him close and motions for Kíli -who had been leaning against the wall nearby- closer.

"The last days of autumn begin in two weeks," Thorin says, calloused fingers worrying his ring.

"Durin's Day is the morn after next," Balin says. "We have some time, Thorin."

"Aye, but our Burglar is stuck as a beast larger than any Man or Orc, Balin. If he's not fixed himself before then, what are we to do?" his Uncle growls at his steward.

"Do you not trust what Bilbo said?"
Thorin jerks back as if Balin had slapped him. Whatever haze Fíli had seen falling over his Uncle's eyes clearing away.

"If he hasn't been able to change back into his Hobbit skin, we can just find and open the door and wait for him to be able to, right?" Kíli asks, eyes wide and pleading at their Uncle.

Fíli watches as Thorin crumbles under his brother's 'puppy eyes' as Bilbo calls them. The Hobbit is annoyingly immune to them, much to the princeling's ire. They'd have gotten away with so many more tricks if he hadn't been.

"Aye, that can be done if our Hobbit isn't ready."

Fíli catches the smirk that stretches Balin's face before it flattens out again.

"Then that's settled. I'll send Nori out once night falls and have him leave a message Bilbo can find," Balin says as he turns away and walks over to Dwalin.

The golden prince feels mildly sorry for the Guardsman. Both Balin and Nori have set their sights on him after all.

Once he has settled all the Dwarves into makeshift cots, Bard gathers his children into his room and pulls out the gifts the Skin-Changer has left them. He's hesitant to give Tilda a dagger, but with others watching the house and the Master's growing obsession with his comings and goings, it will be safer for her to have it than not.

"Father, why would you buy these?" Sigrid asks harshly even as her fingers sink into the thick fur of the cloak. "I don't care how much the Dwarves paid you, the coin could have gone elsewhere!"

"They were given to me as part of the payment," he says to her, handing Bain and Tilda theirs. "The Dwarves have a member who has some... business to take care of before he joins them here."

"There's barely any room for another Dwarf!"

"He is not a Dwarf. He's a... Hobbit? He calls himself a Hobbit Skin-Changer, whatever that is. I don't know how big Hobbits are, but he's surely no bigger than Bain."

He hopes.

"He'll sleep with Bain if he is," she says, ignoring Bain's protests.

Night has finally fallen when Bilbo wakes from his dozing to a rumbling stomach and itching gums. Damn it all, he needs to eat again. Growling and grumbling at this horrible skin's food requirements, he rolls onto all fours and shakes the sandy dirt from his fur, contemplating what exactly he could hunt this late. Grabbing his satchel, he decides to leave it hidden amongst the stones nearby while he returns to the plain to try his luck. Hopefully there will be some night predators he can hunt if nothing else.

Once Bilbo's satchel is secured, he sprints away from the river, keeping an eye on the moon's position as forested land changes into flat plains again. He slows once he's well into the tall grass, nose held high as he scents for dinner. It takes some minutes before the smell of 'cat' hits his nose. Turning in that direction, he stalks through the grass on quiet paw pads, large ears twitching on his
head to try and locate the beast. The soft sound of fur brushing bark meets his ears from a small copse of trees. There it is. Slinking closer to the trees, he hardly breathes as he strains to hear which tree the feline is in. The beast must be one of the large cats said to roam the plains at night.

There. The one on the left.

Bilbo ducks further into the long grass, hoping the night and moon will disguise him long enough to get in close and scale the tree before the cat fled. Golden eyes soak in the light as he looks through the leaves above him as he tries to locate the feline. Gold and black fur glints with moonlight on a low hanging branch.

Low enough to reach from the ground.

An easy meal.

Fíli tucks his brother beneath as many blankets as can be spared without depriving any of the occupants in Bard's home, ignoring the brat's complaints. Kíli has grown paler as day falls into night, but he's still able to move freely despite his limp. Fíli has hope that the arrow wound is not as severe as Kíli's pallor might suggest.

"Óin, come clean Kíli's wound again," the golden-haired prince.

"What was that, lad?" the older Dwarf asks loudly, pulling his trumpet up to his ear despite it being his good ear that faces Fíli.

"Please?"

"Aye, it needs to be cleaned again in any case."

Ambling over and pulling away only the blankets covering his brother's injured leg, Óin carefully peels away the cloth they had to use as a bandage back in the forest. He sends Fíli around Bard's home, having him bring the Dwarf hot water and sterile cloths to clean the wound. Kíli hisses and moans at them as Óin cleans the puncture, a deep frown on the older Dwarf's face.

"Grab me what bandages the Man can spare, Fíli. I reckon we'll need as many as we can get before we leave."

"Aye."

After Óin has bandaged his brother back up, he shuffles away over to Balin, the frown never leaving his face as he pulls the eldest Dwarf aside. They are too far for Fíli to hear what Óin says to Balin, but by the way Balin's face falls, he can guess the news isn't good. Dread fills him as he looks back at his brother's pale face, and Fíli can only hope Bilbo returns soon.

Kíli's health may depend on him.

With a full belly and the moon almost to where it needs to be, Bilbo returns to the River Running to wait out the last half hour needed before he can be rid of this skin. He's going to drink his weight in ale when he reaches Lake Town to celebrate, sod everything else. Gulping down some water he then retrieves his satchel and sits on the bank, dumping it out and rifling through it for something to do in the meantime.
He grumbles when his hand paws are too large to safely retrieve anything out of his personal pack - he did so want to continue reading that book he'd lifted from Elrond's library and settles on a whetstone and some of Fili's daggers. It's still unwieldy, but manageable. Some time passes with little thought as he does the repetitive motion, and he nearly loses track of time. His tingling skin is the only warning he gets when the moon is in position.

Putting aside Fili's weapons, he rises and wades into the river, head held high and gaze locked on the moon as he holds his paw-hands up to his chest and presses them over his heart. With a heavy sigh, Bilbo begins the chant Elrond gave him decades ago.

"I imi nië lóna, kalya, i imi láta, orta tulcoyë. I imi nië vaxë, sovalna, i imi vanwa, entulessë Turyanwayë," he chants, feeling his magic rise up from beneath the roiling tar he's felt ever since the Misty Mountains.

The tar thrashes against his magic, sending agony through his muscles and bones and nearly taking the breath from him to keep him from continuing the ritual. It was not going to leave without a war waged within him.

"I imi nië lóna, kalya, i imi láta, orta tulcoyë. I imi nië vaxë, sovalna, i imi vanwa, entulessë Turyanwayë."

He forces the words out from the tightness in his throat as the tar-like magic tries to strangle his voice. Only the thought of the three Dwarflings waiting for him in Lake Town and his claws digging into his chest rip the words from beyond its hold.

"I imi nië lóna, kalya, i imi láta, orta tulcoyë. I imi nië vaxë, sovalna, i imi vanwa, entulessë Turyanwayë."

It feels like his soul is being ripped from him as the tar throws everything it has against him, against the magic of the land and the river he is using to purge this stain on him. The vague sound of water thrashing around him and the silt beneath his feet trembling barely registers in his ears before he chokes out the last of the spell.

"I imi nië lóna, kalya!"

He doubles over as his bolstered magic surges through him, up his throat and out of his mouth. He retches. Bleary-eyed, he sees a thick black substance escape his mouth to land with a plop into the river before green and blue colored magic rip it to shreds and it vanishes. With trembling Hobbit hands he wipes his mouth with the clear water and shakily wades back to shore. Bilbo collapses in a heap of wet clothes and shaking Hobbit as he breathes heavily.

It had not been this excruciatingly painful the last time he'd had to do this spell. It felt as if his very soul had been clawed and cleansed with fire instead of soothing water. Something like this, he muses hazily as he slowly gets his breathing under control, will have surely left its mark. Uneasy at the thought, he digs his hands and toes into the bank, sending a little pulse of magic out against the leylines. He can't afford any more than that. He sighs in relief as he feels the soothing brush of clean earth magic against his own. It still accepts him and he nearly sobs in joy as magic flows up from the earth into his hands and feet and mingles with his own.

Bilbo lays on the shore for hours, soaking in the light of the moon and the magic freely given as he rests.

"I'll return to them in the morning," he says aloud as he drifts into sleep.
Only the wind hears the content sigh passing from Hobbit lips as the Skin-Changer relaxes for the first time in months.

Only the moon bears witness to the Hobbit's skin shimmering like moonlight itself.

Only the earth feels the shift in one Hobbit's magic.
Runes and Sickness

Chapter Summary

When things change, it's difficult to adapt for many races. When you're comrades change, well... it's something Hobbit Skin-Changers, and Spy Masters expect.

Unfortunately for Dwarrow princes, it's not something they ever had to contemplate until now.

Chapter Notes

So I got the job! I started on Sept 20th, and it has helped reduce my stress now that I have a steady income. As such, I've been able to write and finish this chapter! I'm currently working on the next chapter in What Is Lost and it's coming along nicely with my brain finally cooperating with me.

All that, enjoy the latest shenanigans of our Hobbit Skin-Changer and the Darrow!

Bilbo wakes to the sun warming his skin to the point of discomfort and a fox snout hovering over him as a warm, slimy tongue bathes his face with spit.

“Gah!” he startles, rolling away and scrambling to his feet as he wipes his face with his shirt. The fox only tilts its head at him as Bilbo scowls back at it. With a grimace, he gives up on getting the smell or lingering sensation of wet tongue off without water.

“Well shoo, there’s no food for you nor am I amused with your antics.”

The fox makes a little whining sound as it darts forward, licks his hand, then bounds away into the forest. Bilbo scrunches his nose in distaste, rubbing his slobber coated hand on his pants before looking around. He heaves a frustrated sigh when he sees the state of his bag. The plucky creature had apparently been searching for nibbles. Looking down at his hand, he ambles over to the river, washing off all the fox spit before returning to his bag and putting it back together. Straightening up into a long, well deserved, arms above his head, stretch, he startles when a rush of cold air caresses his face and the sliver of skin peeking out from under his shirts. A harsh shiver rakes up his spine. He drops his arms down and rubs his hands together, breath catching in his throat when his brain finally catches up to his body’s distress.

He’s freezing.

His entire body trembles, even his weather-worn feet. It reminds him of-

“Don’t, Bilbo! Don’t go there,” he chides himself, diving back into his pack and pulling out the thickest shirt he could find.

He dares not retrieve… well, one of those. Not for his personal use. Shrugging off his jacket, he puts
the thicker shirt over the others and puts his tattered coat back on. Nothing he can do to thicken up in
the trouser area, unfortunately. Though it's his abrupt reactions to the cold that is more worrying than
his lack of warm clothes. Ever since… that time, the fluctuations in temperature never adversely
affected him unless they were severe. Not even their trek through the Misty Mountains left him
feeling quite so frozen and shaking.

He needs to get to Lake-town immediately.

With chattering teeth, he calculates how long it will take him to arrive at the town if he remains in his
natural skin. Rubbing his arms, he’s doesn't like his estimate. A day and a half with his body reacting
like it is doesn’t bode well. Another night in this cold weather has a high chance of his body’s ills
becoming worse and leaving him defenseless. Or worse…

Bilbo reaches for his magic, praying to Yavanna he has enough to shift into his Warg skin at least.
He can always absorb more earth magic during rests as long as he runs beside the river. His shaking
legs almost send him to the ground as relief rushes through his blood when the feeling of nearly full
stores rushes through him. With trembling hands, he gathers up his satchel and stuffs it into the
weapon's sling, donning it before he shifts. There’s only some relief as bare skin changes into thick
fur. He’s still trembling, and it becomes worse as a series of violent sneezes erupt from his snout.

‘Oh, bother,’ he thinks as he takes off towards Lake-town. ‘Now is not the time to become sick, old
boy.’

Sticking close to the river, he hopes nothing and no one interrupts his pace. As it is, he won’t arrive
until past nightfall, and he pleads with whichever Valar is listening that his Dwarrows scent still
lingers. Otherwise, he’s going to end up staying out in the cold longer than he needs to in his current
condition.

Nori had better left that note.

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Nori paces around the small space. Well, pacing is what he wants to do. What he is doing is more
akin to playing ‘Don’t Wake the Wolf’ as he once had when Ori was a wee lad. Having to step over
or around one's comrades put a real damper on pacing. Bilbo would have gotten a kick out of
watching him…

The lad hasn’t returned. Hence his need to pace.

After giving Dwalin the what for, Nori had left to sneak around town to cool his head. Dwalin’s shift
in attitude toward Bilbo had sat like a stone in his gut for too long. Just remembering the
‘conversation’ makes his temper spike. The Guardsman couldn’t give him a decent reason for it
either. Only that he’d lost his temper when Bilbo showed his face again and his frustration with the
Hobbit just never left. He even had the gall to say it was none of Nori’s business as Bilbo wasn’t a
Ri.

Nori had decked him on principle because Bilbo certainly wasn’t going to. Short of Dwalin keeping
him from doing as he will, their Hobbit was inclined to listen to Dwalin in most things. The Hobbit
would, however, take everything Dwalin said to heart. His entreaties to Dwalin back in the Elves
cellar was proof enough for him.

His stomach still twists at that memory.

On the bright side, he found the best places to gather information and convenient places to hide the
Company should they need it while he was ‘perusing’. It was a bonus that took up most of their first
night at Bard’s. Before returning to the Man’s home with a clearer head, Nori left a message for their
wayward Hobbit pinned to a tree close to the main wharf of Lake-town. He’d even made sure to
smother it in his scent to catch the sly burglar’s notice. On the way back, he made sure to do the
same to the route he took back, keeping to the back alleys and shadowed alcoves to make it easier on
the lad.

A devious grin tugs at his lips as he remembers how he left his scent behind. Dwalin -who Nori had
noticed keeping an eye on him- frowns at him. The Spy sneers and gives the Guardsman a ‘pleasant’
Iglishmek sign. The blighter wasn’t out of hot water yet, not by a long shot. He’ll be finding
something beautifully pointy in his beard in the morning.

Deciding to ignore the more muscular Dwarf, Nori looks out the nearest window, worry crawling
back up his spine as the sun sets for the fourth time since their arrival to this dreary place. The fourth
sunset since they split ways with his little Shadow Thief.

He startles when his hand is slapped away from his face. He hadn’t realized he had been biting his
nails. A stubborn tell he could never get rid of.

“Stop that,” Dori scolds him. “What will Bilbo say about the state of your fingers if you end up
gnawing them off?”

“e’ld laugh ‘is arse off before slappin’ one a ‘is runes on me,” Nori snorts. “e’s not got te say
anythin’, and whatever the rune does will be words enough.”

“Then ‘stop yer mother hennin’ as you’d put it,” his brother says in such a bad imitation of Nori’s
bad manners that the Spy can’t help the laugh that bubbles out of him. “Though I hate to admit it, the
lad is Dwalin’s age even if he doesn’t look it. He can take care of himself.”

Dori pats his shoulder before walking over to Ori. Despite Dori’s confidence, he doesn’t know Bilbo
as well as he does. He and the Hobbit are almost cut from the same cloth.

Bilbo will take care of those he calls his own before himself.

The weeks spent in those dungeons made that clear.

Fíli watches Nori and Dori’s interaction from the alcove Óin settled Kíli into after forcing foul
smelling medicine down his protesting brother’s throat. He saw Nori’s face deepen with worry even
after his brother tried to encourage him. The prince assumes the Spy’s ill mood is due to Bilbo’s
continued absence.

Fíli feels the same.

The thick fur hides it well, but when he and Kíli had lain atop their Uncle and aided Óin in removing
the arrows from Bilbo’s hide, he was nothing but skin and bones. He’d even admitted it to Bard. It
seems despite having run of the Elven King’s palace, getting enough to eat had not been part of
Bilbo’s plans. Fíli also thinks Dwalin’s callus mood had more to do with it than he had first
considered. Glancing at Nori again, he believes the Spy had the right of it. Most of them had heard
the verbal fisticuffs between them that first night. All but those close to the Hobbit and Thorin had
hung their heads or cast guilty looks out the nearest windows before Nori had stormed out despite
Bard’s demands.

Thorin’s actions the past few days have also confused him. His Uncle has been nothing but unkind
to their Hobbit Uncle, but ever since their escape from the dungeons, he’s defended Bilbo’s actions and remained silent on the matter of their Hobbit’s absence since then. The strange behavior is worrying, especially when his Uncle is already acting oddly ever since setting his sight on Erebor.

‘Be careful, Fíli. Ever since that blasted wizard put this quest into his head, he’s almost become obsessed with this venture,’ his Amad’s voice echoes from his memory.

He remembers telling her that Thorin was just excited and determined to see their people back in their ancestral home. Thinking back on that moment, he also recalls his Amad grimacing before her entire body shifts; anticipating something unpleasant. It was a look Bilbo gives them when they tell stories of their people’s heroes or when the older Dwarrow squabble over coins during bets or food.

The same look that would come over their Hobbit’s face when any of them moved too quickly around him; his eyes ever staring at their hands…

‘When ye get near the mountain, ye keep an eye on Thorin. If he starts… not being himself, ye promise me ye’ll run.’

He’d almost plead with her not to say such things, but she had silenced him with a hand on his shoulder.

‘Ye run with yer brother to someone ye know will keep ye safe. Ye’ve not seen what that gold can to a Dwarf. I don’t want to believe it any more than ye, but I’m yer Amad. My priority will always be my two pebbles, even when they’re too stubborn to listen to me and not follow Thorin on this quest,’ she’s said before she held both of his shoulders and gripped them between her strong fingers. ‘Promise me!’

In the face of his mother’s fear -because it was fear- he’s promised her he’d take Kíli and leave Thorin’s side if he noticed Thorin behaving oddly.

But did this count?

His Uncle hasn’t done anything odd besides defending their Hobbit after months of belittling him or ignoring him is he wasn’t antagonizing their Hobbit Uncle.

“Fíli?” his brother’s tired voice pulls him from his musings.

Looking over at his bedridden sibling, all thought of Thorin’s odd behavior fades away. Kíli will always be his first concern.

“Aye?”

“Has Uncle returned yet?”

“... No.”

“Do you think…”

“Nah, you know how Uncle gets. I wager he’s out hunting and filling that endless stomach of his. You felt how skinny he was when we were helping Óin with him,” Fíli says with as much of a smile as he can get his lips to form. “He’ll be along soon.”

His brother remains silent for so long, he startles when he speaks, having thought he fell asleep.

“I don’t like how Uncle Thorin and Dwalin are acting.”
Fíli hums in question, not willing to speak with his tongue suddenly vying to wag when it shouldn’t. He’d been asleep for Nori’s and Dwalin’s ‘conversation’, and there’s a reason Amad had only told him to keep an eye on Thorin.

“The forest… I think it did something to them just like it infected Uncle Bilbo’s magic. Dwalin’s pushing him away and Thorin is suddenly trying to pull him to his side,” Kíli nearly whispers, making Fíli lean toward him to hear him better. “Ever since we got close to Erebor… Fíli, something is going to happen… Something terrible.”

Seeing his feverish brother becoming agitated with his own words and thoughts, Fíli thinks it’s best he keeps resting.

“Kíli, calm down. You don’t need to make yerself sicker before Bilbo gets back. It will throw him into a right snit, and no one wants that.”

“But Fíli-”

“We’ll talk about this when you’re better, Kí.”

Fever hazed eyes stare at him for a moment before his brother nods, slipping further beneath the covers without another word said. It’s wrong on so many levels, but Fíli needs him to get better.

“I’ll keep watch,” he says, leaning down and kissing his brother’s brow like Amad would when they were sick as Dwarflings.

Sitting back down onto the stool Bard provided him, Fíli rubs a hand down his face as muscle deep weariness engulfs him. If even Kíli who is nearly blind to Uncle’s faults before this journey can see something is happening to the Dwarf, Fíli may have to keep his promise to his mother sooner rather than later.

He would rather consult Bilbo first. The Hobbit wasn’t in the habit of trying to ignore Thorin’s faults and was too observant to not notice something amiss with their King.

Now if only he’d return…

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The sun was well set, and all of the Dwarrow had hunkered down for the night when Nori hears the unmistakable sound of claws scratching against the window frame he had taken to sleeping under.

He waits.

The scratching comes again, more insistent and a dash irritable, and he grins. As quietly as he can, he pushes himself off the floor and slowly pulls back the curtain. Can’t be too careful after all.

Golden eyes reflecting the moonlight glare up at him from just beneath the frame.

“Yer late,” he whispers.

Their Hobbit bares his fangs at him, stepping away from the window as Nori swings it open as quietly as possible, slipping out and shutting it despite Bilbo’s quiet protests when he pushes him aside.

“We need te talk,” Nori says, crossing his arms to keep them warm. In no way was he acting like a parent catching their Dwarfling out after curfew.
Just no. You can’t prove it.

“Can it not wait until we’re inside where it’s a might warmer than out here?” Bilbo snips at him.

The Thief is about to say ‘no’ when he sees the near-violent trembling of his Shadow Thief’s hands. Looking closer at his chosen brother, he sees the uncharacteristic number of layers he’s wearing as well as the almost purple tinge of his lips and ears.

“Mahal! Quick! Get inside!” Nori commands, opening the window, ignorant of the noise it makes and hurries the Hobbit over, boosting him up and over the window frame.

“That’s what I was trying to do!”

“Quiet!”

The soft snarl answering him tell him enough about Bilbo’s state that he hurries to get something warm on and in the Hobbit. Carefully hopping over the sleeping Company, he makes his way to the low burning hearth to check the pot for any leftovers.

“Tea will be fine, Nori. I don’t think I can keep anything as solid as soup down right now,” comes the Hobbit’s quiet request form his left.

“Ye need some meat on yer bones,” the Thief mumbles, switching out the half-full pot of soup with one filled with water.

“Unless you want to be cleaning up quite the mess, just tea will do.”

“Are you unwell, Master Baggins?” Thorin’s voice from behind them startles them.

Nori almost upends the water pot. Both the Thief and the Hobbit look to Thorin and wonder. Well, Nori wonders; Bilbo looks down with a frown on his face before it morphs into one of perplexed understanding.

“I suppose you would be decently quiet without those stompers you call boots if those tiny things are your feet,” he muses, head cocked to the left as he observes their King’s feet.

Nori is the only one to witness the red dusting Thorin’s cheeks and nose. Noticing the Thief’s grin, Thorin averts his eyes from the Thief and focuses on the Hobbit.

“The size of my feet aside, you didn’t answer my question, Master Baggins.”

Bilbo looks up at Thorin, sharp eyes study the King with an intensity even Nori is uncomfortable with. Just as Thorin starts shifting on his feet with growing discomfort, does the Hobbit speak.

“I’ll be fine after some rest,” Bilbo says shortly.

“Kíli is already unwell, Master Baggins. You should-”

“How unwell is he?” Bilbo snaps, standing quickly from the bench only to nearly collapse to the floor had Nori not grabbed him under his arms.

“Easy, Bilbo!” Nori hisses.

“You didn’t tell me Kíli was sick!” the Hobbit growls, shaking him off after the Thief put him back on the bench.
“’Cuz yer about te fall over ye starved, scabies ridden, ankle biter!”

Bilbo and Thorin both look gobsmacked at his words, and though Nori would enjoy Bilbo just dropping the Kíli situation until the morning, it is not to be.

“I don’t have scabies, you disease infested lout!” Bilbo snarls, causing some of the sleeping Dwarf to groan out from within their slumber. “Stop trying to distract me. Just take me to Kíli!”

The three of them stiffen and wait until all noise ceases before Thorin speaks.

“He’s sleeping, Master Baggins, as should you be,” Thorin tells the Hobbit, his voice gruff with frustration.

“I’m fi-”

“You nearly collapsed!” the King hisses, eyes shifting around the sleeping Company. “Kíli’s condition will hold till morning. Yours will not.”

“But I can-”

“You’ll be no help to Kíli if you can hardly stand to even look at him.”

Nori grows concerned when the Hobbit’s jaw clicks shut and green eyes look away from them.

“Peace, Bilbo,” Thorin says after a few moments. “I only mean that Kíli would become distressed if you were to collapse in front of him. Then he and Fíli would both blame me for your stubbornness.”

Bilbo snorts, lips quirked up as his humor returns. Nori doesn’t trust it. Their Hobbit is a deft hand at misdirection and -when he deems it necessary- pulling the strings of one’s emotions and actions.

“Saving your hide I see. Very well, I’ll see him in the morning. But, tea first, Nori,” the Hobbit concedes, grabbing one of the blankets left on the table for the Company by Bard, and wrapping it around his entire body three times.

Thorin looks to join him on the bench, but their Hobbit glares at the King.

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten you pawing at me before I stuffed you into a barrel, Thorin Oakenshield,” he growls, golden eyes flickering in the firelight as they stare the Dwarf down. “Off to bed with you. If I’ve got to sleep, so do pompous Kings.”

“Cheeky. I should have your tongue,” Thorin chuckles as he leaves them by the hearth.

“You could try and lose what little beard you have left,” Bilbo retorts.

Nori would say they were flirting -and maybe Thorin was in his awkward way-, but the focus and intense scrutiny the Hobbit looks at Thorin’s back with reveals something else going on in his Shadow Thief’s head.

Thorin’s soft chuckles echo in the small home as he returns to where he had been sleeping.

Nori was about to comment on Bilbo’s and Thorin’s sudden ‘rapport’ when he notices the look on the Skin-Changer’s face. Golden eyes narrowed, teeth bared, and that focused look evolves into something dark and blood hungry. Bilbo looks as if he’s going to follow Thorin and tear him into gory pieces.

“Bilbo?”
Golden eyes slowly shift to look at him, and it sends chills down his spine and his heart racing as they fade into summer green. It had been hard to tell, but looking directly into his eyes without the wildness shining out, is more terrifying than if Bilbo had shifted into that Man-Warg skin.

“You keep an eye on him, Nori,” he says, voice layered with a growl that puts his hairs on end. “That was not Thorin. Not the one who left Bag End.”

“What do ye mean?” the Thief asks, voice wavering as their Hobbit doesn’t even blink as he stares.

Bilbo shifts to face him fully, “We strive not to repeat the mistakes of our forefathers. Some more than others. It is a noble path, but in doing so, we can become blind. Sometimes we don’t realize we’re becoming the very person we try not to be.”

“Bilbo, speak plainly,” Nori demands as he fills a cup with hot water and the tea Dori had used earlier, occupying his hands and a reason to avert his eyes from their Hobbit.

“Gold sickness runs in the Durin line, yes?” is all he says as he takes the cup from Nori and leisurely swirls the leaves around.

Nori doesn’t understand how Bilbo can be so calm when insinuating something that could be catastrophic to all Dwarrows should Thorin fall to madness. He nearly collapses onto the bench beside the Hobbit who sips on his drink. Rubbing his face, he stares into the embers in the hearth.

“Ye sound sure…”

“You know very well why Nori.”

Dread fills him. The Dwarrow as a race could not afford another gold mad Dwarf on the throne. Reading of the slow decline his people had gone through over the centuries from the few ancient tomes he’s bothered to read, they all lead back to some form of gold sickness. Most of their wars started because of it or for it.

It’s why there are so few of them left.

“And Dwalin?”

“Something else is at play. Something else beyond gold sickness,” Bilbo says, putting his cup down on the table and sliding off the bench. “But that’s a discussion for another time. Just keep an eye on your King.”

“An’ jus’ how am I supposed te tell?”

Green eyes look at him like he’s an idiot, showing some emotion for the first time since Thorin left them alone.

“You’re the Spy Master aren’t you? Or have I been giving you too much credit?”

Bilbo says nothing more as he slips into his Kit skin, disappearing into the shadows beyond the fire’s light. Nori can’t see where he’s wandered off. A moment later, he chuckles weakly when he realizes where the Hobbit would have gone.

He never said where he was going to sleep.

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Bilbo follows Fíli and Kíli’s scents -and he’s going to have words with Nori about how the blighter
decided to leave him a scent trail- to a blocked off area near one of the few windows in Bard’s home. His ears flatten against his skull when he hears Kíli’s panting breaths even in sleep. The lad is running a fever. A harsh one. His brow is covered in sweat, and he’s restless in slumber. Fíli must be exhausted if he hasn’t awakened from Kíli’s shifting.

Hopping up onto the bed, he carefully stalks up to Kíli’s face, pressing his nose to the lad’s forehead and winces at the heat. Next, he sniffs his way down to the arrow wound he has a vague memory of -his time as the Man-Warg became hazy after he purged himself in the river. Finding the bandaged wound, he sniffs deeply, sneezing at the scent of infection as something prods at his tired mind.

He knows this scent, he can’t place it with how tired and cold he is. Despite his roiling stomach, he decides to wait until after he’s had some rest like Nori and the Majestic Sod had demanded of him before he did anything.

Well, there is one thing he could do before he slept…

Hopping down from the bed, he shifts into his Hobbit skin, placing a hand on Kíli’s forehead and another against his own throat. Slowly, he traces a rune against Kíli’s skin, doing the same against his own as he concentrates on his magic. Only when the runes hum beneath his hands does he step back, exhaustion seeping deeper into his bones as he shifts back into his Kit skin. Crawling onto the bed, he makes his way to the curve between Kíli’s shoulder and neck. Curling in close, he presses his nose into the lad’s neck, the rune starting to work on them both.

The next few days were going to be unpleasant.

Even more so when the Dwarrow realize what he’s done.

‘Bothersome Dwarrow,’ he thinks as he drifts off.

Fíli awakens to a hand insistently shoving his head and his brother imploring Bilbo to wake up because ‘this isn’t funny, Uncle!’.

“Kíli?”

“Fíli! Help me move him. He’s not responding to me,” Kíli pleads, gently prodding the ball of fur shoved against his brother’s throat.

Leaning over his brother he sees their Hobbit continually shivering, his breathing shallow and gold eyes barely open as they drift sluggishly up to look at him.

“Bilbo?” Fíli asks, reaching out and laying a hand on the Skin-Changer. “He’s burning up.”

“I know!” Kíli frets as he tenderly brushes his fingers against Bilbo’s furry cheek. “He hasn’t moved, hasn’t even nipped at me when I kept poking him.”

Taking his eyes off their Uncle, Fíli looks at his brother and frowns. Something isn't right. He seems healthier when just that night, Fíli fell into an uneasy sleep listening as Kíli’s breathing got worse. He looks healthier than he had hours after the arrow had hit him. Kíli turns his head to face him, and something shimmers green from beneath his hair.

Fíli’s hand snaps forward, shoving the hair back from Kíli’s forehead. His stomach churning with apprehension at what he sees.
“Kíli, I need you to answer me, and don’t lie,” he demands, waiting for Kíli’s nod; his brother’s eyes wide with worry and confusion but clear for the first time in days. “How do you feel?”

He looks to protest the question, especially with Bilbo shivering against him, but Fíli forcefully shakes the head beneath his hand and frowns at his sibling. His mouth snapping shut, Kíli takes a moment before answering him.

“I feel better? But different… it’s still there but… kind of like when Óin stuck leeches on me to get the infection out of the gouge I got when we were lost in the mines.”

The churning in his stomach worsens. Fíli glances at Bilbo, rubbing his thumb against the rune shimmering there while he thinks. The Hobbit jerks as if struck by lightning before small fangs dig into his hand and a growl rumbles in his throat. Kíli stares up at his hand and Bilbo's snout with wide, nearly crossed eyes.

“Bilbo,” he starts to say, hissing when the Hobbit’s fangs dig in deeper. “Peace, Uncle. I won’t touch it again.”

The Skin-Changer pulls his hand away with a jerk of his snout, only releasing him when he’s laid it down on Kíli’s chest. Slowly he makes his way to the edge of the bed and sits, shifting into his Hobbit skin where he levels the golden-haired Dwarfling with a green-eyed glare.

“Can’t just bloody well leave things be, can you?” Bilbo growls, but his tongue almost slurs over the words. “Like Nori… just let me sleep…”

Bilbo’s eyes droop, and he starts listing towards Kíli’s legs when he grabs him by the shoulder.

“What did you do, Uncle?”

The Hobbit snarls, smacking away his hand, golden slit eyes glaring at him from beneath dirty gold-brown curls.

“It’s just a rune,” he snaps.

“Bilbo-”

“It…” the Hobbit jerks as he starts listing and slurring again. “It links… spreads it out between… Doesn’t remove… or cure… slows it…”

“Bilbo!” Fíli barks, hand snapping out, grabbing and shaking his shoulder with no effect.

He falls over onto Kíli’s legs, shivering and with shuddering breaths.

“Mahal,” Fíli curses as Kíli paws at Bilbo, calling his name and trying to rouse him. “Kíli, stop. He’s probably unconscious.”

“But what was he saying? What rune?”

Fíli takes his eyes off Bilbo to look at his brother. He has suspicions about what Bilbo did and what little he could parse through and understand before their Hobbit fainted.

“It seems he’s put a rune on your forehead. I was trying to find out what it does, but as you heard, he made not a lick of sense.”

One of Kíli’s hands snap up to his brow, feeling around with deft fingers.
“It’s magic, Kíli. All it does is shimmer.”

“Doesn’t mean I can’t feel it.”

“Do you?”

Kíli pouts at him as he lowers his hand back onto the Hobbit, distracting himself by trying to arrange the blankets Bilbo’s laying on over and around their Uncle with little luck. Sighing, Fíli walks around to the other side, pushing and pulling the Hobbit until he’s under the blankets. Done with that task, he drifts over to the water basin beside the bed and washes his face.

“I’m going to see if Nori is up. Maybe he’ll be able to understand what Uncle was mumbling about,” he says when he finishes, drying his face and his beard enough to ignore the chill in Bard’s home.

Kíli hums in acknowledgment as Fíli leaves them, running his hands through the Hobbit’s curls. Reaching the area where the majority of the Company was given to sleep, Fíli looks to where Nori usually sleeps. He’s not there, and no one else is awake either.

“Fíli?” Thorin’s voice startles him from behind.

“Don’t do that Uncle!” Fíli hisses, clutching his shirt over his pounding heart as he leans on the table. “Bilbo does it enough to put everyone’s heart at risk.”

He turns to face his Uncle and shiver rolls down his spine. Thorin stands within the shadows of the short hall leading to the children’s bedrooms.

It’s not... something's not right. Fíli’s Uncle doesn't hide in the shadows.

“You should be with Kíli,” Thorin says sternly, sending the hairs on the back of his neck on end despite his tone being nothing new to hear.

“I’m looking for Nori.”

“I will find him and send him to you.”

Thorin still doesn’t come out from the gloom. He can’t tell if he’s hiding for a reason or if something more sinister is happening here. Fíli’s jaw flexes in apprehension. He doesn’t want to do something that may cause... agitation.

“Bilbo returned in the night,” he says and silently curses his loose tongue for putting their smaller Uncle within Thorin’s awareness.

“Aye. Nori and I made sure he was at least watered before sending him to bed.”

“Ah, that’s good,” Fíli says, his remark hanging heavy in the quiet of the early morning.

“Did he wake and go to check on Kíli?” Thorin asks, finally stepping out from the shadows to stand close to Fíli.

“I think he slept with us…”

Thorin stiffens, a dark look passing over his face before it smooths out as if it had never happened. Fíli can still see the taut way he holds himself. He’s not happy with what Fíli has told him.

“I need to have a word with Master Baggins. Is he awake?”
The eldest prince feels like ice has been shoved into his blood. His Uncle’s eyes are cold like he’s looking at Thranduil or Azog. He needs to say something, but his tongue refuses to move. His hands feel clammy, and sweat is beading along his back. For the first time in his life, he fears the Uncle who’s knee he grew up on.

“Uncle-” he chokes out before a hand lands on his shoulder.

“’E’s asleep, yer Kingliness,” Nori’s voice says cheekily from behind him. “Seems ‘e’ll be out for a while yet. Sneaky bugger went te Kíli after ye left.”

“So it seems,” Thorin rumbles, his displeasure obvious and foreboding. “Did he do anything… ill-advised?”

“No that I could see.”

Thorin hums then turns away, mumbling loud enough for Fíli to hear saying he’s going to ‘check on Bilbo and Kíli himself’.

“They’s asleep, Thorin,” Nori says sharply, his grip on Fíli’s shoulder tightening when Thorin continues to walk away and toward where Kíli’s bed lays.

“I’ll see them for myself, Spy Master. Don’t you have a mission to complete?”

The Thief’s grip tightens painfully as he curses Mahal and the other Valar only loud enough for Fíli to hear. The prince says nothing when he starts cursing Thorin’s Amad for birthing him either.

“Follow me,” he growls, stepping around Fíli and moving into the very shadows that frightened him so are slowly vanishing, the sun continuing to rise.

Nori leads him to the curtained off area Kíli and Bilbo are resting in, putting a hand against Fíli’s chest as he slowly parts one of the curtains. Looking to the elder prince, Nori places a finger against his lips and jerks his head toward the part. Frowning, Fíli does so.

What he sees disturbs him.

Uncle Thorin stands by the side of the bed where Bilbo continues sleeping against Kíli’s legs, staring down at the Hobbit with a look on his face Fíli has never seen on him. It’s… it’s the look he’s seen on some Dwarrow officials when they’re looking at him and Kíli.

Like they are a treasure they’ve laid a claim on. A prize the bastards will soon wrap their greedy hands around…

But as Thorin’s gaze slides to Kíli, his face twists, eyes going cold and lips almost peeling back from his teeth in a snarl, Fíli feels as if his very soul is doused in ice. He surges forward as Thorin reaches toward his brother, panic quickening his breath and his mind racing. He doesn’t know what is happening, all he knows is that he needs to get between Kíli and Thorin now.

He doesn’t expect a hand closing over his mouth or an arm wrapping around his chest, holding him back.

Frantic blue eyes look at Nori in betrayal, but he can’t be swayed. They are close enough to intervene should Thorin do something to their youngest prince.
Thorin doesn’t know how correct he was when he implied there was a task Nori was supposed to be doing. Bilbo gave him a mission. Superior or not, Nori was going to do it, Thorin’s orders be damned.

“Just wait,” he mumbles into the prince's ear. “E’s not done anythin’ yet.”

The lad continues to struggle. Nori can understand, but the Thief feels there is something to be gained from waiting until it’s necessary to interfere.

“Do you trust Bilbo or not?” he snaps, tightening his grip.

Fíli stills, his body trembling. Nori looks back through the curtains and watches as Thorin’s hand aims toward Kíli’s throat. Closer... closer, and Nori can hardly believe what he’s witnessing. To think that the gold sickness has already twisted Thorin so much already...

Thorin’s hand is too close to Kíli’s throat, and Nori curses, about to interfere when something rises and lunges at Thorin’s arm. The King startles, mouth opening in alarm to shout for aid when shadowy tendril-like vines hover threateningly near his throat. Nori has to blink several times before his mind can begin to comprehend what he’s seeing.

One of Bilbo’s arms had risen from the bed and snapped out, fingers digging into Thorin’s arm as the tendrils grow from the shadows Thorin cast over the bed. But his arm isn’t a Hobbit one. No. It’s doubled in size and length; covered in black fur and a smattering of white spots near the top where the Hobbit’s shirt has shredded at the sudden transformation.

Nori would think Bilbo hadn’t succeeded in what he’d set out to do except for the fact that the rest of the Hobbit’s body remains just that, a Hobbit.

“What do you think you are doing, Oakenshield?” a raspy, fathomless voice demands, rumbling like thunder after the lightning and roiling like the ocean against the rocky shores.

*Primal. Vicious.* Waiting for a reason to take a chunk out of his prey.

“Bilbo?” Thorin manages to choke out, and it’s only then that Nori notices the large black claws digging into Thorin’s arm, drawing a significant amount of blood that falls quietly onto the blankets covering Kíli.

“Try that again, on any of the Dwarflings, Oakenshield, and you’ll only live long enough to wonder where your arms had gone.”

Thorin hisses, his face tight with pain as the partially transformed Hobbit pulls his arm away from Kíli’s throat with just his claws. Bilbo had deliberately placed them where they are. Should Thorin try to move his arm, he risks slicing not only muscles but the tendons.

It’s his dominant hand. He would lose the ability to wield anything weightier than a dagger.

“Am I clear?”

“Aye,” Thorin grits out through the pain.

Once his hand is clear does Bilbo remove his claws and shoves the Dwarf away. Their King stumbles back, knocking his head against the wall and barely catching himself from falling.

Nori can’t see the Hobbit’s face, but he’s sure that golden eyes are staring Thorin down from where he lays, no less intimidating in such a position than if he were standing right in their King’s face.
Thorin almost slides to the floor before he clumsily gets his feet under him. His face is contorted in pain and confusion when he looks up and pushes his hair from his face.

His eyes are clear of whatever madness had taken him when he’d dared try and lay a hand against one of Bilbo’s Dwarflings.

“Bilbo? What-” he begins to say before he hisses in pain, looking down at his arm where four gaping holes. “How-”

“So it’s not completely taken you. Not yet at least,” Bilbo muses, his voice has yet to return to normal with Thorin so close to Kíli still, and Nori can understand.

Gold sickness or not, he’s going to be very aware of Thorin’s movements from now on.

Because Bilbo was right.

And it fills Nori with dread so thick it almost compels him to take a dagger to Thorin’s throat here and now. It’s only Thorin’s confusion and distinct lack of memory of the event that stays his hand. Hope flaring in him that their King will be strong enough to overcome the sickness.

“What happened?” Thorin rasps out, clutching at his arm as he grabs a blanket and wraps his arm within it. “I… I remember speaking with Fíli and then…”

Nori thinks Bilbo is about to bluntly inform Thorin he’s falling to the gold sickness. Expects him to nip this problem at its roots and tear it out with his fangs.

But the Hobbit doesn’t.

“You were sleepwalking and startled me awake,” he says as his arm shrinks, transforming back into his Hobbit one just as his voice returns to normal; his sleeve unsalvable. “Shall I strap you down to your bedding, so it doesn’t happen again?”

The Hobbit speaks so calmly, Nori would believe nothing had happened of import had he not witnessed everything from the beginning.

“No. I’ll… I’ll ask whoever is on guard to keep an eye on me,” Thorin says as if in a daze, shaking his head to clear something from it as he shuffles away from the wall and toward the curtains to leave. “I’m going to… bandage this. Let me know what you think of Kíli’s condition after you’ve had some more rest, yes?”

“Aye, after I speak with Óin of course.”

“Of course.”

Nori quickly shoves Fíli back and away from the curtains, pulling them into a barely shadowed alcove and hoping Thorin is too distracted to notice them. Thorin stumbles by without so much as a glance their way. Only after he disappears further into Bard’s home does Nori heave heavily before releasing Fíli. Predictably, the Dwarfling darts away and through the curtains. The Thief follows quickly.

Parting the curtain, Nori sees Fíli hovering over Kíli, checking him over and gently pulling the bloodstained blanket off of him and out from under Bilbo, tossing it aside once it’s free and grabbing another. As the prince is tending to his brother, Nori steps further into the area and around the bed to Bilbo’s side.
A green eye peeks out from beneath clumpy, dirty curls.

Nori frowns down at his Shadow Thief as anger surges through him.

“Ye’ve got some explainin’ te do, Skin-Changer,” he growls.

Green bleeds into gold as the pupil slits and lips pull away from teeth to bare fangs.

A warning. A threat.

Bilbo wasn’t going to make this easy.

But when had the Hobbit ever made anything easy.
You Dwarrow Aren't Very Good With Emotions it Seems...

Chapter Summary

More sickness and madness festers in Bard's home.

Dwarrow can be thick when emotions and sickness are involved it turns out.

Bilbo can barely keep his head on straight with everything going on...

Chapter Notes

Happy Valentines day!

Sorry for the wait, but hopefully this chapter makes up for it. It wasn’t a very nice chapter, to me. Fought me the entire way T-T.

I'll keep you all posted on those translation updates for mobile users as I go chapter by chapter.

Enjoy!

“Well?” Nori demands as their Skin-Changer remains quiet.

“‘Well’ what?” the Hobbit grumbles as he shifts around on the bed.

“Ye know very well what! Ye could have told Thorin and this will never’a happened again!”

The Hobbit scoffs, sending Nori’s temper higher, but before he can say anything, their Hobbit speaks again.

“Do you really think that’s how something like gold-sickness works?” he asks, voice layered with a growl and his golden eyes taking on that look Nori hates.

He steps back, not having realized he was crowding their Hobbit in his anger and feels ashamed.

He’s starting to act like Dwalin.

“Sorry,” he mumbles, because he does know.

“Well I don’t, and I’d like an explanation,” Fíli snaps, glaring at them as he wipes Kíli’s sweaty forehead off.

A low growl of exasperation escapes Bilbo’s throat, and he looks at Nori with tired green eyes.

“You explain it. I need to sleep,” he says before turning over, so his back is to them, and seems to promptly pass out.

“Bilbo?
“Uncle?”

Gentle snores reach their ears, and Fíli looks at him with worry marring his young face. Nori can only shrug.

“If he can’t stay awake long enough to talk, it’s not like we’d have gotten anythin’ understandable.”

The princeling sighs but nods in agreement. Whatever Bilbo had done to help Kíli had apparently taken a lot out of the already weakened Hobbit. Fíli’s eyes meet his, looking expectant and unwilling to let the conversation go. Nori bites the inside of his cheek. This isn’t going to be something Fíli will want to hear, but he needs to know in the event he has to protect himself or Kíli.

“Gold-sickness… It’s a lot more than just makin’ someone lust after gold and nothin’ else. It’s worse for Dwarrow tho’. Makes um violent, possessively jealous, and greedy for what they consider belongin’ te them,” Nori explains slowly, keeping an eye on the princeling in case he needs to clarify anything. “They don’t realize it’s happenin’ an’ a lot of the time, those closest te them don’t see it - don’t want te see it- ‘til it’s te late.”

“But what causes it, Nori? How are we to help Thorin if we can’t get him away from the cause?”

“Aye, but good luck tryin’ te get him away from it.”

Fíli looks at him in confusion.

“It’s Erebor, lad. The gold in there probably kicked it off, but there’s a reason it’s called Dragon Sickness. Smaug sittin’ pretty on all that treasure is sure to have made its pull worse. ‘S prolly why Lake Town has drained down the river. The Master’s a greedy bastard as I ever saw, an Thror was a piece o’ work.”

“Then we must get him away from here!” Fíli says resolutely.

Nori admires his determination, but his naivety will get him in trouble where gold-sickness is concerned.

“Ye got better luck gettin’ Bilbo te hug a Warg then gettin’ Thorin away from the mountain now, lad. I fear he may have fallen under back in Mirkwood or even as far back te when we first caught sight of the mountain.”

“Why do you say that? There must be something we can do.”

“He started actin’ strange when we’s at Beorn’s. At least that’s when Bilbo saw it.”

“And how would Bilbo see it and not ourselves? We are his kin.”

“Sixth sense? Experience? Could be anythin’, lad. Bilbo isn’t a normal Hobbit or Skin-Changer,” Nori shrugs. “He’s not a Dwarf, and he’s not one for gold or treasure either. Maybe that’s why he was only actin’ funny in Mirkwood. Forrest’s poisoned, an he’s a creature of the earth an’ all.”

“Nori.”

“Right. Point is, Thorin’s already caught. Only thing we can do now is keep an eye on him an’ mitigate any damage the sod will cause if he falls any further.”

“There has to be something!” Fíli demands, gripping the rag tightly in one fist and his other hand clutching the bedding until his knuckles are white.
“Sorry, lad. Thorin has te get himself outta this one. We try te get between him an’ what ‘belongs’ te him he’s likely te call us traitor an’ cast us out in the best case. If ye or Kíli try, ye might get away with it a few times but…”

“But what?”

“Ye saw what he was goin’ te do te Kíli.”

Fíli lets out a shaky breath, obviously remembering it in detail. Which he should. It just happened and is a very good example of what Thorin will be capable of if he falls further into the gold-sickness.

“I don’t understand. Kíli’s sick. How would he be a threat to Thorin reaching the gold?”

“I told ye it’s not just gold.”

Nori pointedly looks at Bilbo’s sleeping form before looking at Fíli to see if the lad understood. The princeling looking wide-eyed, back and forth between him and Bilbo would have been comical if the context was different.

“I guess… I can see how Bilbo saw it back at Beorn’s then,” Fíli mumbles before he sighs and resumes cooling Kíli’s brow. “I’m sure Thorin will overcome the sickness, though. He’s strong.”

“Might want te pray te Mahal, just in case tho. It won’t be easy fer any of us in that mountain.”

“… Right.”

Nori thinks it’s the end of the conversation, but the princeling surprises him.

“We should let the rest of the Company know what is happening.”

“No,” Nori decides instantly; that way lay too many complications to count. “No, we tell everyone an’ there’ll be chaos.”

“The three of us can’t be everywhere, Nori.”

The Thief sighs, thinking over their options. Glóin is definitely out of the question; he wouldn’t accept that something like this could happen to Thorin, maybe not even with proof. He’s almost blindly loyal. Dori and Ori will be the same since Thorin gave them this chance to better their lives. Bofur and Bombur won’t understand the gravity of it; they didn’t live through Thror. Dwalin is being a prat, and Kíli will be informed when necessary so that only leaves the elders really.

“We’ll tell Balin, Óin, and Bifur. They lived through Thror, they’ll get the severity of this.”

Fíli deliberates for a few minutes, and Nori lets him. The lad is old enough to be Prince Reagent if worse comes to worst.

“Alright. When?”

“Now.”

When Bilbo next wakes, it’s to short, thin fingers rubbing one of his ears and childish snickers when he twitches at a particularly ticklish graze. Cracking open an eye, he stares into the startled blues of who he assumes is one of Bard’s daughters.
“It’s terribly rude to wake a Hobbit from his sleep,” he says, voice gravely and his mouth dry. He only notices his headache and general achiness in his entire body when the girl speaks.

“I’m sorry. But they were twitching and-”

“It’s alright. I should probably be up anyway,” he says, groaning as he leverages himself up so he can sit. “What time is it?”

“Um… afternoon?”

“You sound so sure.”

The girl straightens her spine, a determined look on her face.

“It’s afternoon.”

“So it is. Sorry, I should probably ask for your name.”

“I’m Tilda.”

“Bilbo Baggins, at your service.”

“You don’t look like any of the other Dwarves, Mister Bilbo.”

“I should certainly hope not! I’m a Hobbit, not a smelly Dwarf.”

Tilda giggles, her eyes bright with interest and excitement. But before she can ask any more questions, Bard walks through the curtains, halting when he sees Bilbo up.

“You’re awake.”

“No, you’re just having a very vivid hallucination,” Bilbo drawls, rubbing his throat as his eyes glance around for some water.

The Man snorts motioning for Tilda to leave them, “Your Dwarves failed to mention your sharp tongue.”

“They are regular recipients of it. If it’s not directed at them, they enjoy watching the spectacle,” he grunts, watching the youngling dart away.

“Sound difficult, dealing with them I mean.”

“Yes, but I found starting in on one and working my way around can entertain them for hours. Simpletons are like that I suppose.”

“Oi!”

Bilbo looks at Bard pointedly.

“Who are ye callin’ ‘simpleton’, Hobbit?!”

Bard sighs and nods his head.

“What did he say?”

“Quiet!” Bilbo barks sharply, placing fingers on his temples and pressing, glaring at the Dwarrow
revealed by Ori flinging open the curtains.

Nori is at the back, rubbing the space between his eyes, while Balin looks amused and Dwalin looks annoyed. Thorin…

Thorin is standing behind Balin in the shadows of a corner trying to not be seen. The Hobbit glares at the Dwarf, daring him to continue cowering.

Bilbo doesn’t realize he’s growling until Balin steps in front of Thorin a moment before Nori steps in front of him and blocks off his view of everyone beyond the curtains.

“None of that. They weren’t that loud yet,” the Thief says, looking Bilbo in the eyes meaningfully.

“Loud enough,” Bilbo snips before he huffs and looks away from Nori to Bard. “If it’s all the same to you, I’m parched and starving.”

“Right. There should be some soup and bread left if your Dwarves decided to be generous,” the Man says, moving around the group as Óin comes forward and starts examining him. The older Dwarf sends the others away when they try to crowd closer, and they scatter like Fauntlings caught in Farmer Maggot’s crops.

“So…” Óin says softly as he palpitates Bilbo’s neck.

“How’d ye keep the young prince from getting worse? I noticed he’s still poisoned, but his symptoms are halved.”

“I used a rune, of course.”

“Aye, Fíli said as much. Mind explaining it to an ol’ healer?”

“It’s as you said. It halves the symptoms and cuts half of the ailment out.”

“How… and where does that half go?”

Bilbo stiffens and stares into Óin’s knowing eyes. They stare at one another for some minutes before Óin rolls his eyes and returns to examining him.

“Ye hide it well, but I can see the same symptoms in ye. That rune links ye together, aye? Since yer a more hearty creature than us Dwarrow, the symptoms don’t affect ye as much. But it’s cyclical. Kíli will seem fine for a time, then he sleeps. Then yer awake and fine as he sleeps.”

“What’s your point, Óin. I couldn’t let him die!” Bilbo snaps, batting his weathered hands away as he sits up straighter on the bed.

“No, but ye were already weak when ye returned to us, from what Nori said. We worry about ye too, lad.”

“I’ll be fine,” Bilbo tells him tightly.

“Fer your sake, I hope so. I’d rather not have to explain to Thorin why yer getting worse instead of better. Don’t want him accidentally waking ye again.”

Bilbo gawks at Óin as the Dwarf ruffles around in his supplies that managed to survive the Elves
“They told you.”

“What was that, lad?”

Bilbo snorts, lips curling in amusement as he endures the rest of Óin’s inspection.

“When will ye be under again?”

“Whenever I please.”

“So ye control it then…” Óin muses. “Don’t overdo it, lad. Even yer body has its limits.”

“I know that better than most, Óin.”

The older Dwarf huffs at him, “Will doing this heal the princeling?”

Bard walks into the area then, carrying a cup, a bowl, and a napkin that looks to be filled with bread. The Man hands them off into Bilbo’s eager hands before he speaks.

“I’d like to speak with you in private when you have a moment, Master Skin-Changer.”

“I’ll have Óin send for you when he’s done here,” Bilbo says with a nod before taking a long gulp of the water.

Bard looks like he’s swallowed a lemon.

“Can we not speak somewhere… less crowded?”

Bilbo narrows his eyes at the Man.

“Bilbo requires bed rest and food, Master Bard. He’s in no condition to be running off,” Óin says sternly.

“I’ll not leave my Dwarfling alone, either.”

“Peace,” Bard says, hands raised in surrender. “I only wished for answers without interference.”

The Hobbit nods despite Óin’s sputtering protests, taking several more sips from his cup.

“I’ll have Nori make sure it happens.”

“Nori?”

“The one with the hair that points out like a star.”

“I see,” Bard says slowly. “I thank you.”

Bilbo waves his thanks away,” It’s me who should thank you for housing these messy sods.”

Óin lets out an affronted sort of sound and Bard chuckles as he turns to leave. Once the Man is gone does Óin give him a pointed look.

Bilbo sighs before he says sternly, “Don’t give me that. The Man deserves some answers, Óin. I’ll not speak of our true purpose here, but Bard has risked much smuggling you lot into Lake Town and putting a roof over your heads and food in your bottomless stomachs. It’s the least I can do since
none of you seem capable of basic decency right now.”

The old Dwarf huffs and averts his eyes after a moment, shuffling his tools around to keep his hands busy.

“So it’s not healing him?”

“If we had *time*, yes. The rune is used to keep the bearer stable until the ailment has run its course or give healers the time they need to get a cure together.”

“And?”

“So it *is* healing him, but only because I recover quickly. It still takes a long time to heal anyone fully this way. So you need to find a cure for whatever that poison is.

Bilbo sneezes.

“Pardon me.”

“Get some sleep after ye finish that. Ye don’t need a cold on top of sharing the poison with Kíli,” the Dwarf says, gathering his tools.

“Yes, yes. Go bother someone else now. And send Bard this way after you tell Nori to keep everyone away.”

“Bossy. Ye’s make a good Consort.”

“Not on your life!”

“Eh? Didn’t hear that laddie,” Óin grunts, ducking out of the area.

“Crazy old bastard,” Bilbo mumbles taking another sip of the soup before dipping the bread in it, savoring the mild flavour on his tongue.

Bard might not be able to afford better spices, but at least he or his eldest can make do with what they have. A few minutes later, Bard pushes the curtains aside, letting them fall behind him before taking a seat next to him on the bed.

“Well?” the Hobbit asks when the Man remains silent. “What did you want to speak with me about?”

“How long have you known the Dwarves?”

Bilbo looks at the Man with a raised brow before he answers, “Since late spring.”

“So you could say you have the measure of them, yes?”

“Yes.”

“On your word, are they honorable?” he asks.

“On my *honor*, they are.”

Bard nods, relaxing his shoulders as he leans on his knees.

“But Bard, if ever it appears they aren’t, please remember there could be forces at work to make
them act so.”

“What do you mean?”

“Some of them have been acting… strange since we passed through Mirkwood. I have my eye on them, and will let you know if anything is further amiss.”

Bard stares at him, a hard look on his face, “Are my children in danger.”

“No. I won’t allow it.”

“Thank you. I’d rather not be forced to ask you to leave after you’ve been so generous. It must have been difficult to give those away.”

Bilbo hums but offers no comment. Giving the reminders of his torture to younglings to provide them with some form of protection is never a hardship.

Bard fills the silence with questions of his travels with the Dwarrow and his own adventures before this one when it becomes clear Bilbo will not offer up information not requested. So Bilbo weaves his tales with anecdotes and observations, enjoying Bard’s wide-eyed look of wonder. This goes on for some time before Bilbo starts to list over as the rune does its work to keep Kíli from getting worse.

“Would you mind if I send Tilda to you at nights while you’re here? She’s a terror to put to bed most nights.”

“If I’m awake, she’s certainly welcome,” Bilbo yawns, relaxing against Kíli’s legs.

“Get some rest, Master Baggins. Quite a few of your Dwarves are getting restless the longer you remain here.”

“Mnhm.”

Bilbo watches Bard leave with half-lidded eyes before they fall closed and darkness takes him.

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Two days later - Bard’s home

Balin isn’t sure what is distressing him more. Bilbo’s sudden sickness; Dwalin’s abrupt change in attitude toward Bilbo; or Thorin’s descent into gold-sickness. He had asked Óin -after Bard had left Bilbo and everyone else had gone about other business within the Man’s home- what had befallen the youngest Son of Farin. He isn’t even surprised at what Bilbo had done, just wracked with increased worry, especially now that Bilbo is running a fever and can hardly breathe for all the mucous leaving his nose and throat. The lad had barely even woken up to cough so much it sounded like his lungs were trying to leave his body.

So no, Bilbo has a severe cold -according to Óin- on top of whatever that rune takes from Kíli and gives to their Hobbit. Put plainly, Bilbo is in a bad way, and it’s making Thorin worse.

His King has taken to checking on their Hobbit every so often and staring out a window towards Erebor the rest of the time if someone doesn’t distract him with food and drink. The longer Bilbo remains so incapacitated, the more Thorin looks at Kíli with a darkness Balin never dreamed he’d see his King direct toward the lad. Just as worrying is the looks he gives Bilbo; that covetous look that he’d seen on Thor when admiring the Arkenstone.
Balin prays to Mahal they never find it once they enter the mountain.

“I don’t like this,” Nori mumbles as he takes a seat beside Balin. “He’s gettin’ worse, an’ we ain’t even in the mountain.”

“Aye, and the only thing keeping Thorin from going after Kíli again is the wound Bilbo gave him,” Balin says with a weary sigh.

“He may have put a rune on ‘im.”

“How do you mean?”

“The wound only seems to give ‘im a problem when ‘e’s got that look in ‘is eyes near the princeling.”

Balin muses on that theory and decides it would be something Bilbo would do to Thorin.

“Then we’ll thank Mahal Bilbo had the foresight to do it. There’ve been too many times he could have done something with Bilbo as sick as he is.”

“Aye. Doubt that would stop our Hobbit from ripping into the sod again, though.”

They sit quietly for some time before Nori speaks again.

“How much time we got till we need to be leavin’?”

“A week. We’ll be leaving on the day of otherwise, which gives us barely any time to find the door.”

“Wonder what’ll happen if our Hobbit ain’t well by then.”

“He’ll not be well even when the cold passes. Not until Kíli is cured of the poison at least.”

Nori leans back and stares up at the ceiling, “Stupid.”

“Perhaps, but Kíli’s been saved because of it.”

“Still stupid.”

Balin only sighs again and keeps an eye on Thorin.

Three more days pass before Bilbo’s cold is gone, much to the relief of Fíli, Kíli, Óin, Nori, Ori, Balin, Bofur and Bifur at least. The others were glad but ready to move on, while others were acting like it was their Hobbit’s fault he got sick.

Then there is Thorin…

“Back off or I’ll bite you this time,” Bilbo snarls at Thorin for the second time in an hour.

Fíli’s worried Bilbo will be driven to do more than bite Thorin at this rate. His Uncle hasn’t left their Hobbit alone for longer than an hour before he returns and tries to take care of Bilbo. Like a demented mother-hen, Thorin has tried to get Bilbo to move over so he can join him on the already crowded bed or feed him despite Bilbo having the strength to do it himself.

If he didn’t know Thorin was already under the gold-sickness, he’d assume his Uncle to be trying to
He could daydream…

Bilbo wasn’t in the mood to entertain any of them though, especially not Thorin. As far as Fíli can tell, their Hobbit is barely holding back his urge to sink his Warg fangs into Thorin.

Maybe the attention reminds Bilbo of whatever happened to him that he acquired items made of his own hide and teeth.

The thought makes his stomach roil.

“Uncle.”

Both Bilbo and Thorin look to him.

“Uncle Thorin.”

Bilbo’s lip curls up in distaste as he glances at the Dwarf.

“Yes, Fíli?”

“Can I speak with you?”

Uneasiness flutters in his stomach as Thorin’s eyes darted between him and Bilbo. He definitely needs to separate the two of them before there is blood on the floor and they’re down an Uncle. He almost pulls Thorin from the bed when Bilbo bares his fangs, eyes blazing gold, and the hair on the back of his neck stands on end like a wolf preparing to fight. Fíli supposes the description isn’t too far off.

Bilbo clicks his teeth together loudly, which is enough to finally get Thorin to move his arse away from their Skin-Changer.

Fíli leads Thorin down to the first floor, fingering one of the daggers in his jacket -Bilbo had been thorough when he retrieved their belongings from the Elves. Having Thorin at his back after witnessing a few of the times the sickness almost made his Uncle harm his brother makes him tense and wary of the Dwarf he’s known since birth.

He hates it.

“What did you want to speak with me about?” Thorin asks when Fíli leans against a wall.

“I think you need to give Bilbo some space,” he says, having thought about what to say to his Uncle when he asked him down here.

A dark look passes over Thorin’s face.

“Why is that?” he asks, deceptively calm.

“He’s still unwell and more irritable than a hibernating bear being woken up.”

“I can handle our Hobbit’s foul mood, Fíli.”

“I’d rather not tempt fate and have you lose a hand to his jaws before we reach the mountain, Uncle. With you hovering over him like this, I fear he’ll lash out and run. If he does that, he could get sick again out in the cold,” Fíli says, trying to channel Óin’s matter-of-fact tone.
They really need Thorin to back off their Hobbit. Fíli would rather not have to take the throne before he needs to.

The dark look fades, but a frantic one replaces it in Thorin’s eyes.

“He can’t leave, Fíli.”

Fíli breathes in quietly.

“I don’t think he’ll be reasonable if he feels cornered. Don’t you remember what happened in Mirkwood?” he says, fingers still twitching to grab a blade. “His contract is with Dwalin, besides. We don’t know exactly what was put in his new contract besides what Balin told us.”

Thorin doesn’t say anything for a moment.

“I read it while we were at Beorn’s,” their King admits.

Fíli looks at his Uncle in surprise. He had thought Thorin wouldn’t have cared as long as Bilbo didn’t do ask for anything outrageous.

“What did it say?”

“Many things Balin told us except for the amendment that Bilbo can break the contract if he deems it necessary,” Thorin says tightly.

Fíli can guess why Thorin would be frantic after what he said.

“Then don’t give him a reason. Give him space to heal completely, so he’s at his best when we reach Erebor.”

Fíli can practically feel the conflicting desires in his Uncle. Eventually one of them wins.

“Very well. Make sure Óin keeps an eye on him,” Thorin says before ascending the stairs.

Fíli stares at his back as he goes, an ugly mix of anger and loathing churning in his stomach.

Thorin had, not once, thought of Kíli.

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Bilbo isn’t sure what Fíli said to Thorin, but he’s not going to question the reprieve given to him. After that, the first few days following his recovery from the cold are filled with Óin keeping an eye on him -but not in a fussy kind of way- and Kíli and telling Tilda heavily edited versions of his adventures. Bard’s son -Bain- and his eldest -Sigryn- join their sister from time to time and Bilbo curses his soft heart.

He wants to keep them.

Unfortunately, he can’t take them back to the Shire after the quest is done. Maybe he can convince Bard to visit him. He doesn’t mind the Man’s presence as much as he does others of his race, and Bilbo’s sure all of them will enjoy having full bellies for a time -loathe as he would be to send them back to this place.

But those are thoughts for another time. He can feel the rune tugging at his consciousness so that Kíli may get some reprieve from the poison.
He doesn’t want to think about what he’ll have to do once the Company is on their way to the mountain if a cure for Kíli isn’t procured.

Maybe he should contact that Elven Captain the brat had made friends with…

Sleep now though, he thinks as he sinks into the bed and lets his mind drift off.

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The day they need to depart is fast approaching and Balin is worried. No cure has been found for the poison -though the lad is recovering slowly with Bilbo taking the brunt of the poison’s potency-, and they need at least Bilbo to his full strength if he’s to find the Arkenstone.

On top of that, without Bilbo to focus on, Thorin’s sickness latches on Erebor in an unwaveringly, frightening way, making his temper shorter than ever.

He fears what will happen once Thorin is in the mountain.

He dreads what Bilbo may do to protect the younglings if Thorin drives the Hobbit’s protective instincts over the edge. They had already seen what he is prepared to do before they lost the path when Thorin tried to take them from it and again when Thorin’s gold madness nearly had him attempt to take Kíli’s life.

It doesn’t help the feeling after watching Bilbo snap and snarl at the King. His Hobbit ideology toward younglings combined with the pack mentality of his Warg skin could drive Thorin to… remove Thorin from the equation if it means keeping the younglings safe.

Balin prays to Mahal that Bilbo’s control holds.

He leafs through the book of herbs and remedies Bard procured for them as he sits by the bed. Bilbo has only left it to bathe, get some time in the sun and fresh air, and get his own food. Balin wonders if Bilbo will entertain trying to reconcile with Dwalin before they leave for Erebor when their Hobbit growls, startling him enough that the book drops to the floor. Looking up, he’s dismayed at Bilbo’s reaction.

“Thorin wants te speak with ye, Balin,” Dwalin says from the curtain’s edge, his eyes wandering the room and only looking directly at Bilbo for a second.

The second was enough to send Bilbo growling even louder and turning his body to face their brother, fangs bared and eyes golden. Balin hesitates to leave when it seems Dwalin wouldn’t be following him.

“I’d like te speak with Bilbo alone, Balin.”

“I’d be more inclined to believe your sincerity if you didn’t speak as if I were some child to be seen, nor heard,” Bilbo snarls, causing Dwalin to flinch.

Dwalin stares at their Hobbit for a moment before he nods his head.

“Can we speak?”

Bilbo is silent, golden eyes looking Dwalin up and down, eyeing the fang dagger with a slight upturn to his lips. Dwalin will be lucky to keep it if he doesn’t hurt their brother further.

“I’m pretty sure we can speak, whether I want to speak to you remains to be seen.”
‘He’s certainly not pulling his sharp tongue,’ Balin thinks before laying a hand on Bilbo’s shoulder.

“Ye alright, brother?”

The Hobbit glances at him before staring at Dwalin again.

“I suppose,” he drawls. “If you hear me shouting, it might be best to get him."

Balin smiles, but it feels weak even to him.

He’s not sure what happened to Dwalin. Of the three of them, he’d been the only one determined to keep Bilbo in Erebor, excited to have a younger brother -if only by some months- to show the mountain to; share their history with; but mostly to spar with as Bilbo has proven he can challenge Dwalin in combat. He prays to Mahal this conversation will be what starts to bridge whatever rift formed between them in Mirkwood -because that’s when everything started going wrong.

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Dwalin waits until Balin has left them before meeting Bilbo’s stare. The warrior in him wants to finger the dagger at his belt, sensing that he’s facing a very dangerous creature. Guilt bubbles up; he knows Bilbo. He knows Bilbo won’t attack with lethal intent unless he goes for Kíli. Their Hobbit would only defend himself otherwise, and he doesn’t need to be shifted to do that.

“Are you going to speak, or are we going to stare at each other until we blink for ten seconds?” his brother asks, his voice startling Dwalin.

“No?” he says, confused and distracted by the odd question. “Why ten an’ not one time?”

“Cats.”

Dwalin is even more confused.

“Ye lost me.”

“If you can stare at a cat and it blinks for ten seconds, it means it trusts you.”

“I see…”

“I don’t think you do, but that’s irrelevant. Speak or leave me be.”

“Bilbo… I’m yer brother-”

“You sure haven’t been acting like I am.”

“I know, and I’ll-”

“You’ve been acting like I’m an outsider intruding where he’s not wanted. Actually, you treat them better. Instead, you’re treating me like you treat Nori. Like a criminal. At this point, I’m not sure-”

“Would ye let me speak?” Dwalin demands firmly, but quietly like Balin does when he has something important to say.

Dwalin is surprised when Bilbo’s mouth clicks shut. He hadn’t thought it would work, honestly; not with Bilbo’s anger toward him.

“Thank ye,” he decides to say -lack of manners had always been the Hobbit’s peeve when they
weren’t used. “I… I want te apologize for how I’ve treated ye since Mirkwood. I don’t… I’m not sure what happened, but it was like a haze would fall over me whenever I looked at ye. I know it’s not enough, but I wanted to says this… in case I don’t get a chance te.”

His brother scrutinizes him with an uncomfortable intensity, never blinking.

He thinks he gets what Bilbo said now about cats…

“And why this change of heart? Why now aside from trying to make amends before either of our untimely demises?”

“I’m not sure. The haze is just… gone now. Ye got back, and the next day, it wasn’t there when I look at ye.”

“Still doesn’t explain why you’re here,” Bilbo says blandly, brow raised, and it breaks Dwalin’s heart.

His brother doesn’t believe him. Doesn’t trust him anymore. Explaining doesn’t negate the betrayal Bilbo must have felt; the confusion and hurt when Dwalin turned against him when many of the others had already done so in that dungeon.

The only one that hadn’t or accidentally given him away to the guards had been Nori.

Dwalin isn’t even sure why he’d turned on Bilbo. Everything the Hobbit did or said suddenly grated his ears like steel dragging against brick and Bilbo’s touch was poisoned oil against his skin.

It reminded him of assassins and criminals, and he’d acted on instinct.

Bilbo isn’t going to forgive him with words alone.

“I… I wanted ye te know. Te apologize, that’s all.”

“Really?” he asks, his tone skeptical and suspicious.

“Aye.”

“You’re not looking for forgiveness?”

“Not now, no.”

“Then when?”

“When ye can. When ye trust me again.”

“Why?” he asks, genuine confusion coloring his voice, his golden eyes slowly fading into their summer green.

“Yer my brother,” Dwalin says, shrugging a shoulder and willing Bilbo to believe that at least.

His brother hums, looking at him with wary eyes and a frown before he looks away to Kíli’s sleeping face.

“Right. You can go now.”

“Bilbo.”
“I can’t forgive you now. But, I appreciate the apology. As long as you don’t… betray me again, we may get back to where we were, Dwalin.”

Dwalin takes in a deep breath and slowly lets it out.

“That’s all I can hope for,” he says, turning to leave Bilbo alone. “If the… haze happens again, I’ll tell ye so ye can get away.”

“Of course,” Bilbo says like Dwalin would do anything but.

For the first time since the haze disappeared, Dwalin feels hope.

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“Surprised he let ye leave without a souvenir. Or without one,” Nori says mildly as he picks his nails with a knife like Bilbo is want to do.

Balin sighs at them when Dwalin scowls at the shorter Dwarf.

“I’ve apologized. It’s Bilbo’s call now,” Dwalin grumbles. “Can’na do more than that an’ show him I mean it.”

“Might be too little too late, mate,” the Thief drawls.

“Dwalin!” he barks at his brother when he looks to punch Nori. “Everyone needs to be fit for our journey.”

“Black eye won’t kill ‘im,” he growls but sits further down the table. “How are our supplies?”

“Bilbo still has out packs an’ weapons in whatever that magic earring of his puts them in,” Nori says. “All we needs is food and ale.”

“Water,” Dwalin says -a habit he gained whenever they resupplied, and Bofur suggested alcohol.

“Though yer not gonna find much here. Town’s barely scraping by while the ‘Master’ gets fat. Would be a good idea te see what we can find on the plains before we need te leave.”

“Will be hard to find anything in the tall grass,” Balin says dryly as he strokes his beard. “Unless you want to climb more trees.”

Nori and Dwalin both make faces at that suggestion.

“I meant send Bilbo out with a small party,” Nori grumbles, putting away the knife and slumping against the table.

“Ye think he’d leave Kíli for that long, ye’ve lost what little sense ye had,” Dwalin snips, picking at a slice of bread.

“Eat it or put it back,” Balin snips at his brother.

Dwalin sneers at him and takes a large bite out of the slice, chewing it dramatically, and Balin rolls his eyes.

“I said a ‘small’ party, not everyone, ye clotpole.”

Dwalin tosses the bread at the Thief, sneering when Nori deftly catches it and finishes it off.
“Aye, and who would he trust? Not Fíli. Thorin is family. You, me, Bifur, and Glóin are the best trackers we got with Kíli sick. Bofur, Bombur, Ori, and Dori aren’t hunters, and Óin won’t leave Kíli’s side either.”

Which leaves me,” Balin says with finality.

They don’t have times to debate this any longer. The sooner supplies are gathered, the better off they will be when they learn if Kíli will be joining them for the rest of the journey. It will be easier to collect enough for everyone and reduce what they take if they must leave Kíli and Óin behind.

Nori looks to argue, but Balin doesn’t let him.

“Óin and I will not leave Kíli’s side. Bilbo will see reason even if he doesn’t like it. If you take Thorin with you, he’ll hate it even more, but knowing Thorin isn’t here will make him more agreeable.”

“Sure, if Bilbo doesn’t rip his throat out when the bastard can’t keep his hands to himself.”

“Watch yer tongue, Thief. He’s still our King.”

“I don’t follow gold blind rulers,” Nori snarls.

“Stop it!” he snaps at them.

Both of them flinch. Balin then stares at the Thief until he sighs dramatically and pushes off the table.

“Alright, but I claim deniability if the ‘King’ gets his royal hide bitten,” he says as he leaves the table.

Once he’s gone, Dwalin moves to sit across from him, face drawn and his shoulders tense.

“Ye know he’s right. There’s a good chance Bilbo will injure Thorin while we hunt.”

“That’s why Fíli will be going.”

“Ye know he won’t-”

“I’ll talk to him. Bilbo won’t do anything worse than snap at him with Fíli around.”

“Ye sound so sure.”

“He didn’t do anything more than that earlier when Fíli was watching, though. I don’t doubt Bilbo wanted to follow through on his threats. Besides, Thorin has been giving our brother space since the prince spoke with him,” he says before taking a sip of his ale. “We need the food, Dwalin, no matter what grudges or anger anyone ah’s against each other.”

Dwalin lets out a tired sigh, “Aye. I’ll let Bifur, Glóin, and Thorin know.”

Balin continues to drink his ale alone until Thorin joins him after slinking out from the shadows.

It prickles his skin every time it happens.

“Do the markets not have enough we can buy?” he asks gruffly.

“Unless you don’t mind leaving people to starve, no. What’s in the market barely feeds the town as is. Getting enough supplies for thirteen Dwarrow and a Hobbit Skin-Changer will leave to many young stomachs empty.”
Balin waits one terribly long moment for Thorin to deny wanting to let children starve.

“No, Bilbo wouldn’t allow us to, not with winter fast approaching,” the King says, taking a cup and pouring some ale. “But… I fear my presence will… cause Bilbo great distress.”

“Nori is speaking with him now. We need the supplies, and he’s the only one who can help us out on the plains. We Dwarrow don’t do well in the tall grasses.”

“No, we don’t,” Thorin says and takes a gulp of ale. “If he’s agreeable, we leave at first light.”

“Aye, I’ll be sure to let him know before I turn in.”

“Thank you, Balin.”

Thorin finishes off his drink before retreating to wherever it is he goes in this small house. Balin sighs and pours another cup, swallowing it down in three gulps before standing and heading to the curtains to speak with Bilbo.

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Bilbo had reluctantly agreed with Nori and Balin. Now, three days later and two hunting trips -which gave them enough meat and herbs to smoke for two weeks- they were getting ready to leave for Erebor the next day. The day after tomorrow is Durin’s Day, and the Dwarrow are anxious and antsy.

It’s annoying.

Unless something happens between now and then, which Bilbo doesn’t see happening. If the Dwarrow don’t do something incredibly stupid.

Several hours later, Bilbo is cursing himself for ever thinking such a fate-tempting thought.

He had foolishly announced to the Dwarrow that he was going to the market to look for some herbs they didn’t find when hunting. Hinting that he would be out a bit late for some other errands.

Why more than half of the bloody sods had decided to -horribly- tail him, he refuses to ask as they are herded to the Master’s home by the town guards; he doesn’t want to catch their stupidity.

“When we get out of this,” Bilbo snarls at Dwalin. “I’m gluing all of your arses to the floor and leaving you there till morning.”

His eyes then snap to Thorin.

“You keep throwing me that poor attempt at Kíli’s puppy eyes and I’ll give you something to be whimpering about.”

Bilbo scowl deepens when townsfolk swarm the streets to get a look at them. It makes him feel very exposed. The torches some of them carry don’t help the phantom sensation of flames on his skin either.

Then the Master and his lackey step out...
Sleazy Master and Gold Sickness give Bilbo Headaches

Chapter Summary

Bilbo could have left Lake Town without ever meeting the Master and his rat bastard and been perfectly fine with it. Of course, he doesn't get his wish. Thorin's gold sick head isn't helping the headache brewing in Bilbo's any better either.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long everyone! Between work and writing this, I was also debating if where I leave it off felt right to the flow of the story before I worked out that it does (imo anyway, I would like your thoughts about that if you don't mind!). Anyway, enjoy and can't wait to hear from you all!

Thorin’s hold on his arm tightens as the Men come out of the town hall. Bilbo growls in warning, but the clothead isn’t listening. So he takes things into his own claws. The arse has the nerve to look at him astonishment as he releases Bilbo to nurse the claw marks on his side.

“What is the meaning of this?!” the portly Man -with the grease slick, balding head and much more lavish clothes than anyone else in Lake Town can afford- demands as he and that rat of a Man exit the building.

He is effective in pulling Thorin’s attention from Bilbo, at least…

“We caught these intruders sneaking around the town, Sire,” Braga says. “They were too close to the armory for my liking.”

Bilbo huffs, already exasperated with this whole affair as he keeps his eyes on the Royal Arse. How on Arda is he supposed to know that was the armory he was hiding behind? All these buildings look alike!

“A desperate bunch of mercenaries if ever there was, Sire. We should lock them up and ‘throw away the keys’ as they say,” Rat Man says with a sleazy grin on his puce face.

“We haven’t done anything!” Ori cries out. “You can’t arrest us if we haven’t done anything!”

Bilbo would have comforted the distressed Dwarfling if most of his attention wasn’t on Thorin. Though he does wonder why Nori hadn’t explained to Ori how some Men like to twist things to benefit themselves. A place like Lake Town? You could get arrested for looking at someone -like Rat Man- the wrong way.

Maybe Dori had something to do with the lack of Ori’s knowledge here? He’s the most overprotective mother bear he’s ever seen.

“Something low-life mercenaries would say, Sire,” he sneers.
“Hold yer tongue!” Dwalin snaps at the Man. “You do not know to whom you speak!”

Bilbo wants to snap at Dwalin right back. What on Arda is he thinking antagonizing the Men who will throw them in jail? They’ll be better off if they just let this happen and let Nori and him get them out. Yvanna knows between the two of them they have more sense than the rest of this lot.

“This is no common criminal. This is Thorin. Son of Thrain. Son of Thror! Show some respect!”

Thorin places a hand on Dwalin’s shoulder and steps forward. He has that look on his face when he’s about to monologue. Despite his reservations at letting Thorin do one now, he decides to let this play out. He’ll only interfere if his Dwarflings are put in danger or the arse gets them in even more trouble.

“We are the Sons of Durin and the Dwarves of Erebor. We have come to reclaim our homeland.”

Bilbo only listens with half an ear as Thorin continues, paying more attention to the whispers of the crowd and the guards than what Thorin is saying until he mentions rivers of gold and sharing it. Bilbo very much doubts the gold-sick bastard will keep that vow, and he doubts most of the Dwarrow would agree with him. The excitement in the crowd grows exponentially until rat Man speaks again. It could turn ugly if Thorin doesn’t keep them excited.

“How do we know you’ll keep your word, eh? We know nothing about you. Who here can vouch for your character?”

This. This is what he meant about it turning ugly. If the rat bastard is convincing enough, the people will turn on them in a heartbeat. But this… this is also an opportunity to get them out of this mess. The promise of gold and the word of an obvious third party will keep them on the right side of the bars and well on their way out of this place.

He might not like taking advantage of people's desperation for a better life, but it will keep his Dwarflings safe for now. When Thorin inevitably goes against his word, Bilbo’s reputation won’t be sullied with the people. They would think him like them. Dupped and taken advantage of. In the darkest time of his life -and he hates what Thorin has fallen into for making him fall back on the mindset he had when survival was the only thing he cared about after his torture-, he saw that sympathetic people were more likely to help you in any way possible.

He loathes what gold has done to the Dwarf and what it is forcing him to do to keep those he cares about safe.

“I do,” Bilbo says, stepping forward. “I’ll vouch for him.”

“Bilbo, what are ye doin’?” Nori hisses at him, which Bilbo ignores.

“I have traveled far with these Dwarves through great danger and triumph. If Thorin Oakenshield gives his word, then he will keep it,” he says, staring the Dwarf down as he lies through his teeth.

He barely acknowledges the grateful nod the sod gives him.

When the attention falls back onto Thorin does he answer Nori, “I’m keeping us out of jail.”

“At what cost? He’s gonna be more covetous of you than before, and we both know it’s unlikely the bastard will follow through.”

“Yes, and it’s what will keep us alive when it happens unless the rest of you succumb too.”
“What does that-”

“Death!” Bard shouts as he pushes through the crowd. “That is what you will bring upon us.”

Bard stands in front of Thorin now, looking at him with contempt and fear. Bilbo understands. They both know the lure of gold will allow Thorin and the Dwarrow to leave Lake Town with the citizens blessing no matter that Bard speaks true now that Bilbo has vouched for the bastard. Both of them know that should the dragon still live, Lake Town will be destroyed when it decides to turn its gaze upon them.

“Have you all forgotten what happened to Dale? The firestorm that rained down and for what? The blind ambition of a mountain King so riven by greed he could not see beyond his own desire?! They will bring us nothing but ruin if they enter the mountain!”

The crowds zeal dims at his words and Bilbo almost lets himself hope these people will at least consider the consequences. If not for themselves then for their children.

His hope is short lived.

“Now, now, let’s not let any of us be too quick to lay blame, Bard. Wasn’t it your ancestor, Girion, Lord of Dale, who failed to kill the beast? Hm?”

Bilbo takes his eyes off Thorin’s surprised face to look at Bard, ignoring the rat bastards taunting voice as he bolsters his master’s agenda. The Man’s shoulder slump as the crowd gasp and speculate about the man -and Bilbo wants to take the Man away from this crowd and the Dwarrow-, but he steps closer to Thorin with determination.

“You have no right. No right to enter that mountain,” Bard hisses, his fear and anger obvious to Bilbo, but he seems to be the only one to notice.

Thorin ignores him and gazes at the crowd.

“You may listen to this naysayer if you wish, but I promise you this; all will share in the gifts of the mountain. I will see Esgaroth restored as the center of all trade in the North and bring wealth and riches down from the halls of Erebor!”

Thorin turns around and takes a few steps up toward the ‘Master’ and rat bastard.

“I speak now to the Master of the Men of the Lake. Will you share in the great wealth of our people?”

Bilbo can practically see the Man already scheming to take the wealth from the people for his own coffers. It disgusts him as much as the thought of having to wade through all the gold in Erebor in search of some pretty stone.

“What say you?”

“I say unto you… Welcome!” the Master declares, throwing his arms wide as the crowd cheers. “Welcome! And thrice, welcome, King Under the Mountain!”

Thorin turns to the cheering crowd only to come face to face with Bard.

“You have no right!” Bard snaps, barely heard over the noise.

Thorin leans closer, eyes cold and locked with Bard’s, “I have the only right.”
The crowd continues to cheer and the feeling of relief they exude is palpable. Bilbo only pities their blindness for a moment before throwing a glare Thorin’s way and slipping away through the crowd. He has Dwarflings to take care of before he says goodbye.

It’s late into the night when Nori manages to slip away and back to Bard’s home where Fíli, Kíli, Óin and Bilbo are staying. Thorin had sent Bofur earlier -glaring at Nori as he commanded the miner to go- in the day to retrieve them. The Dwarf came back empty-handed and boldly told their King that he shouldn’t send anyone over there again unless ‘yer lookin’ te get fangs and claws sunk in yer hide, yer Highness’.

The bastard had been in a right foul mood ever since, and Nori had been keeping a vigilant eye on Ori during the feast the ‘Master’ threw them. He left Balin to that when he decided to visit their Shadow Thief and see what his plans are with most of the Company out of earshot.

The door jerks open just as Nori tries to pick the lock, startling him and sending him onto his arse.

“Knocking is the polite thing to do, Nori,” Bilbo growls at him.

“I didn’t know ye were up, Bilbo,” he drawls back, putting away his tools and slipping in before Bilbo can think to keep him out. “Everyone else asleep?”

“Bard went to sleep a few hours ago after I spent three convincing the Man to let the princelings, Óin, and Bofur stay until we return. We negotiated to three weeks after Kíli is healed if we die horribly by dragon-fire.”

“An’ if the dragon burns Lake Town?”

Their Hobbit shrugs, “He didn’t ask and I didn’t mention it.”

Nori observes Bilbo, noticing the bags under his green eyes, the sickly sheen to his skin and the loss of the weight he had gained the days before he found them in Lake Town.

“Ye don’t look so good, Bilbo.”

The Hobbit grins wryly and takes a seat at the dining table.

“The poison is quite potent. If I hadn’t cast the rune, Kíli would have already passed on to Mahal’s Halls. Not much I can do about my current state unless Kíli miraculously heals. The rune won’t disappear until then or one of us dies.”

“Will you be able to do what Thorin asks?”

Green blurs into gold as the Hobbit glares at him.

“Hey, I jes’ meant will ye be able enough to do it so he’s not tempted te send Ori down. Otherwise, we have te convince the bastard te wait after we’ve found the door.”

Bilbo huffs, “I’d rather that happen, but we both know with Thorin already so far under, I’ll be down there regardless.”

“Then why did ye vouch for him? I’d have been able to find a way out of a jail made by Men.”

The Hobbit stares at him with a raised brow.
“Okay, we’d find a way out.”

“Be that as it may, it would put us at a greater disadvantage. They’d notice the lack of noise, just like the Elves did, and we’d be traveling with Kíli. It would slow us down and we’d most likely miss our opportunity to get the door open. I don’t want to see what else Thorin is capable of while under the gold-sickness, Nori.”

“So it has nothing to do with the sympathy you might get when Thorin doesn’t keep his word?”

Bilbo flashes a fang at him as he shoves a mug into Nori’s hands, sloshing the mead around dangerously, “It may have crossed my mind. It’s never a bad thing to have a back-up plan, Spymaster, even if I hate it.”

Nori’s grip on the mug tightens, his chuckle hollow even to his ears as he says, “I’ll drink te that.”

For some time after that Bilbo explains how he’s going to keep Kíli from trying to follow them to the mountain. It turns out runes are more versatile then Nori had first thought.

“It’s gonna keep him here? What happens if the Orcs find them here or the dragon’s alive an’ comes te burn the Town te a crisp?”

“I’m not daft! I gave Óin and Fíli the way to banish that part of it since we don’t know when Kíli will be healed enough to survive.”

“Oh.”

“I may look young, Nori, but I’m Dwalin’s age.”

“Still a babe according to Beorn.”

The Hobbit chucks a bread roll at him.

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“Are ye really going to be alright still bound te Kíli?”

“I’ll have to be.”

Nori heaves a heavy sigh and nods his head.

“Thorin’s moving us out at sun-up. Make sure yer there before then so we don’t start the day with him in a foul mood, aye?”

“He can shove a pine cone up his arse for all I care,” Bilbo growls. “But to… ease the rest of the journey, I will be there early.”

“Much obliged,” Nori smirks, tipping a nonexistent hat at Bilbo, who gives him a very rude Iglishmek gesture.

Nori leaves Bard’s home trying to keep him cackling unheard.

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Morning comes and Thorin is ready to drag their Hobbit out of the Man’s home and back where he belongs; with h-the Company. He stops short when he sees Bilbo staring out the window towards the sunrise. The light glinting off their Hobbit’s hair like gold.
Thorin can’t help but move closer. Bilbo had shown his support for Thorin’s quest, surely he’ll be
more amiable to Thorin’s presence now.

“Good morning, Bilbo,” he says softly, only an arm's length from being able to touch that soft,
golden hair.

His boots scrape against the floor. Golden eyes pin him in place as they glare out from behind the
locks he longs to sink his fingers into.

“That’s close enough,” Bilbo growls as he turns away from the window enough to put his back
away from Thorin.

Thorin frowns. He thought things were better now…

One of Bilbo’s thin -when did they get so thin- hands rests on the windowsill, tapping against the
wood with pronounced clicks. Glancing at them, he sees Bilbo’s claws are out; a quick glance at his
other hand reveals a dagger held loosely. Thorin knows better than to think Bilbo isn’t prepared to
use it on him and it pains him.

He’d vouched for Thorin. Why would Bilbo do that if he didn’t…

But Fíli had warned him Bilbo was quicker to anger. Maybe something…

“Did you bring our supplies with you?” Thorin asks instead of trying to pry out why Bilbo was
angry with him.

Thorin knows attempting to do so would make Bilbo’s anger worse.

“Yes. Your weapons too, but I’ll hold onto those until we’re out of Lake Town if you don’t mind,”
he says as he flicks his earring.

It’s on the tip of his tongue to argue, but the tapping of the dagger against Bilbo’s leg keeps his
mouth shut.

“Very well,” he forces himself to say.

“I’d also like my other ornament back now.”

Their Hobbit turns fully to face him, clawed hand held out. He can’t stop his hand from covering the
pocket of his jacket holding the barbell ornament protectively. Golden eyes flick down briefly, and
Thorin knows he’s memorized the spot.

Bilbo will have it back regardless if Thorin relinquishes it willingly or not.

Golden eyes narrow further the longer he takes to either return the ornament or argue to keep it.

“Are you going to steal from me, Oakenshield?”

The use of his moniker instead of any vulgar nickname or his birth name is enough to make him
hand it over. He doesn’t want hi-their Hobbit anymore cross with him than he has been.

He has too many desires riding on Bilbo’s favor.

Quietly he removes the ornament from his pocket and places it in Bilbo’s hand, lingering at the
almost forgotten touch of skin against skin.
Claws tap his wrist and he quickly withdraws his hand and steps back.

“Be ready to leave shortly,” he says, nearly choking on the words.

Bilbo says nothing, just keeps his eyes on him till Thorin feels unnerved enough to leave their Hobbit alone as Fíli suggested.

He remains tense until he turns a corner and doesn’t feel those feral eyes watching him anymore.

Bilbo huffs once the sod is out of sight and sheathes his dagger. Reaching behind his head, he carefully replaces the barbell and heaves a sigh of relief once it’s secure.

For a moment, he thought he’d have to physically remove it himself, and he wasn’t confident he wouldn’t have taken Thorin’s hand with it.

Bilbo physically shakes himself to get rid of the tension vibrating through his body. It helps… a bit. He doubts the tension will truly leave his body until this whole mess of a quest is over and done with.

“Bilbo! We’re leavin’!” Nori calls from down the hall like a Faunt still learning what an ‘inside voice’ is.

“Save your yelling for the mountain, Nori,” he sighs as he leaves the window behind to follow the Dwarf.

“Well that’s an ominous thing te say.”

“Fitting either way,” Bilbo shrugs, passing through the door into the morning light and the chill of early winter, frowning at the crowd of townsfolk cheering and playing music as they pass.

Bilbo is more than ready for this quest to be done.

Bofur watches from the other side of the pier as Thorin tentatively offers Bilbo a cape to keep their Hobbit warmer. The miner knows it doesn’t go unnoticed by the rest of the Company or Bilbo that it matches Thorin’s own. Mahal, the bastard is so gone on their Hobbit even acting as weird as he has been. It’d be sweet if Bilbo found Thorin’s attentions to be, but the Hobbit had slowly become more short-tempered than a hungry bear when Thorin is in a few feet of him.

It’s worrisome is what it is.

Especially when Bilbo asked him to stay behind with Óin and the princelings. Bofur had protested, but when Bilbo practically begged him to, he couldn’t deny him. That told Bofur enough to know something other than Thorin’s behavior is putting their Hobbit on high alert.

He watches as Bilbo looks at the cape for a moment before saying something to Thorin and taking the cape. Their King’s face lights up with a small smile he only ever gives their Hobbit now.

Something settles heavy and cold in Bofur’s stomach.

Thorin hasn’t smiled at his nephews in weeks now.

Only at Bilbo.
“I hope ye know what yer doin’, Bilbo,” he says aloud as the Company boards the boat, his thoughts taking a darker turn as Thorin doesn’t even look around for the rest of them.

Golden eyes meet his from across the water as though they heard him.

Bofur wouldn’t be surprised if Bilbo had even over the noise of the townsfolk. The Hobbit nods his head, giving him a little salute before boarding the boat after Thorin.

The Master gives a flowery speech and Bifur and Bombur set the boat to sail. The Company doesn’t see him, waving at the crowds as they float away towards the lake. He thinks it’s just as well, really. Bilbo gave him a job to do, and he’d be Mahal damned if he wasn’t able to see it though because Thorin wants more Dwarrow to throw into the fire -so to speak.

Bofur just prays they remain safe.

And if they can’t, well, Bilbo’s the best at getting out of tricky situations.

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Bofur returns to Bard’s home to see the Man brooding at the table, nursing a glass of watered-down mead, as far as Bofur can tell.

Probably not as good as that Hobbit mead back in the Shire though, nor half as potent…

“The Skin Changer-” Bard starts to say before Bofur interrupts him with a stern look.

At least he picked up something from Bilbo.

“Bilbo.”

“Aye, apologies.”

Bofur keeps staring at him.

“Peace, my anger was misplaced. It is your leader I have issue with.”

“Well, depending on the day, that changes. So I can’t be too sure who yer anger is for.”

“Thorin, as I heard you call him.”

“Aye, yer not the only one.”

“The why follow him?” Bard asks, his tone desperate to understand.

Bofur gets it, in a way. The Man only wants to know his family will live to grow, marry, and have children if they so wish. All this… this drama with Dwarrow returning to a mountain that was abandoned long before he was born and said to hold a dragon with no remorse when burning things to a crisp would put any parent on high alert.

“He wasn’t like this before,” Bofur says, taking a seat at the table. “Before we crossed the Misty Mountains, Thorin was a just leader. At least te us Dwarrow. He didn’t much like Bilbo at first. Thought he was a fussy, useless thing when he joined us.”

Bofur takes a cup and pours himself some of the mead. As he’d thought, it barely hits the spot, poor sod.
“Lot of us thought he was but fer Dwalin and Balin. At least, until he kept our food supplies full when he could and always protected the Dwarflings. Well, most of us. Gloin, Dori, and Thorin still had issues with him, and at one point it went back te the way it started when Bilbo shifted inte a Warg te defend Thorin from some Orcs.”

“Warg? You mean that monstrous form isn’t his only one?” Bard interrupts him this time.

“Nay. Not sure how that one came about honestly, an’ he says he fixed his Warg skin -whatever that means. But, aye, Bilbo has the ability te shift inte a Kit Fox too. Gave us quite the run around at one point before we all knew he was a skin-changing Hobbit.”

“But he’s a Skin Changer -or some variant of them-, not a Hobbit.”

“Variant? Hadn’t thought of that… Not sure how it works. He says he’s a Hobbit before he’s a Skin Changer,” Bofur says with a shrug. “I don’t know much about either to explain it.”

Bard gives a hesitant nod before looking past him toward the window.

“I’d say ye’ve got nothin’ te worry about, not with Bilbo there te keep them in line, but…”

“You can’t promise me that. Not when your leader isn’t himself, as you said.”

“Aye. All we can do is pray it doesn’t happen while we prepare for the worst. Bilbo left some coin for us te gather supplies. We can’t leave, but you can take yer children and get out of here.”

“And go where? There’s nowhere else to go.”

Bofur stills, looking at the Man’s drawn face.

He’s not wrong, and that is more saddening than knowing it may be dragon fire that kills them.

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Thorin is very insistent that Bilbo takes his place at the front of the boat with him. The Hobbit does so with great reluctance, with a dagger drawn and laid across his lap as he sits. He rather fancies not having to take a leap into the lake just to get rid of the Dwarf following him around the boat. Though in all honesty, he’d probably throw the sod over instead just to cool the bastards’ gold-drunk head.

Really, he also prefers the silence now instead of the talking that would happen if he did deny the bastard. It’s like pacifying a temperamental Faunt instead of a fully grown Dwarrow, but as long as it works, Bilbo isn’t going to question the methods he has to use to keep the peace.

It’s not yet midday when they arrive at the shore closest to Erebor. Judging by the distance, Bilbo supposes they will reach the actual mountain sometime after the noon sun starts setting -if they don’t force him into being their steed again-, but before nightfall. Finding the hidden door will be a whole other matter Bilbo doesn’t want to think about until they are actively looking for the bloody thing. If this Dwarrow door is anything like the others Elrond has told him exist, it’s not going to be an easy thing to find, especially on a time limit.

Bilbo is dreading the tantrum Thorin is going to throw when that happens. Best not to think of it now…

End Notes
First fanfic, so any criticism and advice is appreciated. Flames, however, will be ignored, I'm not here to cater to delicate sensibilities after all.

If you wanna chat, ask questions, etc., hit me up on my Tumblr.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!