Summary

A retelling of The Hobbit in which Bilbo is Bella and she can grow a beard when even male hobbits can't.

A tale of growth, love and self acceptance.

Based on this prompt.

(New summary as of 08/12)

Notes

For the Hobbit Kink Meme

I am basing Bella off of my own experiences with PCOS. PCOS is an endocrine system disorder that can cause a variety of symptoms including infrequent or prolonged menstrual periods, excess hair growth, acne, and obesity and often affects different women in different
ways.

I'll be updating this story once a week. I have the first 4 chapters written and a basic outline for the story. I really hope I do this prompt justice and please feel free to leave a comment if you enjoy the story or if you have other opinions/suggestions. Feedback is always welcome :) Unbeta'd so all mistakes are my own.

EDIT 08/12: I changed the summary because I didn't like the old one.
In which the main character is introduced

Bella was a normal, healthy child growing up. She had only rarely gotten sick; never more than a sniffle and despite an odd penchant for adventuring was generally considered to be a lovely child. Many neighbors agreed she’d make some young lad a fine wife someday. It wasn’t until she started puberty and began getting her monthlies that there was the first hint of things not being all as they should be.

Everyone knew that Bella Baggins had an irregular monthlies. Some months they would avoid her altogether and other months they would visit twice and always with the most unbearable pains. There were few secrets in Hobbiton and unfortunately for Bella, her flow was not one of them. Of course, irregular monthlies could only mean one thing; Bella was barren. 'Such a sad thing to happen to such a lovely lass', the neighbors whispered as she walked by. 'Best not to get too close', mothers warned their daughters at the market. The touch of a barren was something to be feared, as many believed it might be contagious. Bella herself became less than a whole in the eyes of her community.

When Bella came of age there were no courting gifts, not that she had expected any, though her parents were very disappointment. While heartbroken at the thought of never being a wife or mother, a part of her had been relieved. If being barren already made her less than a woman, what would her spouse think when they found out she could also grow a beard? It was Bella’s most fiercely guarded secret, something she never confided even to her parents. And if she had had her way, she would have taken it to her grave.

By the time one meddling wizard and 13 crazy dwarves arrived at her smial, Bella had been alone for a long time. Bella found herself fascinated by the dwarves, even as she was flustered, scandalized, and a little frightened by them. They were so unlike anyone she had ever met before. And their beards! Aside from Gandalf when she was a small fauntling Bella had never seen a beard before. Hobbit men didn’t grow beards, Bella wasn’t even sure they could, and her own she was careful to shave every morning first thing and sometimes in the evening too. She hadn’t realized that beards could be, well, attractive. Of course, they were all males. Facial hair was acceptable on males. There were even a few older hobbit men with rather impressive muttonchops. On a woman though, such a thing could only be repulsive.

When Bella decided to join the quest she didn’t have much time for packing. She forgot many things such as her matches and heavy coat. What she didn’t forget was her razors. She brought every one she owned and dispersed them throughout her pockets in clothing and packs. She felt a little paranoid but she also knew life on the road was unpredictable and she wasn’t willing to risk being without. In the Shire she could hide in her home. Traveling with the dwarves there would be no escape if they discovered her shame.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

We get to see a bit how it all began for Bella and then some Company fluff because I'm not the best at angst.

Unbeta'd so all mistakes are mine.

Chapter Notes

I just need to say a huge THANK YOU!!! to everyone who commented and read my story! The feedback was overwhelming and I am so very touched! You guys are absolutely amazing!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It started with just a few hairs on her chin that she could easily pluck. It was annoying but not yet worrisome. She had giggled enough with friends about ‘granny hairs’ to not feel more than a bit embarrassed. But they kept coming back darker and thicker and spread along her jaw like weeds across a sickly garden. Bella found herself going out less and less, fearful that someone else might notice. She struggled to keep up with plucking but it was becoming obvious she needed something more to keep the hair in check. She found her solution quite by accident at the market.

The hobbit was a Bree Hobbit- tall and dark and strange. Many of his wares were geared towards the other residents of Bree such as Men and ill suited for Shire Hobbits but he had lovely silverware, which was why she and her father had stopped at the stall. While Bungo carefully considered many different patterns Bella looked over the other, stranger items, wondering at some of their uses. Despite her attempts at emulating her father’s respectability, she found herself drawn to the pocketknives she found down on one end of the table. There was little reason for a genteel hobbit lass to have more than a penknife at her writing desk or a paring knife in the kitchen. If the neighbor’s knew that Bella did her own butchering and carving on occasion she would be seen as quite strange.

“You’ll not have much want for those.” A loud voice startled Bella. She looked up to see the merchant looking at her with an indulgent smile. “Those are razors. The big folk use them for cutting their whiskers.”

“Whiskers?”

“Aye, you know, the hair that grows on their chins. Their beards.”

“Ah.”

“Strange creatures, those big folk.” Bella’s father commented from beside her.

“Aye, but they make me a pretty penny.”
Bella said nothing as the two male hobbits shared a laugh. She had not known there were tools for removing hair. What hobbit could ever need such a thing? Yet it would be so much easier than trying to pluck, which was hardly working anymore anyways.

She spent a week fretting over it. What would people say if they found out? How could she explain to the merchant what she wanted the razor for? But it was getting harder for Bella to feel comfortable leaving her house and finally she made up her mind. Wearing her plainest clothes and wrapping a shawl about her head, Bella headed down to market shortly before it closed for the day. She was careful to avoid any friend she saw and headed straight to the Bree Hobbit’s stall. The razors were where she left them, tucked to one side, out of the way of more Shire friendly items. She glanced over them but wasn’t sure what to look for in quality.

“May I help you lass?”

“Umm… yes. I want one of these.” She pointed to the nearest razor. The other hobbit’s brows rose near to his hairline.

“And what would you be needing one of those for?”

“I-it’s for a f-friend. A- a gift.” She stuttered, not knowing what else to say.

He stared at her for a moment before a slow smile spread across his face. “Ah, I see. Gift for a friend eh? Didn’t know you Shire hobbits had it in ya.”

Bella wasn’t sure she like the way he said friend, or chuckled at her. She most certainly didn’t like the wink he gave.

“This one here’s quite popular.” The merchant continued, either unaware or uncaring of Bella’s discomfort. “Smooth hinge, best of the man-forged blades that hardly ever needs sharpening and lovely carved handle.”

Bella didn’t really care whether the handle was carved or not nor who forged the blade. She just wanted to make her purchase and get out of there. Agreeing to the proffered blade, she readily handed over the payment and quickly made her way back home, ignoring the merchant’s parting “I hope your man likes it.”

The first morning Bella uses it she feigns sick and refuses to leave her room. Her skin it cut in several places and red and irritated. She throws the razor into the bottom of her trousseau chest and tries to forget about it. But the hair is still growing and she hardly ever leaves the house. Her friends are calling on her less often and she can tell her parents are worried. It takes several tries before she can use the razor without cutting herself and weeks before she discovers that soap will help keep her skin from getting irritated. The next summer, when the Bree Hobbits return for market, Bella buys another razor and a wet stone of her own.

Eventually she becomes quite proficient with the razor, though by then she has few friends left to shave for.

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Every morning Bella made sure she was one of the first to wake. The one benefit she had traveling with a group of males was no one contested her desire for some privacy.

“Mistress Boggins!” Well, almost no one. Bella let out a rather unladylike curse as her hand jerked in surprise and she felt her razor nick right beneath her jaw. A tentative touch showed it to be bleeding.
Hearing Kili and what had to be Fili wondering through the woods, Bella hurried to finish her shaving. She managed just in time as the young princes burst into her small clearing.

“Miss Baggins! You’re bleeding!”

“Are you alright?”

Bella shifted nervously. “F-fine boys, just got a bit of a scratch from a thorn. Nothing to fuss over.” She dabbed at it with a bit of water and her sleeve. By the Valar what she wouldn’t give for a handkerchief. “Did you need something?”

“We’re hungry.” Kili whined as he all but threw himself at her feet. He was quite the dramatic little sod when he wanted to be. Bella was fairly certain he got that from his uncle though she’d never dare say so out loud.

“No one is up yet ‘cept uncle and he’s not allowed to cook.” Fili explained.

Bella smiled. “Well, I might not have been of much help so far on this journey but breakfast is one thing I can do and do well.”

The boys smiled and quickly led the way back to camp. As they had said, Thorin was the only one up having taken the early morning watch. He gave them a small nod in greeting before returning to staring into the distance. He really was magnificent, especially when he was all broody. Bella wondered idly if he was aware of how he looked. Perhaps he posed himself to take optimal advantage of the light and wind. Bella let out a small laugh at the thought as she got to cooking. Of course her musings didn’t stop her from sneaking admiring glances while she worked. No one may ever want her as a wife but that didn’t mean she couldn’t enjoy the view presented.

“What are you thinking about?”

Bella nearly jumped out of her skin at hearing Fili’s voice so close.

“What?” She squeaked.

“Did uncle do something? ‘Cause I can have a word with him.”

“What? No. No, of course not. I’m not sure we’ve ever exchanged more than a handful of words. Why would you think he’s done something?”

“Well, you had this sad look on your face and you keep looking over at uncle so I thought maybe… I mean, I know how he can be when he…”

“When he what?” Bella asked when it seemed Fili wouldn’t finish on his own.

The young dwarf just shrugged, looking mildly embarrassed before looking earnestly at Bella. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay. You’re one of us you know? And we look after our own.”

Bella felt tears well up and was sure Fili could see them despite her best efforts. He couldn’t have any idea how much his words meant to her. She hadn’t been a part of anything since before her parents’ had died.

“Oh you!” She exclaimed as she tackled Fili into a hug. It was obvious he was surprised by the hug but he responded to it warmly.

“No fair! I want a hobbit hug!” Was all the warning they got before Kili slammed into them. If it
hadn’t of been for Fili, Bella would have been knocked to the ground. As it was she found herself squashed between two very solid dwarf bodies. It was rather uncomfortable and hard to breath but Bella wouldn’t trade her current place for the world.

“The food is beginning to burn.” Thorin’s voice intruded on the moment.

“Oh no!” With a surprisingly hard shove Bella extracted herself from the hug and ran back to where her sausages and mushrooms were cooking. Focused on her food (in danger of being overcooked but thankfully not burned) Bella didn’t notice Thorin’s eyes following her or the glare he sent his nephews.

The smell of food soon roused the rest of the dwarves. It wasn’t long before they were packed up and back on the road. Bella found herself spending most of the day walking between Fili and Kili, sharing stories. Well, the boys shared stories and Bella mostly listened. She didn’t have much worth sharing. The nicest parts of her life either took place before the age of 25 or after leaving with the dwarves. Many of the other dwarves also joined in adding their own stories or, in Bofur’s case, a song. It was the best day she’d had so far on the quest. In fact it was best day she’d had in longer than Bella cared to remember.

Chapter End Notes

So, I did a little bit of research for this on both razor blades and pocketknives. Mostly for the fun of it (I’m a huge history nerd) than because I’m actually going for accuracy. I choose to believe that since The Hobbit didn’t take place on Earth I don’t actually have to worry about historical accuracy too much.

Anyways, cool facts, they've found folding blades (like in Sweeny Todd) as far back as the 15 century and folding pocketknives date as far back as 600-500 BC. Also, the Romans had their own Swiss-Army knife back in the 2nd century!

If you want to read more: The History of the Pocket Knife and The History of the Straight Razor. Scroll down to the 5th post to learn more about the 15 century razor.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Rather long flashback in this one. Just a warning to those of you who like Lobelia, I made her a huge b*tch. I needed a bully and she makes for a rather good one I'm afraid.

Unbeta'd so all mistakes are mine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Lobelia had announced at the market that morning that she would be joining Bella for tea, Bella herself had been confused but excited at the prospect of having a guest. She and Lobelia had never been close. The other hobbit was a few years older than Bella and had run with a different circle of fauntlings growing up. Even after marrying Bella’s cousin Otho they hadn’t much to do with each other. Bungo and Otho’s father, Longo, had fallen out of each other’s favor long before Bella had arrived. So it was surprising that Lobelia would come over but not unwelcome. Bella had not had the opportunity to play host since her parents had died. Her once warm and happy smial was far too quiet and it would be lovely to hear another’s voice in it again.

Bella quickly finished up her shopping and hurried home. The rest of the morning was devoted to cleaning and cooking. Bella flitted about like an excited hummingbird, stirring a batter here, sweeping a hallway there, and putting food on and off the hearth. By teatime she was quite exhausted but her smial was sparkling and she had created a small feast. As she looked once more over her spread Bella thought she might have overdone it a bit. Hopefully Lobelia wouldn’t see it as the desperation for company it was.

Minutes trickled by. Bella checked and rechecked everything. She ran a razor over her chin just in case there was any little stubble she’d missed. She got up and peeked out the window for any sign of her guest. She ensured her best silver was put out and spotless. She picked up books just to put them down again. Bella Baggins fretted. Finally, 45 minutes late, when most would be finishing their tea, there was a knock on the door.

"Please, come in." She greeted the hobbit on her step. Lobelia gave her a bland smile and handed over her umbrella and jacket.

"So sorry I’m late. I ran into Menegilda Goold. Did you know she was visiting Hobbiton? I simply had to stop and talk to her."

"Y-yes, of course." Bella led the way to the dining room. "I hope you’re hungry, I made quite a spread for tea."

"Oh dear." Lobelia tutted. "I’m afraid I’ve already eaten. Menegilda had some of her strawberry tarts- you know the ones? Quite divine. In any case I couldn’t possibly eat any more."

Bella tried hard not to wilt. Refusing food? She had never witnessed such behavior from a hobbit before. Surely there was always room for just a spot more? "I-I s-see. J-just tea then?"

"Yes. Cream and two sugars."
The younger hobbit quickly made up a cup for her guest before pouring one for herself. Lobelia took it was a small sniff before setting it down without a taste. Bella floundered for something to say but before she could think of anything Lobelia spoke up again.

“As I’m sure you realize this isn’t a social call.”

“Yes. I-I’m beginning to see that.”

“Right. Well, the fact is Otho and I are starting our family.” Lobelia said with a meaningful hand on her belly.

“Oh! Congratulations!”

“We’re quite pleased. Now that our family is growing, our current smial is too small and well, to be honest people think you should have left when your father died. Bag End is far too big for one hobbit. Would it not be better to go to a family that could better care for it? Such as my own?”

“W-what?”

“Really, it should have gone to Otho as soon as Bungo died. It was quite selfish of you to refuse to move.”

“This is my home!” Bella interrupted, all righteous indignation.

“There’s no need to shout.” Lobelia looked at Bella as though she were the rude one. “And that’s just the attitude I’m talking about. Selfish. This was your home and it has served you well but it is time to move on. Season’s change and as Hobbits we must change with it. You would understand this if you in-tune with Yavanna’s creations.” Bella flinched at the reference to her irregular monthlies.

“I will not give up my home.”

“Stop being ridiculous. What good is Bag End doing you? It is a big smial built for a family, which is something you cannot and will never have. Otho and I can. This home is no place for a halfling who has no hope of filling it.”

Bella gasped at the word. She had no doubt people thought such things but to be so called to her face, in her very own home and over tea as though discussing the weather; it was beyond any offense Bella could have ever conceived.

“Get out.” Bella was proud of how calm she was able to keep her voice.

“What?” Had the conversation been any less painful the surprise on Lobelia’s face would have been comical.

“Get out.”

“Well, I never!” Lobelia huffed but made no move to leave. “How rude!”

“Rude?! You come into my house, refuse to eat my food-“

“Of course. You can’t expect me to eat something a halfling made. It might make me lose the baby.”

“You have insulted me in the worst possible ways, have the audacity to demand my house, and then call me rude?! Get out! Get out before I do something worse than be rude to you! You and your family will never have Bag End!”
Lobelia’s face morphed into one of anger. “You are an abomination Bella Baggins! A disgrace to the Baggins’ name and a terrible excuse for a hobbit. Also, the hair on your feet is very thin indeed.” With that parting shot Lobelia flounced out the door. Bella had the pleasure of slamming it behind her.

It was a short-lived pleasure though and as the adrenaline faded Bella felt the grief overwhelm her. It was a long time before she is able to pick herself up off the entryway floor. She wiped her face clean and settled herself at the kitchen table with her cold tea and food. It wasn’t until she was cleaning up later that Bella realized several pieces of silverware were missing.

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They were setting up camp that evening when Thorin walked up to her. It was the first time since beginning their journey that the king had sought her out.

“Miss Baggins, you did such a fine job with breakfast I was wondering if you would cook our meal tonight?”

“Oh!” Bella felt quite flustered and knew her face must be bright red. There wasn’t a much better compliment for a hobbit than to be told their cooking was appreciated. To have Thorin actually ask her to cook for them, Bella didn’t think she could me more pleased.

“Yes! Of course! I’d love to.” Bella began to babble as she walked over to their food supplies. “I know I’ve not been of much use so far, though I have tried to help where I can. But cooking I am good at. Quite good if I do flatter myself. And to cook for so many people! It’s so lovely. I’ve never had the opportunity to cook for so many. It’s quite exciting.”

Thorin looked bemused by the spew of words flowing from her mouth. Bella wasn’t sure if it was because of what she was saying or just the sheer amount.

“I-I’m sorry. You have much better things to do I’m sure than listen to me ramble. I’ll have supper done in a jiffy.”

Instead of wondering off as Bella expected Thorin sat himself down near the fire. For a while they were silent, him enjoying the warmth of the fire and her cooking. She was a bit nervous, having him so near but at the same time found the company surprisingly comfortable.

“Do hobbits not have large parties?” Thorin eventually broke the silence.

“What? Oh no, hobbits love parties. The larger the better. They’re grand things with drinking and dancing, stories and so much food the tables are groaning with it!” Bella sighed wistfully, remembering the parties she had attended in her youth.

“But you’ve never cooked for one.”

“Ah, no.” She ran a hand down her jaw, subconsciously checking for stubble. It was a nervous habit she’d developed in her tweens. “I’ve never had the opportunity to host.”

“That explains why you were so flustered when my dwarrows and I arrived for supper.” Thorin said with what might have been the beginnings of a teasing smile.

Bella nodded with a thoughtful look. “I never thought of it that way.” A smile of her own took over her face. “I always figured it was because I had 13 dwarves showing up unannounced and taking over my smial.”
“What?” Any hint of a smile was gone. In fact Thorin looked angry all of a sudden. “What do you mean ‘unannounced’?”

“W-well, just that I wasn’t expecting you is all. It was quite a surprise having you all show up. Not that I minded. Well, I did at the time. I felt quite put out having all these people show up and eat out my pantry but that’s all in the past now. I’m quite happy you all came and brought me along on your adventure, really I am. It’s so much more than I deserve and you’ve all been so great to me, really, even though I’ve been quite useless and now you’re letting me cook for you all which is an honor.” The more Bella talked the fiercer Thorin’s scowl became which made poor Bella quite nervous and she’d always had the unfortunate habit of rambling when nervous.

“Peace Halfling.” Thorin interrupted and Bella immediately shut her mouth. She hated that name, ‘halfling’ - someone who was less than a person. Only Lobelia had ever been cruel enough to say such a thing to her face though she’d heard it often enough in passing. Thorin was still talking. Something about needing to speak to the wizard. It was hard to hear anything over the white noise in her ears.

Bella was thankful when he finally walked away. The last thing she wanted was for Thorin to see her tears. She wasn’t sure what had gone wrong, they had been having a perfectly amicable conversation; he had even complimented her cooking. What happened to make him angry with her? And to call her a Halfling! He couldn’t possibly know she was barren, could he? Unless dwarves could tell and what a horrifying thought that was!

It was hard to finish the meal with her sight blurred by tears but she was determined to do a good job. She would prove her worth to these dwarves if it was the last thing she did.

Thorin found her later that evening tucked into the shadows beneath a large tree. Bella had chosen the spot at the edge of camp with the intention of being left alone. And it had worked until Thorin sought her out. Confounded dwarf. She only hoped it was dark enough he couldn’t see she had been crying.

“I owe you an apology.” Thorin looked more uncomfortable than Bella had ever seen him. He was holding himself stiffly and his words were stilted. If circumstances had been different she might have found it funny.

“My dwarrows and I, we were under the impression that Gandalf had gone on ahead to secure your services for the quest and to announce us. We arrived believing we were expected.”

“Oh.” That definitely explained a few things. “It’s quite alright, please don’t let it bother you. It was certainly a bother at the time, and rather frightening- do you know what it’s like to open your door to Dwalin’s scowling visage?”

Thorin gave a small chuckle. “I do in fact but I see your point.”

“Right. But as I said before I am quite glad you all did barge in to my home that night. So very glad.”

“Still,” Thorin said, shuffling a little. “If we had known we would not have been rude.”

Bella made a rude sound herself in disbelief. They were not far into their journey but she had been around these dwarves enough to know their rudeness was an ingrained part of their personalities. Bella thought a lot of it was simply a clash of cultures.

Thorin must have been thinking along the same lines because he amended with, “less rude at least.” Bella had to smile at that. “Thank you but really, it’s not worth troubling your self over.”
A regal nod and Thorin was gone, obviously relieved to have that conversation over. Bella settled further into her seat with a sigh. She appreciated the apology, really she did. She just couldn’t help feeling he was apologizing for the wrong thing.

Chapter End Notes

(Not really) Brief explanation on my use of the word 'halfling' in this chapter. I know that halfling is a really common term the other races use for hobbits. But I stole it and turned it into an insult. My thoughts are this: Hobbits, especially those from Hobbiton and those that can be categorized as genteel hobbits, are rather isolated from the rest of the word. Bella has never been outside the Shire, has never met anyone not a hobbit (except for Gandalf) before this adventure. I imagine it's much the same with the other residents of Hobbiton.

So the term 'halfling' has been passed to the Shire (probably by the Stoors) and the meaning has been warped and changed by the region. Hobbits wouldn't refer to themselves as halflings in the sense of being half-sized because in their view, they're not. So instead it means figuratively 'half a person' and with their culture (or at least the one I gave them) who would be seen as only half a person? Why, a barren woman of course because she cannot fulfill her purpose as a woman.

So yeah, hope that clears any confusion. It's going to play a semi-big role later on (just imagine how Thorin's going to feel when he finds out).
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

We get to see Bella’s first experience with adventuring and she and Dwalin bond a little.

Chapter Notes

First off I need to tell you all how amazing you are! Thank you so much to everyone who’s read, gave kudos, and left comments!!! You guys leave the best feedback! Not just affirmations which are incredibly appreciated but things that make me think and challenge me as I work on this story. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

I will say this is not my favorite chapter. I struggled with it and considered leaving it out because it doesn’t really further the plot along but to be honest, I love Dwalin (He’s my favorite dwarf and my second favorite to pair with Bilbo). Also, this is a very angsty story and I thought it could do with a little bit of fluff.

Or maybe I just need a little fluff after the future chapters I’ve written this week.

Unbeta’d so all mistakes are mine.

“We are going on an adventure.” Belladonna announced to the room at large.

Bungo did not even look up from the map he was looking over. “That’s nice dear.” He mumbled. Little Bella, however, looked up with her eyes wide and toys forgotten. She had heard of adventures before; in her mother’s stories and her father’s books but it was a word whispered amongst the fauntlings and Bella herself had never thought she’d be anywhere near one.

Belladonna gave a huff in her husband’s directions before turning to her daughter. “What do you say, Little One? Are you ready for your first adventure?”

“Don’t you think she’s a little young?” Bungo asked, finally looking up. He had that line between his eyes that made him look grumpy, even when he said he wasn’t.

“Nonsense. She’s eleven. Eleven is a fine age for adventuring.”

Bungo continued to look grumpy.

“You can come along too for extra protection. I packed my meat pies to eat.” Belladonna coaxed, her grin teasing.

Bungo huffed, much in the same manner as his wife but the line went away and he even smiled a little. “I suppose a little adventure never hurt nobody. As long as we’re back by dinner.”

“Naturally.” Belladonna smiled brightly. Bella thought her mother was prettier than all the flowers in their garden. “You hear that my Bella, we are going adventuring!”
Bella could hardly breathe she was so excited. A real adventure! “Yay!” She squealed unable to contain the excitement rushing through her.

“That’s the spirit. Run and grab your jacket now, we’re not quite into summer yet.”

The fauntling raced out the room and down the hall, ignoring her dad’s call of “no running!” Once in her room she searched out her best jacket. Surely something as special as an adventure deserved her best.

“Ready!” She met back up with her parents in the front hall. Her mother was armed with a large basket and her father a walking stick. “Let’s go!”

“As my lady orders.” Her father answered even as her mother ran a suspicious eye over her jacket.

“One minute missy.” Belladonna stopped her. Bella knew a moment of fear. “Do you have your handkerchief?”

Bella checked her pockets. “No?”

“Gasp! You can’t go adventuring without your handkerchief!”

“Why not?”

“What are you going to do out there in the wild if you’ve got a runny nose and no handkerchief? Or if you cut your hand or need something to carry berries in? What if you see a bear and need to let him know you’re friendly with a nice white flag? Or want to catch the attention of an elf before they step right on top of you? Handkerchiefs are vital to all adventures.”

Bella’s eyes grew wide. She’d never thought handkerchiefs were so important. If she had know she would have been much better about not losing hers all the time… or cutting it to make ribbons for her dolls.

“March right back to your room and grab yourself a handkerchief. Quickly now. And why don’t you change out of your red jacket into the green while you’re there.”

Bella didn’t change her jacket but she did grab all five handkerchiefs from her bedside drawer.

It was fairly early in the day still, just after second breakfast and Hobbiton was just starting to come alive with people working in their gardens, heading to the market, or going on their way to visit someone for elevensies. Bella and her parents stopped to talk with several neighbors and friends along the way.

“We’re going on an adventure!” She told them each time. The strange looks she often received did nothing to curb her enthusiasm. Belladonna stood protectively over her child and while her smile never faltered, it had a harsh, challenging edge to it. Bungo on the other hand seemed perfectly relaxed. His easy demeanor never change but the look in his eyes was more than enough to silence any negative comment any hobbit might have said. Of course, more often than not he was able to masterfully steer the conversation so the other went away thinking to themselves what a nice family those Bagginses were.

They eventually made their way down to The Water and followed it for a good long while. At elevensies they stopped for a light snack of cheesy scones by the riverbank.

“I thought you said you brought meat pies?” Bella whined, though it didn’t stop her from eating her scone.
“So I did Little One. Those we’ll save for lunch.”

They soon packed up and were on their way again. This time they turned north and moved away from The Water towards the Bindbole Wood. They reached the shade of the trees just in time for lunch. The long awaited meat pies were passed out and Bella munched happily on hers as she listened to the birds sing. She thought food tasted even better when on an adventure.

“Well my dear, where to now on our adventure?” Bungo asked as they cleaned up their meal.

“Just a bit further.” Belladonna promised and once again led their small party. Bella had never been so far away from home before. She kept her eyes wide to take in everything there was to be seen. Every skittish animal, every friendly flower, every bright leaf seemed new and strange and exotic to the fauntling. Eventually they came to a small clearing bursting with all kinds of flowers Bella had never seen before.

“Here we are.”

“Sweet Yavanna.” Bungo breathed, looking at the riot of color before them. “How did you find this place?”

“Last time I went to visit Mirabella I noticed she had some new flowers in her garden. She told me about this place.” Belladonna turned to her husband with a large grin. “Help me decide which to bring back?”

“But of course.”

Bella happily explored the clearing as her parents worked. She pointed out the flowers she thought prettiest, chased butterflies, and looked for elves. Eventually she wondered her way back to her parents. Bungo was napping underneath a tree at the edge of the clearing so Bella ignored him and made her way to her mother. Belladonna was sitting beside a small bush with large red flowers. Bella watched in silence for a while as her mother used a knife unlike any Bella had ever seen before to cut off several branches.

“What is that?” She asked, pointing to the knife.

“This is my pocket knife. I am using it to get cuttings of this bush.” Belladonna held the knife up for Bella to see. It looked like their steak knives in that it had a blade and a handle but the shape was wrong. When her mother folded it in half Bella had thought for a moment that it was broken until it was unfolded again.

“Oooh.” Bella reached out to touch it.

“Ah. This is not for little fauntlings to play with.” Belladonna laughed at Bella’s pout. “Soon enough you will be old enough and I will buy you a pocket knife of your own and teach you how to care for it.”

“You promise?”

“I promise. After all, after your handkerchief, a pocketknife is the most useful tool an adventurer can have. Now, how about we wake up your father or else we won’t make it home for dinner.”

The journey back went much quicker. They didn’t stop for any meals, just eating a snack as they walked, which allowed them to arrive home just in time to put together a quick dinner. As they ate Bella happily retold her parents the adventure, despite having been there themselves, and her plans for many future ones. Once the dishes were cleaned up Belladonna allowed Bella to crawl into her
lap at the table and watch as she cleaned and sharpened her pocketknife. It was fascinating but the day had been long and exciting and the rhythmic sound of the whetstone over metal soon lulled the fauntling into sleep.

Bella shifted nervously under Dwalin’s blank stare. “I- I’m sorry. I was just… just never mind. Forget I asked.”

“You want to use my sharpening stone?” The large dwarf cut through her nervous ramblings.

“Umm… yes?”

Another pause.

“Do you even know how to use one?”

“What? Of course I do! Do you think I just wonder around asking dwarves for the use of their tools all- all higgledy-piddledy? Of course not! What would be the point of asking for something I can’t use?”

“Tch, calm down lass. I meant no insult. Here.”

Bella very nearly dropped the stone when he tossed it to her. “T-thanks.”

“So what is it that needs sharpening? You can’t be hiding much more than a toothpick on ya.”

“A toothpick!” She sputtered indignantly. “Just because I don’t carry around hulking axes bigger than I am, doesn’t mean I don’t have any tool on me!”

“Alright then.” Dwalin conceded good-naturedly. “Let’s see what you’ve got then.”

“Very well.”

Without further ado she plopped herself down next to the large warrior and began emptying her pockets. She started with the pocketknife her mother had given her when she turned 20. After her mother had died it had gone into her trousseau, which had become a bit of a place to store things that were never to be used but couldn’t be thrown away. As soon as she had signed the contract she had run and dug it out, packing it first quickly followed by all of her handkerchiefs.

Next she began pulling out her razors. She had planned to care for them in private, away from dwarven eyes but her pride had been hurt and they looked close enough to pocketknives that surely they, who took pride in their beards and never shaved, wouldn’t know the difference. Out came the two from her jacket’s inner pockets. Then the one in her vest. The three tucked amongst the folds of her skirts followed and finally the one tucked within her bodice, which she removed with a blush across her cheeks. She had more in her pack but that was on the other side of camp and eight blades was enough for one evening. It had certainly gained her the reaction she was hoping for. Dwalin’s eyes were wide and his jaw hung open with shock. He was not the only one either. Dwarves, Bella had found, were nosey creatures (though not quite as bad a hobbits- just less subtle about it) and several other members of camp had been paying attention. Those who hadn’t soon were thanks to the surprised look all being sent in her direction. Bella pretended couldn’t see them and flipped open her first blade. She hummed an old hobbit song as she expertly ran the stone along the razor’s edge.
“That’s quite a collection you’ve got there.” Dwalin said once he’d recovered. There was genuine admiration in his voice. Bella worked to contain her joy.

“I find it best to be prepared.” She wasn’t quite sure she pulled off the nonchalant tone she was going for. She rather thought she sounded like a fauntling at a birthday party.

“榜样. A good policy, that. You seem quite comfortable handling them. I thought hobbits were gentle, peaceful folk?”

“Oh, we are. You won’t catch most respectable hobbits holding anything more exciting than a butter knife. But my mother, she loved adventures.” Bella sighed, losing herself in memories for just a moment. “She always said a good pocketknife was the second most important thing a person could have on an adventure.”

“What was the first?”

“A handkerchief.”

Dwalin snorted. “Strange folk, hobbits, even if your mother does sound more sensible than most.”

“Handkerchiefs are very useful.” Bella defended.

“Oh, aye. They’re quite good with a sniffle but I’ve never known one to get you out of a scuffle.”

“That was nearly poetic and obviously you’ve just not been using one right.”

“I’ll bow to your expertise on the matter.”

“A good choice. I am quite knowledgeable on the uses of handkerchiefs and from what little I’ve seen, you dwarves are really quite useless when it comes to such things.”

The large dwarf laughed. “You’re alright Burglar. I think we just might keep you.”

Bella beamed and happily went back to her sharpening.

The next day burned hot and bright. The cool spring breezes that had kept things comfortable were nowhere to be found. Many of the dwarves grumbled at the heat and moods were testier than usual. Bella personally thought removing a few of their many layers would go a long way to help but refrained from saying anything. Even this early into the trip she knew better than to comment on the dwarves’ clothes or hair.

Bella’s own curls were lying damp against her forehead and the back of her neck. Finally, around lunch, she’d had enough. Pulling out one of her handkerchiefs she folded it in half and tied it around her head. She felt a bit like one of the grandmothers back in the Shire but it held her hair back and she could even pull it forward a little to help shield her eyes.

“Burglar.”

Bella looked up to see Dwalin had come to ride beside her. “Yes?”

His face was as stern as always but she couldn’t help but think he looked a little sheepish. “Have you got another of those handkerchiefs?”


“For my head. You’ve got a good idea there.” He gestured to his head, which Bella now noticed was
beginning to redden.

“Oh! You poor thing! Of course!“

“Tch, I’m no such thing. It’s just a bit of a burn but I’d prefer it not get any worse. Not good for the tattoos, you see.”

Bella quickly fished around in her pockets to find another handkerchief. The only one she had on her, aside from the one on her head, was a favorite of her mother’s. It had large, beautiful primroses embroidered across it. Dwalin gave it a look like he thought it might insult him but took it without complaint.

She knew enough not to laugh at the dwarf, as apparently did the rest of the dwarves. No one said a word or so much as snickered but the looks passed behind Dwalin’s back let her know they were enjoying the view as much as she was. The sight of the large warrior with a flowered handkerchief tied about his head like an old biddy was not one Bella would soon forget.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

In this chapter we get Bella's first heartbreak and trolls.

Chapter Notes

#1 Sorry this is late! I have no good excuse except that I got lost in a book yesterday and didn't find my way out until far too late in the evening.

#2 You all are amazing and I love you! Thank you so much everyone who left a comment. I try to respond to everyone individually but I just can't say enough how awesome you all are!

#3 I am picking and choosing what I want from the books and movies and therefore not staying very true to either one. The timeline and relationships with the elves are most definitely more in line with the book while I took the action I like from the movies. My scene here with the trolls is also heavily inspired by the play adaption. I had the pleasure last month of seeing our local children's theatre perform it and it was adorable! (If a bit strange. Thorin and the Elf Queen team up to kill the dragon... but then don't kill the dragon. Bard still does that)

#4 Unbeta'd so all mistakes are mine. I did a very quick look through because I wanted to get this out asap so please feel free to let me know if something needs to be fixed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bella had grown up along side Bolo Proudfoot. They had run around in the same pack of fauntlings and he had been one of the few willing to climb trees or hop across streams with her. When they were 15 he had given her, her first kiss under the Party Tree. Bella had been quite certain she was in love.

When the rumors began, in Bella’s early tweens, he began to grow distant. It took her a while to notice that he was busy more often, had less time to spend with her. He didn’t come by to talk anymore or walk her down to the party tree. Whenever she saw him down at the market he seemed to be on his way, hurrying here or there. An errand for his mother, a chore for his father. Had to pass a message to one of his siblings. It took her so long to catch on.

It wasn’t until Adalgrim Took’s wedding that Bella fully realized what was happening.

She had worn her best frock and had spent extra time curling her hair and brushing her feet. She had backcombed the hair a bit to make it look fuller. Bolo had been rather busy of late and she was hoping that tonight she could remind him of his promise to court her. They were still a bit young yet but it had been almost 10 years since their first kiss. Everyone knew they would marry.

Bella arrived with her parents shortly before the start of the ceremony. Looking between the other
guests she could see Bolo with his siblings several rows away. She tried several times to make eye contact but he seemed not to notice her at all. In fact, he was looking quite intently on something towards the front. Bella looked to see what could be so interesting but aside from the normal decorations she couldn’t see anything. With a small huff she slouched in her seat. She would just have to wait until after. A look from her mother had Bella sitting straight as the wedding started. Never before had a ceremony lasted so long.

Finally, finally it was over. Adalgrim and his lovely bride were married. It had been a beautiful ceremony but she found herself comparing everything to how she would plan her wedding. Roses were traditional but overdone. Myrtle and honeysuckle were also common though beautiful. Maybe gilly-flower and alstroemeria with heliotrope and ivy. Yes, that would be lovely.

Once free to mingle she immediately looked around for Bolo but he wasn’t to be seen. Bella was a bit hurt that he hadn’t yet sought her out but she was sure there was a good reason. Perhaps he had been put in charge of his older brother Bodo’s fauntling, though Odo was almost a tween himself. Finally she saw him over by the food with several other young males, including her cousin Otho. With a determined stride she made her way over.

However, it was a hobbit party and it seemed all of Hobbiton was making their way to the food. She had to dodge and weave and ‘excuse me’ with every step. By the time she made it to where Bolo had been he was there no longer.

“Where did Bolo disappear to? I thought I saw him here a moment ago.” Bella kept her tone purposely light. The three young males still there were looking at her in a way that had been more and more common the past few weeks. It was the way they looked at the stray dogs that occasionally wondered into town. Like they were looking at something that didn’t belong. Something that was potentially dangerous. Otho looked down on her with an ugly frown.

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because I want to talk to him obviously.”

Otho stared at her for a moment. “I don’t know.” He finally answered before turning his back to her. The other two hobbits with him followed suit. She stared at their backs in shock for a moment, unable to believe their rudeness before going back to her search.

What followed was the longest and least fun game of cat and mouse Bella had ever played. Bolo had seemed to develop a talent for disappearing in-between bouts of dancing with the other hobbit lasses. By the time she finally managed to corner him, long after the moon had risen, Bella was under no illusions as to their relationship. Or lack thereof to be more accurate. She merely wanted to hear him say the words though she couldn’t explain why, even to herself.

“You’ve been avoiding me.” Bella accused a she approached the arbor he was standing under.

“Bella! W-what a surprise.”

“I just want to know why.” She wasn’t at all interested in his poor acting. She just wanted answers. Something that might soothe the ache in her chest.

Bolo looked around, as though he might find an answer from their surrounding. Or perhaps he was looking for a way to escape. When none made itself known he heaved a sigh but still refused to meet her eyes.

“They say you’re barren.”
“What!” Bella could feel the blood drain from her face and her hands began to tremble. “Who says that?”

“Everyone. We all know about your monthlies.”

She could hardly believe he’d say such a thing out loud. Of course, a lot had happened lately that she could hardly believe. Not the least of which was the truth about her monthlies.

“Apparently Jessamine Bolger has been busy.” Bella said, once again feeling the sting of betrayal. Jessamine had been her best friend she had thought.

“So it’s true.”

Balla shrugged, not sure what she could say. “There’s no proof that I’m barren. It’s possible I could have children.”

Bolo frowned. In that moment he looked remarkably like Otho. “Your monthlies are irregular. Don’t lie to yourself. It’ll not do you any favors and it certainly won’t work in trying to fool me. I don’t even know why you’ve sought me out. You had to know how I’d feel once I found out.”

“I thought you loved me. I thought we were in love.” Knowing that there was no hope didn’t stop Bella from trying. She had spent the last 10 years dreaming of the day she’d marry Bolo Proudfoot.

“Well, that was before. It’s different now obviously. I can’t have a wife that can’t have children. I’d be a laughingstock. And what would you do without children to tend to? What would even be the point? No, it’s best you forget about such foolishness as love. You’ll only make yourself miserable.”

Bella stared at him a moment, trying to understand who this hobbit was in front of her. Surely he was not the same hobbit who would escort her to the market or bring such lovely bouquets of violets? Unable to spend another moment in his presence, she turned and walked away without a word. It was rude on her part but she was far past the point of caring. Not bothering to say anything to anyone she made her way back home alone. When her mother found her later, closer to morning than not, she was sitting amongst the anemone. The older hobbit said nothing. Belladonna sat herself beside her daughter and wrapped them both in the blanket she had brought. When Bella began to cry she said nothing but held her close until the tears ran out. Like that, together, they watched the sun rise.

+ 

Being held within a troll’s fist was certainly one of the least comfortable places Bella had ever been. She was torn between fear of being squeezed to death by the tight grip and falling to her death if she freed herself. She settled for wiggling her arms free. It at least gave her the illusion of some control.

“What is it?” Asked one of the trolls.

“I dunno.” Said the one holding Bella. “Furry little thing though.”

Bella’s hand immediately shot to her chin, feeling the light stubble before realizing he was staring at her feet.

“Can we eat it?” The third troll asked.

“Certainly not!” Bella said even as her troll pulled her protectively towards his chest.

“No! ‘Es me pet!” He cried. Bella let out a little squeak as the grip tightened, pushing all the air out
of her lungs.

“I still say we should eat it.”

“There’s hardly enough for a mouthful. Let William keep his pet.”

“Maybe there’s more of them?”

“Well pet?” William asked, lifting Bella up to eye level. “Are there more of ya out there?”

It took Bella a moment to answer. She had never been so high up in her life and she really wasn’t enjoying the experience. “Yes.” She squeaked before she thought better of it. “I-I mean no! No there’s not.”

“Well, which is it? Are there o’ aren’t there? I don’t fancy wakin’ with my throat slit.”

“I-I’m the only one. “ Of course, it would be her luck that as soon as she said it the dwarves would burst out of the trees, weapons drawn and battle cries on their lips. Never before had she so loved and hated anyone at the same time. They were trying to save her- after she had been foolish enough to get caught- but by the Valar, they were going about it in the most idiotic way possible!

Things came to a head rather quickly as William held her up by her arms and threatened to tear Bella limb from limb. She was absolutely terrified but at the same time she knew this quest was bigger than her and far more important. She tried to communicate this to Thorin. Bella was too scared to move to shake her head but she tried to plead with him with her eyes not too do anything stupid. For one moment she thought it worked. Then the great, majestic idiot dropped his sword and the others followed suite. Oh they were going to have words if they survived this!

What followed were a horrible blur of smelly sacks, fast-talking, and the timely arrival of Gandalf. Bella had never been so happy to see the wizard in all her life though she had a thing or two to say about leaving things to the last minute. That would have to wait, she decided when she saw Thorin marching towards her with a thunderous expression.

“What could you have possibly been thinking?” Bella demanded before Thorin could even open his mouth. It was almost funny to watch his step falter and a bewildered look take over his face. However, Bella Baggins was not in the mood to be amused.

“What kind of fool goes charging out at 3 trolls with nothing more than a handful of dwarves?”

“The correct term is dwarrows and we are warriors.” Thorin growled, looking angry again.

“Dwarrows then and no. Some of you are warriors. Some are scribes and toymakers and accountants and while I do not doubt anyone’s ability to fight you tried to take on three full grown mountain trolls! Without any sort of plan! How is that not idiotic?”

“If you recall Madam Burglar, we were doing it to save you!”

“Which I appreciate!” Bella realized she was yelling and made an effort to calm down. “Thorin, I am just one small hobbit, no one of any importance. Not even in the Shire. You are a king on a quest to take back your kingdom for your people. You must never put your quest at risk for me. I am not worth it.”

“Bella-“

She ignored him and kept talking. “If we ever get into a situation like that again you must promise to
“You would have me abandon my honor?”

“I would see you live and fulfill your quest and see your people home. I am nothing but a halfling,” the word came out with more emotion than Bella had intended. “But I will do what I can to see this through but you must never risk anything for my sake. I’m not worth it.”

Thorin opened his mouth to respond but was cut off by Gandalf’s call. “If there are trolls then there must be a troll cave nearby. We should see what we can find in the way of supplies.”

Bella was thankful to watch Thorin walk away. She felt completely drained and not for the first time wondered what she was thinking stepping outside her front door.

After the troll incident Bella noticed a change in Thorin. It wasn’t an immediate or extreme change but enough of one to rouse Bella’s notice. He began spending time with her, asking questions or even on rare occasion sharing stories of his own. He also growled at her less and instead offered suggestions or advise when she struggled. He even smiled at her a time or two. The first time it happened Bella had been so flustered by the unexpected sight she’d almost dropped too much rosemary into the stew. It could have ruined the meal completely.

Bella wasn’t sure what to make of this new closeness. A large part of her enjoyed it immensely. Thorin proved to be a good conversationalist. Bella even found him charming when he wanted to be as well as lovely to look at. But it seemed unwise letting the king so close. The evenings when he liked to sit beside her and share stories of their respective cultures were the worst for her. She absolutely loved those times with him and knew it would take very little to love Thorin and that was a very dangerous thing. He already called her Halfling and as they sat together around the campfire she often fretted, rubbing at her chin and feeling the beginning of her whiskers growing there. The disgust she felt at the small prickles helped remind her of all the reasons it was a bad idea to fall in love. And so much more so with a king.

She began to use it as a way to ground herself whenever he said something kind or made her smile or, Valar help her, smiled himself. Every time she felt those small prickles she would come crashing back to reality.

He probably had a dam waiting for him anyways- someone strong and beautiful with a smooth face and fertile womb. Someone a king could love. Someone who deserved his love.

Most certainly not an unnatural Halfling. Sometimes, when she was feeling very heart sore she considered trying to keep her distance, at least as much as she could while traveling together. But the truth was Bella didn’t want to. Even if it meant a broken heart at the end of all this, well, she was already broken. She had learned long ago to take joy where she could.

Chapter End Notes

All the hobbits are cannon except Bolo. I could not easily find someone who was the age I needed so I made him up. Also, I forgot to mention this a couple chapters back but I've taken license with Otho and Lobelia's ages. They are actually younger than Bilbo in the books but I've made them older in my stories.

Flower Meanings:
Roses= love  
Myrtle= love  
Honeysuckle= Bonds of love  
Alstroemeria= Devotion, Loyalty  
Gilly-Flower= Bonds of affection  
Ive= Friendship, Fidelity, Marriage  
Anemone= Forsaken

Oh! Also, I am having a hard time coming up with flashback ideas for some of the later chapters so if you guys have any suggestions/ scenes you want to see let me know and I'll try to work them in!

It is now after midnight and I need to go to bed :/
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

A birthday party and Rivendell

Chapter Notes

Wasn't sure I was going to make it on time this week and while it's quite late in the evening I have a new chapter! Thank you everyone who left a review and especially to those who gifted me with ideas! I'm quite excited to try and incorporate them into the story!!

Unbeta's so all mistakes are mine. If you see anything glaring go ahead and let me know.

Bella was late. It was the first party she’d been invited to since her mother’s death a year before and she was late. Aunt Mirabella had invited her to young Primula’s birthday party and she was determined to go and make a good showing of it.

But she had slept in far too late and breakfast had burned and she’d needed to clear out the smoke. After second breakfast she had tried to take a bath but the pump wasn’t working right and it had taken the better part of the day to find someone to fix it and by the time she was finally able to wash up she barely had the time to clean her feet and behind her ears. The only bit of luck was she had wrapped her hair in ribbons the night before to make it curl. Dressed in her best and with a quick backcomb to her feet Bella rushed to the party tree.

The party had already started when Bella arrived but only recently and her aunt greeted her with a warm smile. She had always enjoyed her Took cousins best but unfortunately had little opportunity to visit them nor much desire to blight them with association. Tooks may be adventurous when young and more open minded than many but they were a family almost as respectable as the Baggins and not above being hurt by rumors.

“How are you doing, dear? I worry about you in that big smial all by yourself.”

Bella stiffened at the mention of her home. No one had said anything to her face but had certainly been quite a bit said behind her back about her staying at Bag End alone. “Fine. I’m quite fine, thank you.”

“You’re not but you’re a strong lass. You will let me know if you need anything?” Mirabella looked her in the eye and Bella felt ashamed for thinking her aunt would be at all like those other hobbits.

“Yes, of course.”

“Good girl. Now go and get some food. I got the Chubbs to make their famous squash casserole
and Menegilda brought her tarts. And you’d best greet your cousin. Primula will be quite cross if you don’t.”

She did as her aunt told, fortifying herself with a large plate of food. Bella hadn’t had much time for meals that day, running around as she had, and was quite happy to clear her plate and refill it before attempting to talk to anyone. Careful to avoid Bolo and his young family she watched the dancing and waited for a moment when Primula wasn’t surrounded. Her uncle Hildigrim found her first.

“Bella Baggins! What are you doing standing here all alone?” He asked, his voice as loud and booming as it’d always been despite the fact he was coming upon his 95th year.

“I’m watching the dancing.”

“Watching? A young thing like you should be out there with them! Where is your lad?”

“I don’t have one, uncle. It’s just me.”

“What? No one’s courting you?”

“No.” Bella began to fidget, knowing her face was bright red. She tried very hard not to notice the stares from nearby hobbits.

“That’s a sin! Not married or courting. It’s just not right.” He humphed and grumbled for a bit and Bella did her best to try and look invisible. “Don’t you worry though child. You’re time will come. The lad’s might mess around with the pretty lasses now but you’ll see. It’s the nice girls like you they settle down with.”

“T-thank you. That’s quite… k-kind of you to say.”

“Think nothing of it, child. Oh, you’ve got a bit of something on your chin.” Hildigrim gave her a fatherly pat on the shoulder and then wondered off, leaving Bella feeling rather sick to her stomach. She could hear a few snickers from the people nearby and could only imagine what they were thinking. The worst of it was Bella knew her uncle had only spoken with kindness in his heart.

Absently she reached up to brush whatever was on her chin and flinched when she felt stubble. In all the busyness of the day Bella had forgotten to shave. The nausea in her stomach rolled anew and for a moment she thought she might actually be sick. Bella quickly set her plate down before she dropped it and focused on her breathing. She wasn’t going to run. She wouldn’t give anyone the satisfaction. At a measured pace she began to make her way out of the party. A part of Bella wanted to leave with her head high but she couldn’t. Not with stubble on display for any to see. So she tucked her chin and focused on the ground.

The one bright side of being an outcast is Bella didn’t have to worry about anyone stopping her to talk. She was careful not to make eye contact with any relation and avoided her Aunt Maribella by slipping away between houses instead of taking the main road. She felt terrible about not wishing her cousin a happy birthday but it couldn’t be helped. Next time, she promised herself.

Next time she would be better prepared. Next time she would remember to shave. Next time she wouldn’t walk home in shame.

There never was a next time.
Rivendell was a pleasant surprise for Bella, even if no one else thought so. The dwarrows could keep their pride and silly feud with the elves. Bella fully intended to enjoy real food and a bed as much as possible.

The Last Homely House fully lived up to its name. Bella loved the Shire with its bright rolling hills and jewel like flowers but the home of the elves held an ethereal beauty unlike anything she had ever seen before. She took great pleasure in exploring, especially the gardens and waterfalls. She loved the library too but it was often filled with too many elves.

It wasn’t that she didn’t like the elves. They were all perfectly kind and courteous to her. But they were so perfect- otherworldly in their beauty so that Bella found it hard to be around them. She was so small and frumpy in comparison. Short, fat, and hairy to their tall, sleek and elegant. Her hand was almost always at her jaw when she talked to the elves. She was near obsessive with checking for stubble and found herself shaving at least 3 times a day until her skin became red and irritated.

Bella refused to leave her rooms. Her lower face was red and shaving had been painful that morning. She knew she needed to give her skin a break. So she shut herself in and refused to leave, even for meals. By mid afternoon she was bored, starving, lonely, and completely miserable. She had reorganized her pack twice. Once with her shirts on the top and then again two hours later with the shirts on the bottom. When the knock came on her door Bella was curled up on the bed, trying-again, to take a nap.

As she had that morning, Bella debated between answering as manners dictated and just ignoring the person completely. She had responded in the morning and it had taken forever for the dwarrow to go away. As she debated, the knock came again loud and insistent. It was not the type of knock to be ignored.

“I’m not feeling very well, thank you.” Bella called from the bed. Instead of sending the person away, the door to her room opened.

“I am aware.” Thorin said as he came in. In one hand he was holding a tray stacked with a small feast. “You have missed both breakfast and lunch. I feel I know you well enough to know that missing meals means something quite serious indeed.” His tone was light and teasing but his eyes when he looked at her were full of concern.

Bella felt terrible.

“I-I’m sorry. It’s really nothing to worry about. I didn’t mean to be a bother.”

Thorin set the tray on her bed and pulled a chair to sit by her. “Miss Baggins, you are many things but never a bother.”

“That’s not what you said when we first set out on this journey.” She hadn’t meant to sound so petulant. The words had just slipped out without her permission.

“It is not. I judged you harshly in the beginning and unfairly, basing my opinion solely off your looks. I was wrong and you have proven me so several times over. Now, eat the food I brought for you or I shall begin to think something is really wrong.”

Bella was hurt to hear she had been so disliked because of her looks. She knew she was no beauty, that was made quite clear in the Shire, but she hadn’t thought herself so ugly as all that. But Thorin was admitting he was wrong and trying to make amends. He was being so nice to her, had been for these last few weeks that she couldn’t justify being mad. Besides, she was starving.
“Will you join me? I don’t really like eating alone.” Funny how she’d never realized that until she didn’t have to any more.

“I’d be honored.”

Bella uncurled from her nest of blankets and they sat and ate. The companionable silence quickly gave way to pleasant conversation. He gave her updates of the rest of the dwarrows and the antics they were getting up to. She was aware of Thorin’s gaze often on her but she did her best to ignore it. Her best wasn’t very good and she found herself fidgeting and nervously rubbing at her chin.

“You do that a lot.”

“W-what?”

“Touch your face.” He reached up to touch where her fingers had been running along her chin. Bella couldn’t have stopped herself from flinching had she wanted to. Seeing a look of pain flash across his face before settling into blankness certainly made her wish she could have.

“Sorry. I’m sorry. I just… its just… I don’t like my face touched.” She stuttered, not knowing how to go back to the easy atmosphere of before.

“Do not apologize. I touched without thought. It was not my right.”

Bella nodded, her heart sinking at the return of formality. The silence in the room quickly became strained and Bella tried to think of some way to fix the situation. Luckily, she didn’t have to.

“Did I tell you what my nephews did last night?”

Conversation picked back up after that and Bella felt herself relax into the flow of it. She could hardly believe how natural it felt to spend time with Thorin, especially when one considered how rough their start had been. Before she knew it, darkness was beginning to fall. A polite knock startled Bella from her telling of the hobbits’ exile before they settled in the Shire. Balin poked his head in without waiting to be invited.

“Supper is being served.”

“Thank you Balin, we will be out in a moment.”

The older dwarf gave a smile and a nod that managed to encompass both of them and left.

“You will be joining us, won’t you? You seem to be feeling better and I know my dwarrow are anxious to see you.”

Bella hesitated. She was so sick of her room and desperately wanted to be with her friends but there was reason she had gone into hiding for the day. “If you could give me a moment to freshen up?”

“Yes, of course. I imagine you’d like to try to make yourself look presentable before the others see you.”

“Yes, that.” Bella muttered. Suddenly, she didn’t want to leave anymore. Thorin offered a small smile and left the room.

Alone once again, Bella considered crawling back under the blankets. Instead she got up and stood in front of the mirror. She looked awful, even more so than normal. Her hair, which was not near curly enough by Shire standards, was in complete disarray. She could only imagine what Thorin
must have thought of it. He, like all the dwarrows, kept his hair meticulously groomed.

Bella ran a hand along her jaw and her reflection grimaced at her. While no longer red, her skin was still sore to the touch. Thankfully there was only the barest hint of stubble and nothing visible. How disgusting was it though that she even had to check? What kind of woman was she?

“Ms. Baggins?” Thorin’s voice sounded through the door.

“Just a moment.” She gave herself one last look before resolutely turning away and getting ready. *Not much of a woman at all,* she answered herself.

Chapter End Notes

The flashback was supposed to be a bit more about how at least some of Bella's isolation is her own doing but then Hildigrim showed up and completely changed the feel of the scene. The conversation between Hildigrim and Bella is based very much on a conversation I had with an older male coworker. I firmly believe the old man had had the best of intentions but it was also one of the most insulting conversations ever. Just a tip, never assume people are single because they don't have a choice, don't treat being single like it's something to be sad or ashamed about, and NEVER tell a girl that guys 'only date skinny girls but that's not who they marry’. It is so rude to women of all body types. Gah! Ok, off my soap box now.

Sorry if this fic seems really Bella/ Thorin centric. I want more of the other dwarves but I'm finding it hard to fit them in in a way that still moves the plot along. It might be a bit before we get more than a passing glance at the rest of the company.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Thorin admits his feelings and it actually solves very little. So begins the emotional roller coster.

Chapter Notes

You guys are amazing! I have the best readers ever!

To celebrate (and because I'm going on vacation tomorrow and won't be able to post at my normal time) you get a new chapter a day early! It's a long one too!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The elves prayed to Ilúvatar and the Valar through song as they had learned before the sundering when all elves lived together still. Dwarves chanted deep within their mountains while practicing their craft as their father, Mahal had taught them. Hobbits, who believed themselves to be Yavanna’s children, planted gardens.

Lavender when they needed calmness, dianthus when they needed boldness. Turnips for charity and agrimony for thankfulness. When a loved one passed gardens were full of thorns, hazel, scabious, marigolds and geraniums. Newlyweds would plant their first gardens together with peonies, violets, roses red and yellow, and stephanotis. Each plant held a prayer and every garden told the story of the hobbit that tended it.

As a child Bella helped her parents tend their garden. Pruning roses and weeding amongst the tulips and helping her parents decide where to plant the honeysuckle. She worked closest with her father who had always had a better touch with plants than Belladonna. It was often a bonding time for them just like baking was with her mother. He taught her what he knew about plants and their meanings and how best to tend them. It was Bungo that talked to the plants and explained to Bella how hobbits prayed.

When Bella was given a garden all her own she filled it with sage and oregano and a hawthorn with cinquefoil at its base. It was not the loveliest garden in the shire but was full of her heart’s desires and she tended it with a devotion surpassed by none. She lovingly trimmed the holly bushes and weeded amongst the lily of the valley. Her fennel was always well watered and even the pink peony, hidden amongst the rest, was treated with care. Everyday she would see to her garden and speak to the plants what was on her heart in hopes that they would carry the message to Yavanna.

Bungo helped her with it, in planning and tilling and knowing where best to put what plant. He never asked uncomfortable questions or doubted her choices but sometimes when he looked at her garden his eyes would turn sad. He never could hide what he was feeling from his eyes.

After Bella’s second experience with heartbreak she tore her garden out. Long days were spent digging up every flower, shrub, and bush until only the single pink peony remained. It stood
obscenely in the empty patch that was once Bella’s garden, weighed with its lush, fat blossoms in full bloom. And so it stayed for weeks until Spring shifted fully into summer and Summer into fall.

Bungo and Belladonna watch on in sadness as Bella withdrew from not just the outside world but from them as well. Belladonna made all kinds of delicious foods and attempted to coax her daughter into talking. In her desperation to help she became nagging. Bungo worked in the garden.

“Can’t you at least try to help?” His wife asks him one day when her frustration and sorrow finally makes her turn on him. “You could try and talk to her.”

“Bella will talk when he is ready and not a moment before. She is like her mother that way.”

Belladonna let out a frustrated noise but then the fight drained out of her and she sunk down onto the bench next to him. “I just don’t know what to do anymore. I don’t know how to help.”

“Love her. Let her know you love her.”

“Of course I love her! How could she not know that?”

“It’s not that she doesn’t know. I think she just needs to be reminded right now.”

“I just want everything to be okay.”

“I know.” Bungo said, wrapping an arm around his wife. “It will be. Have faith.”

They sat like that for a while, watching the fall day pass before them. Soon it would be winter. Already the smell of frost was in the air.

“What are you doing out here anyway?” Belladonna asked.

“Gardening.” She left out a huff and Bungo elaborated. “I’m prepping Bella’s garden for the Spring.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well I hope you got rid of that awful peony. I can’t stand that thing.”

Bungo just smiled and gave his wife a squeeze. “We should go in. Dinner will be soon.”

Winter soon settled into the Shire and conversely as the weather grew colder, Bella felt her heart beginning to thaw. She began to cook with her mother again and read with her father in the parlor. Slowly she was making her way back to okay.

As it began to warm again and the first hints at Spring were creeping in Bella began to think towards her garden. It was a loss. She had not touched it in almost a year and it would take nearly as long to revive it and bring it back to full health. Revive it she would though and fill it with her new hopes and dreams. Ones that didn’t revolve around marriage and family. Ones that she could make happen without anyone else.

When the last of the snow finally melted and the southern winds came to reawaken plants Bella ventured out with her father. It was with a great amount of shock that she viewed her garden patch. The best she had hoped for was bare earth and an unhealthy peony. More realistically she was expecting an area chocked with weeds grown wild. What she found was nothing like that.
A beautiful, healthy garden stood before her. Snowdrops were the first she identified and then sorrel and ground persuasion. The more she looked, the more she found every different plant for love and beauty and hope and joy and strength and affection. And there, in the back where it would have lots of room to grow an oak sapling.

“What is this?” Bella asked her father.

“It is your garden. It is you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I filled this garden with everything I see when I look at you and everything I think when I think of you and all of my hopes and prayers for you.”

“It’s perfect.” She said, choking back tears. “Absolutely perfect.” And it was.

Though unsure why, Bella was excited to be invited along to read the map. She found the moonrunes to be beautiful, fascinating, and incredibly impractical. Who else but dwarrows could have invented such a thing? When the message was read Bella couldn’t help but think Thorin’s grandfather could have been a bit more helpful. 'Stand by the grey stone when the thrush knocks' indeed.

Naturally she kept these thoughts to herself. The last thing she wished to do was offend Thorin. The dwarf might make fun of her fussy nature but no one could do wounded pride like a dwarf.

As though called forth from her thoughts, Bella was joined by Thorin. For a moment they stood in silence, simply looking over the balcony at the gardens below.

“What do you make of this business, Miss Baggins?”

Bella took her time in answering, trying to choose the right words. “I think we have a long journey still ahead of us but not an impossible one.”

Thorin grunted in response, though whether it was in agreement or simple acknowledgement she didn’t know. They lapsed back into silence and it was soothing to Bella. She thought she could stay like this forever, in the peace of it, with Thorin’s warm presence by her side. But of course it couldn’t last.

“Bella.” Thorin broke the silence. He turned to look at her and seemed to freeze.

“Yes?” She finally prompted.

“I wish to court you.”

“What?” Her voice was little more than a squeak.

“I love you. You have charmed me again and again with your strength, wit, and kindness. It is my wish to court you and at the end of this journey call you my wife.”

Bella couldn’t think. She wasn’t even sure she was breathing. How did this happen? What could she have done to make Thorin fall in love with little, plain Bella Baggins? And so many years after she had promised herself to give up on such ideas.

“I can’t!” She blurted out, louder than necessary and winced at the sound of her own voice. “I can’t.”
“What do you mean, ‘can’t’?” Thorin looked more confused than upset or angry. “Is there another? Back in the Shire?”

Bella nearly laughed aloud at the thought. As if anyone there would have her. Not as a wife. The other hobbits knew she was not suited to be married, how did Thorin not? “No, of course not.”

“Then do you not love me? I had thought, from our time spent together that my affections were returned.” If anything Thorin looked more confused and it was so achingly sweet that it broke Bella’s heart anew.

It would be so much easier if she could claim not to love him. But Bella was never very good at lying and it seemed wrong to reward his honesty with untruths. Thorin deserved better than that.

“I-I cannot be your wife. I can’t be anyone’s wife. You must realize that? You call me Halfling often enough.”

“What? What does being a hobbit have to do with anything?”

“A hob-? Are you mocking me?”

“Do I look like I’m mocking you? I am confused. If you are worried about my people accepting a hobbit as their queen, don’t be. They will be as charmed by you as I am.”

“Queen! Oh dear, I hadn’t even thought of that! And you’ll need heirs! Oh no. This will never do.” Bella began backing away. “I am so sorry but I cannot. I just can’t.”

“Bella!” He reached out to her but she was already hurrying down the hallway. She all but ran back to her room and shut the door behind her. In the safety of her room she took a deep breath, tried to relax, and for a moment forgot about the stubbornness of dwarrows.

“Bella Baggins, you open this door right now!”

For a second Bella was transported back to being a fauntling, hiding from her father after breaking his favorite quill. The absurdity of the situation almost made her want to laugh.

“I will not.”

“We were not done talking.”

“I am fairly certain we were.”

“You running away like a coward does not mean our conversation is over!”

“A coward! How dare you!”

“Bella.” Oh! She had not been at all prepared for his voice to go from angry to soft and pleading. *That*, she thought, *is cheating.*

“Please open the door. You don’t have to marry me if you don’t wish it but I would like to understand.”

She leaned her forehead against the door, imagining she could feel his presence through the wood. “I can’t bear you children. I am a halfling like you’ve called me.”

Silence. Bella almost thought that was the end of it. “Bella, what does halfling mean?”
What a strange question to be asking but Bella answered anyway. She tried hard to keep her voice as emotionless as possible. “It means I am barren. I am only half a person, never truly a woman because I cannot have children.”

There was a wounded sound from the other side of the door and when Thorin spoke again it was with a broken voice that Bella could not ignore. “Bella, ghivashel, open the door.”

As soon as the gap was big enough he pushed through and wrapped Bella in his arms. “I am sorry. I am so, sorry. You must know I don’t believe it. If I had known- it’s different for others… I would have never called you such a name. No wonder you won’t accept my suit when I have dishonored you so.”

“I- I don’t understand.”

“No dwarf worth his beard would ever disparage someone for being unable to bear children. Such a thing is unthinkable. Children are so precious among my race because they are so rare. Of those who choose to marry, and less than half do, only about a third of our dams are blessed with children.”

“But you call me halfling.”

“It’s not the same for us. Does not mean the same. For the other races, halfling is a common name given to all hobbits in reference to your size, not your worth as a person. It was never meant to be disparaging.”

Bella couldn’t believe it. Couldn’t believe someone could love her despite her barrenness would not think less of her for it. Would still think her worth marriage. She didn’t even realize she was sobbing until she tasted the saltiness of her tears. She felt Thorin’s arms tighten around her, pulling her fully onto his lap.

“I’m sorry.” She sniffed, trying to pull away. Thorin’s arms were like steel though and he would not allow her to withdraw.

“You have nothing to be sorry for. It is I who owe you reparation.”

“What? No, I-“ A large yawn cut off the rest of what Bella was going to say.

“We have much to talk about, you and I, but it can wait until morning I think. You need rest.”

Bella wanted to argue, she really did, but she was exhausted both physically and mentally. She allowed Thorin to help her to bed and tuck the blankets around her chin.

“May you dream of jewels, ghivashel.” Bella was half asleep when she thought she felt a kiss pressed to her brow.

The next morning came with a knock on the door. Bella woke up groggy and with an all too familiar headache which tells of crying. It took a minute for Bella to remember where she was and all that had happened the night before.

“Sweet Yavanna!”

“Miss Baggins? Is everything all right?” Balin’s voice sounded worried and she was quite certain she’d missed the first several calls of her name.

“Yes, f-fine. Just fine.” She says though she isn’t sure how true that actually is.
“If you’re sure.” Obviously Balin had doubts as well. “Breakfast is in an hour. Thorin wanted everyone reminded that we will be leaving today right afterwards.”

“Oh! Yes, of course.” Bella had completely forgotten in all the drama of the night before. “I’ll join up with the rest of you soon.”

“Very good.”

She readied her pack and herself in a daze. It was only her fussy nature, in keeping all her items together, that nothing was left behind. Breakfast was a subdued affair, or at least so it seemed to Bella. It could have merely been a result of the fog she found herself surrounded in. She kept her eyes on her plate and did her best to ignore Thorin’s presence; it was hard though, especially after she noticed the black eye that had not been there the night before. She successfully avoided him as they bid good-bye to their host but he managed to catch her as she struggled to get on her pony.

“I am sorry we did not have a chance to talk this morning.” Thorin said, appearing at her side.

“Oh!” She startled. “I-it’s okay.”

“It is not. There are many things not okay but I will make it up to you. I will fix this, I promise you. Until then, please accept this small token and know I hold you in the highest regard.” He held out a small item wrapped in velvet cloth. Bella tried her best to steady her hands as she unwrapped the cloth. She could not think of a reason for him to give her a gift. It looked like one of her razors, only far nicer than any she’d ever purchased. For a moment she wondered if she was being mocked.

“I’ve noticed how much you favor your pocket knives. If I’d had access to materials and a forge I would have made you one of my own hands. Instead I have given you my own which I have carried with me since before the dragon came.”

Bella ran her fingers over the handle. It was a little too big for her hand but well built and beautifully carved with geometric designs and inlaid with gems she did not know the names of.

“It’s lovely, thank you.”

Thorin’s smile was bright and more beautiful than anything she’d seen during their stay in Rivendell. Even with the black eye. She was in serious danger of that smile.

“Will you ride beside me today?”

“I, well… o-okay. Sure.”

“Let’s get you on your pony and we can be away of this place.”

Part of Bella mourned leaving Rivendell. She doubted there was its like in all of Middle Earth and more practically, she was loathe to return to sleeping outdoors. However, it was obvious her dwarrows were uncomfortable amongst the elves and she herself was very self-conscious in their presence. She would finally be able to relax.

Bella glanced over at Thorin riding beside her, his profile regal. He caught her looking and offered a small smile. Well, perhaps I’ll have to wait a bit longer to relax; she amended as she felt her heartbeat increase.

“W-what happened to your eye?” She asked after failing to think of a conversation topic.

Thorin reached up and touched at the dark bruise. “Do not worry about it. It was well earned, I
That of course did absolutely nothing to answer her question but Bella chose not to push, not feeling quite confident enough. Silence settled around them and Bella tried not to fidget under the weight of it. The rest of the morning passed in the same manner with Bella alternating between quiet contemplation and fretting and Thorin a solid, silent presence beside her who occasionally sent her meaningful glances.

It wasn’t until after they had stopped for lunch and were back on the path that Thorin finally broke the silence. They were riding at the back of the line this time with Gandalf and Balin leading. Thorin had allowed some space to grow between them and the rest of the company. Not much but enough to keep their conversation private if they talked softly.

“I have thought much last night and again this morning and I cannot court you.”

This was, if not what she wanted, how it was supposed to be. It was certainly what she expected after telling Thorin she was Barren. Yet that didn’t stop her feeling her heart drop or nausea roll through her stomach. Bella quickly looked away, trying to blink back tears and catch her breath all without letting on that her heart was breaking.

“I do not deserve you.”

“What?!” The word came out closer to a screech and Bella ducked her head as Dwalin, who was closest, looked back at them with a stern gaze.

“I have gravely insulted you. I have caused you pain and belittled you. At the very least I should offer you my beard though it is poor recompense.” He ran his hand over his short beard and Bella felt a moment of panic.

“But you didn’t know! You didn’t know what halfling meant. Please don’t cut off your beard.”

“Knowing or not I hurt you. My sister would castrate me if she were here.” His smile was self-deprecating. “If you do not want my beard I must find some other way to make amends.”

“You don’t need to-“

“I do.” Thorin cut her off with a stern voice. “I am not worthy of you. Not yet. But I love you Bella Baggins and I will marry you once I have earned it.”

Well, what could Bella possibly say to that? It would never come to fruition of course. Even if he accepted her barrenness, which she had some suspicions about, Thorin would eventually realize she was not suited to be a wife, much less a queen. But her poor bruised heart wanted to hope and she couldn’t bring herself to fight it.

The rest of the day passed quietly but pleasantly. Thorin offered her snacks as they rode and songs to distract from the road. The other dwarrow must have had some idea of what was going on because no one ever tried to join them or add in their own voice to the songs. Bella wondered if Thorin had already told them of his intentions or if they would be surprised to hear he planned to court her.

That evening when they stopped for camp Thorin brushed down Bella’s pony for her and led her to sit beside him by the fire. He served her supper himself and when night fell Bella went to sleep wrapped in Thorin’s fur coat. The next day followed the same pattern and the one after that and the one after that.

Bella found it very hard not to fall into a sense of security. She knew more likely than not, it wasn’t
what it seemed. Males did not want barren females, not to marry and she had been wooed before in such a way. It was not a trap she’d allow herself to fall into again, even if her heart seemed bound and determined to remake that mistake.

Chapter End Notes

I'm a little worried about this chapter, especially Thorin becoming OOC. He's definitely going to become a lot more talkative. In the movies he's rather stoic but it's implied in the book that he can be a bit of a windbag. Let me know what you think?

Also, lots of flowers. I go to languageofflowers.com for meanings because I know nothing.

Mourning plants:
Thorns= Solace in Adversity
Scabious= Mourning
Marigolds= Grief
Geraniums (scarelet)= Comforting, (dark)= Melancholy

Love plants:
Peonys (red)= Devotion
Violets= Love, Faithfullness
Roses (red)= Love, (yellow)= Joy, affection
Stephanotis= Marital bliss
Tupip= Love
Honeysuckle= Bonds of Love

Bella's Garden:
Sage= Health
Oregano= Birth
Hawthorn= Hope
Cinquefoil= Maternal affection
Holly= Domestic happiness
Lily of the Valley= Return of happiness
Peony (pink)= Shame

Snowdrop= Consolation, hope
Sorrel= Parental affection
Ground Persuasion= Perseverance
Bella first saw Ranugad Blackhyll at the market. He was new to Hobbiton and therefore easily stood out amongst all the familiar faces. Michel Delving is where the gossipmongers placed his origins. The capital! A big city hobbit. Some even said he was nephew to the mayor and while not exactly handsome he certainly cut a dashing figure in his stylish and well cut clothes.

It was also soon obvious, based on the giggling flock around him, he was someone the lasses had set their cap to marrying. Bella sent a longing glance in their direction and was quite flustered when her eyes were caught by him. She was quite sure her face turned as red as a tomato and she quickly looked away.

Some twenty minutes later Bella was done with the shopping and ready to head home. She had not seen the new Mr. Blackhyll again which was both a disappointment and a relief. Pushing thoughts of him away, Bella considered whether her father would prefer something sweet or savory for tea. She was lost in thought enough that it took the person beside her speaking before she noticed his presence.

“That looks like a heavy load you’ve got there.” Bella startled and would have dropped her basket if
another pair of hands hadn’t of caught it. “Woah there, don’t want to be dropping those apples. They’ll bruise.”

Bella looked up into the smiling brown eyes of Hobbiton’s newest resident. “Oh! Oh, I’m sorry. Thank you.” She tried to take her basket back but Blackhyll pulled it fully into his arms.

“Say nothing of it. Please, allow me to carry it for you.” He smiled broadly and Bella felt completely disarmed.

“R-really. It’s… t-there’s no need.”

“Surely as a gentleman it is the least of my duties to help a beautiful young lady such as yourself.”

“O-oh, w-well then.” Completely flustered it was all Bella could do to walk along side him as he started walking. All the way back to her smial Bella couldn’t think of anything to say but Blackhyll didn’t seem to mind. Instead he filled the silence with cheery anecdotes and information about himself (he was the nephew of the mayor). At her door he passed back her groceries but only after placing a kiss upon her hand.

Later that night in bed she could still feel where he had placed his lips. She could hardly believe such a hobbit would give her attention and knew it couldn’t last but still she went to sleep with a smile.

Despite Bella’s predictions, Blackhyll continued to seek her out—long after he would have heard the rumors about her. And hear them he did, Bella had no doubt. She could see the way the other lasses looked at her as she went on strolls with Blackhyll, could hear the loud whispers aimed in her direction. There was no way he couldn’t know. And yet, he didn’t seem to care. At all.

In the weeks that followed Blackhyll took her on a whirlwind romance. He showered her with gifts and called upon her almost daily. Sometimes even when her parents were out. His behavior at times bordered on scandalous and Bella worked hard to not see Bungo’s frowns or Belladonna’s worried looks. On the rare occasions she protested something he would laugh her off saying something about ‘prudish country ways’ and life in ‘the city’. It made her feel self-conscious and she became less vocal, not wanting to push him away with her prudish behavior. She allowed him to sit closer than propriety dictated, let his touch linger on an arm or leg outside her skirt or on her neck, and even allowed him kisses when no one else was about.

It wasn’t ideal, this romance, but it was love, wasn’t it? And likely her only chance at it. No, it wasn’t ideal but in the end it would be worth it, she was sure.

Things came to a head two months into the courtship. Or, not courtship as she later found out. They had been sitting in the parlor at Bag End, her parents out visiting one of the cousins, and he was once again touching her, stroking her arms and neck and giving little kisses. It was not the first time they had spent time in such a way and Bella was almost used to the feeling.

Suddenly one of his hands was on her leg and not over her skirt.

“What?!” She cried, pushing him away. “What are you doing?”

“Come now, don’t play the innocent.” Blackhyll grinned and pulled her close again.

“I’m not- mmmph!” Bella’s words were cut off by Blackhyll’s mouth. She tried to push him away again but he was a large hobbit, well rounded in the middle and taller than Bella. He held her down with some little effort.

“See now, I knew you wanted it.” He said when he came up for air. His grin, which Bella had once
taken comfort in now made her stomach roll. She felt his hand once again up her skirt and this time not stopping at just her leg. For the first time in her life, Bella saw red.

Bella had never hurt another person before. Had never raised fist or weapon to any living creature nor had ever wanted to. Not even to the gossipy ladies at market. The sound of her slap echoed through the smial. Both hobbits froze and Bella could see a vivid handprint across Blackhyll’s cheek.

What followed was the worst moment of Bella’s life. There would be no wedding. Never was going to be a wedding. Once again it was abundantly clear that Bella was wholly unsuited and undesirable as a wife. But in other areas? Well, apparently halflings could be of use in a very specific way. She had never been so hurt or so horrified in her life.

Blackhyll was thrown out of Bag End, never to return. The next day Bella began tearing out her garden.

As they went further into the Misty Mountains and morale began to drop Thorin spent even more time around Bella. When the large boulders rolled by and even overhead he had taken to shielding Bella with his body. At night he placed his bedroll beside hers. Not so close as to be improper, his sword a firm barrier between them, but close enough for Bella to be soothed by the sound of his breathing and feel protected by his presence. He showed her such care and never pushed for any liberties. Never asked for so much as a kiss. As miserable as it was crossing through the mountains, those days were some of the best Bella had ever had up to that point in her life.

Except for the sudden lack of privacy.

Not all of it was Thorin’s fault, though he had taken to following her around waiting on her every need until Bella was near ready to tear her hair out. A large part of the problem was quite simply that traveling through mountains was quite dangerous and it was not safe to wonder far off path. The company did the best they could to afford her what privacy was possible. Unfortunately more often than not what was possible was no more than a bend in the path to protect her modesty while relieving herself. It was certainly not a safe enough environment for shaving.

Her only saving grace was the cold. As high in the mountains as they were, there was snow everywhere and harsh winds blowing often. No one thought anything of it that she had taken to wearing a scarf wrapped around her neck and lower face. She never removed it fully, not even while eating which could make things a bit awkward but was still manageable.

Of course Bella still fretted- more and more each day. At night in the safety of the dark and wrapped hidden in Thorin’s great coat she would run her fingers along the growing stubble. It was long enough now that she could feel it change directions with the stroke of her hand and it made her feel sick to her stomach.

She worried constantly about losing her scarf. What if the wind blew it away? What if it unwrapped at night and she woke to find her shame barred before her dwarrows? Bella began to lose sleep to her worries. Thorin’s presence, which once comforted her, began to chaff at her nerves, making her feel raw. She snapped at him one evening as he tried to help her after she had stumbled. Bella had felt terrible afterwards, knowing it wasn’t his fault. She was just so afraid of his discovering her secret. She didn’t think she could bear it to see his disgust. Not so soon after giving in to hope.

The next morning she very insistently started up a conversation with Ori, ensuring she would be walking beside him for the day while Thorin was at the front of the line. She heartedly regretted her choice when the stone giants happened. Hanging for dear life to a cliff’s edge was an experience she
would sooner forget. She had been quite sure she was going to die and while she was mostly paralyzed with fear a small, calm part of her brain admitted that this was a better way to die than old, bitter, and absolutely alone in her smial and hopefully Bag End burned down before Lobelia could get her hands on it. Or even better, a particularly blood thirsty part of her said, if it burned down after Lobelia had moved in with Lobelia in it.

And then Thorin was there with his eyes wild and she was being tossed back onto the safety of the path but at the cost of it being Thorin clinging for life. Bella had thought she knew terror just moments before but that was nothing to how she felt thinking she might never see Thorin again.

“For a moment there, I thought we’d lost our burglar.” Dwalin joked once everyone was safe. It had been a long time since Bella had wanted to punch someone so badly. What an inappropriate time for jokes. Almost lost their burglar indeed! And what about when Thorin nearly fell to his death just a moment before?

Before Bella could act on her impulses she found herself wrapped in a familiar embrace. It was tighter than she was used to and her face was squashed against wet fur. “So did I.” Was muttered against her curls.

When Bella tried to protest all she got was a mouthful of soggy fur. It took quite a bit of sputtering, struggling, and ineffectual pushing before Thorin would release her. She immediately fixed her scarf before turning on the dwarf with a glare.

“Thorin Oakenshield! What on Yavanna’s green earth were you thinking? I know we talked about you senselessly putting yourself at risk after the trolls!”

“What on Yavanna’s green earth were you thinking? I know we talked about you senselessly putting yourself at risk after the trolls!”

“Did you expect me to just allow you to die?” Thorin growled with a glare of his own.

“I expect you to keep yourself safe! You are too important to go falling off the side of a cliff.”

“And are you not important? I will never stand aside while you are in danger. Even if I did not love you, my honor would not allow it.”

“Your stupid pride, more like.” Bella muttered though not so quietly that Thorin didn’t hear her. Thorin opened his mouth to growl some more but was stopped from doing so by Gandalf.

“If we may find some shelter? No doubt that would be a better place for you to hold your argument and certainly a better place for us to watch.”

Both Bella and Thorin startled, remembering not only where they were but also whom they were with. “Fili, Kili- scout ahead and find us some shelter. The rest of us will follow behind.”

Luck was with them for once and the lads were able to find a cave quickly that could not only accommodate the company but their ponies as well. Gloin and Oin immediately went to work starting a fire and soon the company was settled in. As the cram was boiling with the last of Bella’s herbs for supper the hobbit found herself wondering where to sit. Thorin sat at the back of the cave, running his whetstone along his blade. Lately, she wouldn’t have hesitated to sit beside him but she was still feeling quite cross and from the glower on his face, Thorin felt much the same. Then she recalled how it felt to have Thorin so close to death and decided she didn’t care. Feeling bolder than she ever had before she marched up to the dwarf.

“Set aside your sword.” She demanded.

Thorin looked up at her, expression dark, and for a moment Bella thought it was all over. Everything was ruined. She tried hard to keep her face impassive and nearly wept in relief when he put his
sword and stone to the side. Bella wasted no time climbing onto his lap and wrapping his coat around herself, locking herself into his warmth. She was a bit stunned at her own daring— at even wanting to be so close but if there was one thing she felt with Thorin, it was trust. He knew and respected her boundaries.

“Bella?” He sounded confused but not angry for which she was thankful.

“I almost lost you today. I’m still angry at you for putting yourself in danger but I almost lost you and I’ve never been so scared in my life and I just need to feel you alive right now and with me. If you want to yell some more we can do that later.”

Bella felt a small huff against her hair and then arms like steel came around her. “I almost lost you as well. I am done with yelling. Besides, I fear this is one argument we will never agree on.”

“You might be right on that.”

“Hmmm.” He nuzzled her curls and they relaxed together, taking comfort from each other until it was time to eat.

After a bland but filling supper the company settled in for the night. For the first time Bella fell asleep in Thorin’s arms. It was very improper, at least by Shire standards, but Bella couldn’t bring herself to care. She was hardly accepted by them anyways and that night she sorely needed the reassurance.

Unfortunately it was not long after sleep claimed her that the world descended into chaos.

Chapter End Notes

Cliff hanger after cliff hanging! Ahahaha!

Not really much of a cliff hanger if you’ve read the book or seen the movie which I’m assuming everyone has.

Bella’s experiences with Blackhyll are unfortunately very common. Yes is consent! If anything your partner does makes you uncomfortable you should tell them right away. If your feelings are dismissed or you don’t feel comfortable/safe talking to your partner that’s a good sign something is wrong. There are many resources online and at your local Domestic Violence Services if you ever need any help (any kind of help, not just from violence). Most importantly I wish for all of you to be happy, be healthy, and be safe!
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Bella's secret is out.

Chapter Notes

Oh my gosh guys I am so sorry!!!!!!! I can't believe this is so late! Real life has been kicking my butt. I have rewritten this chapter so many times and I don't know that it's all I wanted it to be but at least it's done.

Unbeta'd as always. See any big mistakes please let me know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Bella felt she had finally run a far enough distance from the mountains she threw herself down on the ground and simply breathed. Her body was shaking and she could still feel the adrenaline coursing through her. Inside the mountain had been the stuff of nightmares and in that moment Bella didn’t know if she could do this anymore. She was just one little hobbit and not a very good one at that. What could she have possibly been thinking stepping outside her door?

“It’s dangerous business stepping outside your front door. If you don’t keep your feet, there’s no knowing where you’ll be swept off too.” Her father had always said.

All of a sudden she wanted nothing more than to go home. She wanted her warm, beautiful smial where she was incredibly lonely but safe from the dangers of the world.

“We have to go back! Bella is still in that cursed mountain!”

Bella looked up in surprise. All thoughts of home vanished.

“Thorin?” She called out. She got up and stumbled in the direction she thought the voice was coming from. “Thorin!”

“Bella?” She could hear another body moving through the underbrush and then Thorin was there before her and Bella practically threw herself into his arms.

There were many thoughts running around in her head and many things Bella wanted to say. She wanted to tell Thorin about getting lost and finding the Gollum creature, defending herself against being eaten and waging a battle of wits to escape, finding a magical ring and having to sneak past the goblin guards. All of this she wanted to say but what came out was, “well, that was unpleasant.”

Thorin laughed and there was a hysterical edge to it, Bella didn’t say anything. “Hobbits are amazing, or maybe it’s just you. You, Bella Baggins are amazing.”

Bella couldn’t help but grin. She pulled back to say something cheeky but was stopped from doing so by the look of surprise that came across Thorin’s face.
“Bella?” It wasn’t’ until Thorin ran his fingers along her chin that Bella realized her scarf had slipped down to rest uselessly around her shoulders.

“Oh!” She cried out, flinching from his touch. She pushed away from Thorin’s embrace and quickly rewrapped her scarf. “Don’t look!”

“Bella?” Thorin reached out for her but she quickly backed away.

“D-don’t!”

The timely appearance of the rest of the company saved Bella from Thorin’s reaction to her beard, at least temporarily.

“Bella, it has been a long time since I have been so glad to see someone.” Gandalf greeted followed by twelve dwarrow. They all greeted her warmly, Fili and Kili even drawing her into a hug and asking to hear how she escaped. Bella felt a little overwhelmed but happily indulged them as it gave her an excuse to avoid Thorin (whose eyes were following her intently).

After a while when Bella had a chance to share a little bit of her story and the dwarrow a little bit of theirs Gandalf called them to move on. “We are safe for now but as soon as the sun sets we shall have many angry goblins after us and it would be prudent if we put as many miles between us before they do.”

Everyone readily agreed and soon they were moving again with Gandalf in the lead talking to an annoyed looking Thorin. In fact, as they traveled along it seemed as if every time Thorin tried to draw near someone would distract him from Bella. She was so hungry and exhausted it took her a while to catch on but it was rather hard to miss when Bifur literally stood between them with his arms crossed and growled until Thorin gave up and walked away. Bella had no idea how they all knew she wanted to avoid Thorin and what was sure to be some awkward questions but she was incredibly thankful.

“Here lass, take my arm.” Gloin offered from beside her after she tripped for the fifth time over her own feet. “You look about ready to drop and that won’t do anyone any good.”

Bella offered a tired smile from behind her scarf and what might have been a mumbled ‘thank you’ if she’d had more energy.

“I’ve told you about my Gimli a time or two but have I ever told you about my wife, Nalili?”

Bella made a little grunt and shook her head in the negative.

“Ah, she’s a fine dam, my Nalili with a fiery temper to match her heir. You should have seen her after I announced my intention to join this quest. I near lost my beard to her blade I did. Quite skilled, my Nalili is.”

Having sat through not just Gloin’s many stories of Gimli but Bombur’s of his wife and children and even Thorin’s of his nephews’ youths- Bella knew just how much a dwarf could talk about their family. Dwarrow may be secretive to outsiders but once they accepted you in they could be worse than the old marketplace biddies. As such Bella didn’t bother too much with listening and instead focused her energy on walking and fretting over Thorin. She knew she couldn’t avoid him forever. Perhaps she could find an opportunity to shave first and then plead ignorance? Somehow she doubted that would fool him.

 “… after she accepted my court, I made the most beautiful beads for her beard of gold and emeralds.”
Bella stumbled over her feet and would have fallen if not for Gloin’s arm. “What?!” She squawked.

Gloin matched her wide-eyed stare for a moment before laughing. “I know! Emeralds for a first courting gift! A bold choice. My brother had much the same reaction- but I knew from the moment I saw her she’d be my wife or I’d have none at all.”

“Oh. Yes. Very romantic.” Bella murmured, trying to get her brain to catch up.

“Aye.” Gloin agreed with a large grin. “Nalili thought so as well.”

They continued walking and Bella decided she must have heard things. Of course he didn’t say ‘beard,’ she scolded herself. You are being ridiculous, Bella Baggins. It was only because she was worried about Thorin and her own beard. Other women- proper women- didn’t have beards.

The howling of wargs filled the air. Bella was perversely glad of the distraction from her thoughts. She noticed Thorin eyeing her and tried running at the edge of the group away from him. That plan was dashed, however, when Thorin grabbed her hand to haul her along. “I don’t know what is going on but I swear to Mahal you will stay alive long enough for us to talk about it.”

Suddenly death by wargs didn’t seem so bad. As if sensing her thoughts Thorin’s grip on her tightened and he began running even faster.

Bella only made it up into the tree with Dori’s help. The silver-haired dwarf’s eyes widened when he caught a good look at her face, letting her know her scarf had slipped again. Thankfully they were too busy with the arrival of the orcs, throwing flaming pinecones, and then hanging on for dear life for Dori to say anything to her. As Bella dangled once again over the side of a cliff she reflected on how hobbits really weren’t meant to leave the ground. She wondered how long it would take to fall if she let go. The thought scared her but not as much as the thought of facing Thorin. Certainly it would be more pleasant than what the wargs and orcs would do to her.

Before she could act on her impulses, Thorin standing up on the tree’s trunk and running towards Azog the defiler distracted her. She could barely process what she was seeing as he was knocked down again and again. With more strength than she’d have believed she processed Bella pulled herself up. Without thought she raced to Thorin’s defense.

It hardly felt real as she sunk her small sword through the warg. Nor when she killed the orc riding it. Really, Bella Baggins killing an orc, who could imagine such a thing? It wasn’t until she was standing over Thorin’s prone form looking at the ugliest creature she had ever seen that reality seemed to catch up with her. She almost dropped her sword as her fear returned but she feared loosing Thorin more, even if he no longer wanted her, and her arms stayed steady.

“What manner of ugly creature are you?”

Bella flinched at the insult but did not move.

“If you are what dwarven women look like then no wonder your men come to me to die.”

Anger and pain surged through her and with a roar she charged at the orc. He easily knocked the sword from her hands but she didn’t let that stop her. Without missing a step she ducked under Azog’s arms and pulling out one of her blades slashed him deep on the side. Azog let out a mighty bellow and with his claw flung Bella away. By this time the other dwarrows had rallied and joined into the fight. Bella did what she could, dodging under arms and slashing at any exposed skin, never straying far from Thorin.

Then the eagles came and they were flying and Bella wondered idly if there was a limit to the
amount of fear one person could feel because surely she had surpassed it. She clung to the eagle’s back like burnt toffee to a pan. Even as she felt her scarf loosen she could not bring herself to let go of the feathers beneath her. It was with despair that she felt it slip free and fly away. She wept bitterly; knowing her time with the company was coming to an end. Hopefully they would allow her to stay long enough to know Thorin had survived before they ran her off. Surely she deserved at least that.

The eagles left them on a great rock a good distance from the Misty Mountains. As Gandalf and the rest of the company huddled around the still unconscious Thorin Bella backed away and did her best not to get noticed. She just needed to know he was okay. Once she knew that she could leave. Hopefully by the time they noticed her gone she’d be far away. It would be the best for everyone that way. Where she’d go she wasn’t sure. The thought of crossing back over the Misty Mountains seemed unbearable. Maybe South? She just hoped the dwarrows could find a replacement burglar this far into the quest.

“Where is Bella?”

And like he’d done since Bella first met him, Thorin once again ruined her plans. The group parted, leaving an open pathway directly between the two of them.

“You!” He growled.

Bella instinctually tried to make herself smaller and ducked her head to head to hide her stubble as best as possible.

“What were you thinking? You could have been killed!” He charged at her and Bella would have backed away in fear if she hadn’t of already been at the rock’s edge. She was taken completely surprised when he pulled her into a fierce embrace. “I have never been so scared in all my life.”

Bella was confused. This was not the rejection she had been expecting. Where were the words of disgust? How could he even stand touching her? She had no idea what to say or do. She tentatively hugged him back, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“I could have lost you.” He murmured into her hair, squeezing her almost painfully tight.

“Now maybe you know how I felt with the trolls.” She said for lack of anything else.

Thorin let out a chuckle that sounded suspiciously wet. “Indeed I do. And if you think you are ever stepping between me and an enemy again you are very mistaken.”

“Hypocrite. I will do what I must to protect you.”

“Then we are both hypocrites. Bella, my dear Bella, I cannot lose you.”

Bella didn’t know how to respond so she just squeezed back, burying her face in the musty fur of his coat.

“Is that it? Is that the Lonely Mountain?” Fili’s voice reminded Bella there were others about. Both she and Thorin turned to look where Fili was pointing. Looming over the horizon was a grand solitary peak.

“Aye. That is Erebor. Our home.”

It was beautiful Bella thought as she stood looking at the mountain with the rest of the company. It was a poignant moment, one the little hobbit was proud to be a part of, but of course it couldn’t last.
“Bella! You’re turning into a dwarf!” Bofur’s exclamation cut through the air. Every eye was on her and worse, staring at her furry chin. A second later the air was filled with exited words.

“Bless my hammer, your beard’s coming in!”

“I didn’t think hobbits got beards.”

“Do you think they’re contagious?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Ori.”

“Oh Miss Baggins, you look lovely.”

“Aye, it’ll be a right good beard once it’s all in.”

Bella stared at them all, uncomprehending the words they were saying. As their meanings sunk in she felt horrified. This was so much worse than the disgust she’d feared. They were making fun of her! She had become an object of mockery.

“We should have a party!” Fili declared and many others took up the cheer. Even Balin and Dwalin, whom Bella had thought better of, seemed to join in on the others’ fun. Bella’s whimper was drowned out by Thorin’s laughter.

“Enough.” Bella screamed, unable to take it anymore. Tears were falling freely but she was past the point of caring. “I-I… I know I’m not… b-but a-after everything! I d-don’t des-serve this!”

“Bella, of course you do. What’s wrong?”

Bella looked up at Thorin, unable to believe he would say such a thing. She felt her heart break and knew she had no one to blame but herself. It had been too good to be true, having Thorin’s love. She had always known it could never last but had allowed herself to believe otherwise. *What a fool*, she thought bitterly.

She looked around, needing to escape. To the right she saw the top of the stairs down and ignoring the stunned faces around her, made a run for it.

“Bella?” Thorin called after her but she ignored him. “Bella, wait!”

Chapter End Notes

You'll notice there's no flashback in this one. I really don't like changing the chapter structure part way through the story but I really struggled with writing one and this chapter was already late. Someone in the comments suggested that I maybe take out the flashbacks and put them into their own separate story or use them more judiciously. They made some good points and I wanted to know other people's opinions? Do you like having the flashbacks in each chapter? Do you think it would be better to set it up as a series and move them to their own story? Please let me know what you think.

I'm sorry again for being late and you are all amazing. Chapter 10 will be up tomorrow on schedule. I will try to respond to your comments later tonight!
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Gandalf has a go at counselor and Bella and Thorin have a talk.

Chapter Notes

Wow, guys. You are all amazing! Absolutely amazing! I was completely blown away by the responses from the last chapter. So much so that this one is being posted a bit early :D Hope you enjoy!

I want to credit EllieBelly8185 who came up with the idea for the scene in the last chapter with Gloin. Huge thank you for allowing me to use your idea!

Unbeta'd and it's almost 4 am so please feel free to let me know of any glaring errors. I'm also using the time as an excuse if something (including a comment) doesn't make sense.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The stairs were rough, more an impression of stairs than actual steps. It was a struggle to climb them. Someone far larger than she had obviously carved them without any thought to shorter legs. The tears blurring her vision did not do much to help either. Bella had not made it very far down when her foot landed on some loose stones and slipped from under her. She would have surely fallen and broken her neck if Gandalf had not arrived to catch her.

“Bella Baggins, I did not bring you all the way out here for you to die from a mere fall.”

“Really? Because by my count that was the third time I’ve almost fallen to my death.” She snapped.

“Ah, but haven’t.”

“Humph.” Bella really wasn’t in the mood. In silence they continued their way down. Behind her she could hear the dwarrow’s murmurs and heavy steps but Bella ignored them.

“Why did you bring me?” She finally asked. It was a question that had weighted heavily on her mind but until now hadn’t the courage to ask. “Why did you insist on me joining this quest?”

“For many reasons that are my own and I shall not share with you but mainly for this- you, Bella Baggins, were meant for greater things than the Shire. The hobbit I found when I came to your home was but a shadow of the bright fauntling I had known. I found that simply unacceptable.”

Bella could feel a fresh wave of tears. “I was as I was meant to be. Just look at me! I am cursed, Gandalf, a blight to Yavanna! I was fortunate I was allowed to keep my home.”

“That is enough!” Gandalf’s tone was as sharp and angry as she had ever heard it. “It is through no fault of your own the others could not see your worth. You are of more value to the world at large
than all those of the Shire put together.”

He said it so matter-of-factly that it was hard not to believe him.

“T-that’s not true! That can’t be true.”

“And why not?” Gandalf demanded.

“Just look at me! I am an abomination!” There was a choked noise from behind Bella but she didn’t hear it in her distress. “I-I had thought maybe I could hide it but I can’t.”

“Nonsense. Why would you think such a thing?”

“Because it’s true. Everyone in the Shire knew it and even they didn’t know the true extent of my shame. Now the people I care about most in the world know and I don’t know if I can survive going back to being alone.”

“Oh Bella, I had no idea. I should have come for you years ago.” For a moment Gandalf looked ancient and weary but it passed quickly enough. “Dwelling on such things does us no good. We cannot change the past and the future has yet to be written but one thing I know to be true is if you allow it, the dwarves will ensure you are never alone again.”

“How can you promise that? Especially after how they just mocked me?”

“How? Because I know you and I know those dwarves and most importantly I know those dwarves care deeply for you. What you heard as mockery was nothing of the sort. Thorin plans to court you, does he not? Surely you don’t think creatures carved from stone are so fickle?”

“Not fickle, no. But I’m so… I-I… now that he k-knows… h-how could he possibly?” Bella asked, gesturing to her face.

“I think, if you actually sat and talked, you’d find that not all cultures share hobbit ideas and values. Or even beauty standards.”

Bella didn’t know what to say to that so she said nothing at all. Gandalf had given her a lot to think about. Was it possible Thorin would still want to court her? Even having seen her beard? It seemed far too good to be true.

Gloin’s words from earlier came back to her. Maybe she hadn’t misheard? But surely that was just absurd. As covertly as she could, Bella glanced back. The dwarrows were several yards behind. Thorin was in the lead with Dwalin and Fili on either side, helping as inconspicuously as possible. All three of them wore grim expressions. In fact, all the dwarrows looked subdued and Bella felt a pang in her chest. She’d done that. They’d all been so happy on top of the rock, gazing out at Erebor and she’d ruined it.

Quite by accident she caught Thorin’s eye. He looked at her so intently Bella felt sure he was trying to communicate something, but she couldn’t understand the message. She was too afraid to try and so quickly turned forward. It was hardly safe enough to not be looking where one was walking anyway.

The sun was high in the sky when they finally made it to the base of the great rock. The Carrock as Gandalf called it. There was a tidy cave and many dwarrows immediately dropped to the ground and settled in for a nap. Bella took herself around to the side of the Carrock to try and find a place where the water was not so deep and fast. She found a small spot on the South side where the rock blocked the current and formed a natural pool. There she settled and took stalk of herself. Her pack was lost
to the goblin tunnels along with any spare clothes and the majority of her razors. Luckily she still had several on her person as well as her mother’s pocketknife and the gift from Thorin. Her lovely red jacket was beyond saving but she thought she might be able to use it for patches if she could get her hands on a sewing kit. Her own did not survive the mountain.

Possessions sorted out Bella washed her arms and neck as best she could. Then choosing a razor she began the unpleasant task of shaving. The hair was longer than mere stubble, longer than it had ever been before and it hurt to run the blade against it. She feared it would take more than one pass and could already tell her skin would be sore and irritated when she was done.

“What are you doing?!” Thorin’s voice startled Bella and it was a good thing she was rinsing the blade or she might have slit her own throat.

“T-Thorin?”

He rushed to her and knelt down beside her heedless that one knee was in the water. “I don’t understand what is wrong but surely nothing is so bad as to be worth this. If you would just talk to me! I am certain we could come up with a less drastic solution. Please don’t do this.”

His eyes were so very sad and his voice had a desperate, pleading tone Bella had never heard before. It left her aching and confused. “I… I don’t understand.”

“Bella, there is nothing you could have done to be worth this.”

“But I am… I’m just shaving.” Bella was completely lost. She had no idea what he was talking about but Thorin was not looking at her in disgust and that seemed far more important. Fear, anguish, confusion and most amazingly love were all there for her to see, but no disgust. He cupped her face in his large palms and she couldn’t stop from flinching at the feel of them against the hairs of her chin.

“I know and I’m telling you there’s no need. I heard some of your talk with Gandalf and you need to know there is nothing you could have done, no shame, to justify it.”

“But I have a beard.” She said, wondering why she needed to point out the obvious.

“Aye, and it promises to be a beautiful one too. My Bella, you have always been lovely but once it’s grown in you will outshine any jewel.”

Bella could hardly believe she had any more tears to cry but apparently she did. She pulled away from Thorin’s touch. “There is no need to mock me.”

“You think I am being dishonest?

“How can I not when I know it’s not true? I am perfectly aware that I am plain at best and with this beard an abomination.”

“What?!” Thorin sounded angry and she pulled further away at the sound of it. Or at least tried but she soon found herself wrapped in his arms and pulled close. He continued more gently, “Who told you such things? How can you believe that?”

“It was often said in the Shire though rarely to my face. The hair on my head is not curly enough and the hair on my feet is too thin. I had a nice round belly but I’ve lost much of it on this journey and m-my beard- not even our men grow beards! It is unnatural and disgusting!”

“Oh my Bella.” He moaned into her hair, pulling her even closer. “If I could I would go right now
and knock sense into every person in the Shire. With my sword preferably. You are beautiful Bella, so very beautiful. Your hair shines like gold in the sun and I cannot wait to put my braid in it. Your feet are by far the hairiest I have ever seen and I find them adorable. You are a bit too thin but when we reclaim our home I shall keep you in milk and honey and meat and cheeses and fresh bread and even those greens you enjoy to your hearts content even if it might cost me all my treasury to do so. And your beard- Bella, all dwarrow have beards, even our females.”

“You’re lying.”

“I am not. My sister’s is longer than mine and she keeps it braided with fine chains of silver.” Thorin pulled back enough to cup her cheek again and look her in the eyes. “Bella, you have always been beautiful to me bare-cheeked but with a beard you would be bunnel, radiant.”

“That is the strangest thing.” Bella said after a moment of trying to process. She felt dazed and off-centered. It was becoming a familiar feeling around Thorin and his company.

Throin gave a small chuckle. “You have argued with trolls, seen stone giants, and ridden on eagles larger than ponies and learning that dwarrow prefer their dams bearded is the strangest?”

She gave an annoyed huff but otherwise said nothing. Her mind was whirling and she could barely understand what he had told her, much less believe it. She felt strangely separated from the world around her, even Thorin whose lap she was practically sitting in.

“So,” she said slowly. “You still want to court me?”

“Of course!”

“Even with a beard?”

“Especially with a beard.”

“Even though I cannot give you children?”

“I told you before I do not care about such things. I already have my heir through Fili. Bella, amralime, I love you. Even should you refuse me there will never be another. You are my marlel, my bunnel, the greatest treasure of my heart.”

That barrier she felt around herself, that feeling of separation, cracked and then shattered. She heaved great big, gasping sobs like she was a small fauntling again and buried her head in Thorin’s chest. He held her tight and made soft, comforting sounds. She wanted to laugh but it came out as a hiccup-y sob. She was happy. Immeasurably, indescribably happy in a way she had never been before. It was completely overwhelming.

It went on for some time; her sobs and Thorin began to become visibly distressed. More so with each passing moment. “I-It’s o-ok-kay.” Bella finally managed to stutter out. “T-these are h-hap-py t-tears.”

“Is there such a thing?” Thorin’s skepticism was plain to hear.

“O-Of c-course. D-don’t-t be s-silly.”

“Silly?! I’m not the one crying because I’m happy.”

Bella let out a wet chuckle. “Rude dwarf.”
Thorin made a protesting sound but didn’t say anything. They stayed like that, wrapped together for several moments, just enjoying the closeness. Of course, it couldn’t last forever.

“My pants are wet.” Thorin mumbled into Bella’s hair.

“What?”

“My pants are wet. I appear to be kneeling in the water.”

Bella giggled as she climbed off his lap. “Well, you could do with a washing.”

“Miss Baggins, are you telling me I smell?”

“Mister Oakenshield, are you telling me you don’t?”

Thorin’s laugh was loud and clear and utterly captivating. It was like a balm on Bella’s soul. “Fair enough. After the past days I imagine we could all do with a bath.”

“I don’t know. Another few days and we might be able to drive out the dragon with our stench alone.”

“We’ll have to save that for a plan B.”

Bella’s joke about not having a plan A died on her tongue as Thorin began to disrobe. “W-what are you doing?”

“I am going to bathe. Care to join me?” The look he sent her was as rogue-ish as any Bella had ever seen and it made her equal parts flattered and uncomfortable.

I-I don’t think that’s would be a-appropriate.”

Thorin’s expression became serious as he began to unbuckle and remove his armor. “I would never do something you did not want, you must know that. I will only touch where and when it is welcome.” He sighed and his shoulder’s slumped a little. “But perhaps you are right- it would not be appropriate. I have not yet earned the honor of your love.”

Many thoughts and emotions were swirling around in Bella’s head but as usual what came out was the least of what Bella wanted to say. “You’re ridiculous.”

“And why do you say that?” Thorin asked. He was down to just his trousers and undershirt and was removing his heavy boots. The sight of his bare feet felt incredibly erotic and it took Bella a moment to regain her thoughts.

“Because you don’t need to earn my love. Y-you already have it.” Bella was sure her face was glowing it felt so warm. She could hardly believe her own boldness. “I can’t think of anyone who deserves it more. If anything, I don’t deserve you.”

Thorin, now shirtless, approached her and reached out to grab her hands. “I will spend the rest of my life working to give you a fraction of the joy you give me. There could not be another more worthy and to hear you say you love me brings me more happiness than I can express but I cannot court you yet. I- it is hard to express in Westron- I do not have the honor.” He made a little growl of frustration. The sound sent shivers down Bella’s spine.

“When I- when I insulted you so brutally, unintentionally as it was, I lost my honor in the eyes of my people. Until I earn it back I cannot court you. If we were in Erebor your family would insure
reparation on your behalf and determine when I was worthy enough of you.”

“And since we’re not in Erebor and I have no family?”

Thorin smiled. “I have 12 dwarrow who stepped forward on your behalf when I told them of my sin.”

“You told them?”

“Of course. It was the first step in regaining my honor. I also wished to ensure no one else made my mistake.”

“Oh. That’s where you got your black eye in Rivendell isn’t it? From one of the other dwarrow.”

“It is.”

Bella wasn’t sure how she felt about that. She certainly didn’t condone violence, especially directed at Thorin but she was quite touched that her friends were so indignant on her behalf.

“You have a fine Champion in Dwalin.” Thorin continued.

“Dwalin?”

“He won the right to stand in for your family as your Champion. It will be him who decides when I have my honor returned and may court you.”

“Oh.” The idea that any of the dwarrow wanted to stand in for her family warmed her down to her very toes. “That’s- that’s good. Why wasn’t I told about this though?”

“It is a part of our culture. We didn’t want you to feel burdened by it or uncomfortable. You could not ask for a more loyal brother, though. Nor a more devoted one.” He brought one hand up to brush a kiss against Bella’s knuckles. “Now, I need to wash and check in on my dwarrow. Will you be rejoining them?”

“Yes, as soon as I’m done shaving.”

“What?” Thorin’s grip on her hands tightened and his face hardened. “Did we not just talk about this? There is no need for you to shave. In fact it is my preference that you never shave again.”

Bella took a moment to let her thoughts settle. It would be so easy to give into his request. So much simpler but just the very thought had nausea rolling through her belly. Bella gave Thorin’s hands a squeeze and tried to think of how to word what she wanted to say. “But it’s not my preference. I understand- well, not understand but… acknowledge- that you find my beard… appealing but I don’t. I hate it. I’ve spent the last 30 years hating it and while it’s amazing to know you find me b-beautiful even with it, that doesn’t change how I feel. It will take a while, if ever, for that to change. I’m just not comfortable not shaving it right now. Besides,” Bella smiled, trying to lighten the troubled look on Thorin’s face. “I already started. I’d look quite ridiculous walking around with only half a beard.”

The dwarf appeared to be waging some sort of internal war with himself but eventually he let out a sigh of defeat. “It would be wrong of me to force my people’s ways on you, especially if it makes you uncomfortable. Would you consider allowing it to grow out? For me?”

“I will and not just for you. Now, go take your bath. The rest of the company must think you’ve gone and drowned by now.”
Thorin laughed though it sounded strained. “Very well.”

Bella watched him wade out into the pool and once certain he had a handle on things despite his injuries, turned back to her own task. It took but a few moments to finish. The hardest part was ignoring the pained looks and sounds Thorin kept sending her way. She decided to leave it at one go over, even if it wasn’t as smooth as she’d prefer. After, feeling like she deserved a bit of a treat after the day she’d had, Bella settled in to watch Thorin finish bathing. He smiled and perhaps stretched a bit more than was strictly necessary, ensuring she saw the best of his physique. It made her blush but Bella thoroughly enjoyed it.

“When I first saw you with your razors, I thought some merchant had sold them to you as pocketknives and you didn’t know better. Gloin had wanted to tell you but I saw no purpose in it except to embarrass you and Dwalin said they would work well enough for protection.”

“It would have embarrassed me though not for the reason you thought.” Bella admitted. She tried not to grimace as Thorin used his discarded shirt, dirty even before the goblin caves, to towel off. “If I had known you all would recognize them for what they were I would have never let you see them. I thought, because none of you shave, you wouldn’t know a razor.”

Thorin gave a wry grin. “My kin and I have spent much time amongst the villages of men, often working as blacksmiths for them. Of course we know what razors are.”

“Well, when you put it like that…” Bella felt herself blush.

Thorin smiled. “I am going back to the others. If you give me a few minutes, it might be best if I explain the situation before you join us.”

“Oh! Oh yes. I-I suppose that would be best.” Bella hadn’t even thought about what would happen rejoining the rest of the company in her freshly shaven state.

He gave her a reassuring squeeze to the shoulder and then he was gone. Bella sat herself upon a rock and fretted. Would her shaving affect the way the others saw her? Would they see her as someone shameful now? At the very least she would surely make them uncomfortable practicing something so taboo. It was almost humorous how quickly her worries changed from one extreme to the other.

When she deemed enough time passed she made her way back to the cave. Each step seemed weighted with her worries until it was like she was wading through the river instead of on its shores. Bella could hear some talking as she approached but it all fell silent as she entered. The expressions ranged from anger to sorrow to Thorin’s small, encouraging smile and Bella was just considering turning and fleeing when a large presence came up beside her.

“I know of a man who lives near here who may be willing to provide us with food and shelter. Come, we do not want to be out still when night falls.” Gandalf commanded and like that the Company was on the move again.

Chapter End Notes

So I made some attempts at Khuzdul. I used the English/ Neo-Khuzdul dictionary from the Dwarrow Scholar. If I messed up somewhere please feel free to let me know.

-Bunmel- beauty of all beauty- closest I could find to radiant
- Amralime-my love
- Marlel- love of all love
- Bunnel-treasure of all treasures, *hidden wealth- I thought it was fitting for Bella, especially the 'hidden wealth' part.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

The Company arrives at Beorn's and we learn a bit about Dwarven culture.

Also, far less angst than previous chapters and what little there is isn't Bella's.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bella’s fears about the company’s reaction to her shaving seemed unfounded. As they made their way to the skin changer’s house each dwarf took a moment to give her a warm smile or friendly pat on the arm or back. Bifur even brought her a small bouquet of flowers. She didn’t know their name or meaning but they smelled lovely and he had blushed brightly when she thanked him profusely. It was all immensely reassuring and she was beginning to think there wasn’t anything that could drive her dwarrow away. Their friendship seemed to be as steadfast as their mountains.

Their journey that day passed quietly. Everyone was tired despite their rest at the Carrock and they were all long past ready for the warm meal and safe place to sleep Gandalf promised them. There was a small fuss when it was suggested the approach in small groups of 2’s and 3’s- a tactic Bella found suspiciously familiar, and a bigger fuss when she was to go first.

“You would have us send her into an unknown situation without at least one of us at her side?” Thorin demanded.

“And what protection do you think you could offer that I cannot? Bella is a dear friend, I would not allow any harm to come to her.”

“Except for trolls and goblins and orcs.” Dwalin pointed out.

“And wargs!”

“Aye, and cliffs!” Fili and Kili chimed in.

“Your tally is not very good wizard.” Gloin summed up happily.

“Enough! If I say I shall keep her safe then keep her safe I shall!” Gandalf yelled over the squabbling dwarrow. “Besides, our host is not overly fond of dwarves and it would not do to upset him before we’ve even made it through the door.”

The dwarrow continued to glare, Thorin most of all, but their arguments were noticeably quieted. Many of the younger looked away what very much looked like shame. Bella felt her heart go out to them. How terrible, to be judged just for their race. How stupid. She couldn’t speak for every dwarrow but these 13 were only the best of people and certainly deserved better. Bella dearly wished she could gather them all up into a hug just then.

“It’ll be just for a moment. Thorin, you and Dori will be with us before anything bad can happen.” She tried to give him her most reassuring smile. “At least we know this strategy works. It certainly got you lot inside my smial all fed and watered.”
Bella felt quite relieved when he returned her smile, even if his was small. “Very well, but we will be right behind you.”

“Wait 10 minutes after you see us enter the gate, then follow.” Gandalf instructed.

“Five.”

“Very well.” The wizard said with exasperation before leading the way down the path. Bella went to follow but Thorin grabbed her hand.

“You will shout for us if there is any trouble.”

Bella wanted to make a joke but Thorin was looking at her so earnestly. “I promise.”

Despite her dwarrow’s concern Bella herself hadn’t been worried until she saw Beorn. She had always thought Gandalf was ridiculously tall but even with his pointy hat he came short to Beorn’s full height. Bella, hobbit that she was, found herself staring at the skin changer’s knees. Really it just wasn’t natural being that tall. She sat quietly, trying to make herself even smaller as Gandalf began to tell their tale. Bella felt relief as she watched Thorin join them.

It was impressive to watch Gandalf weave a spell with his story. Beorn hardly paid attention to the parade of dwarrow slowly taking over his home. Even Bella, who had lived through the events, found herself on the edge of her seat to hear what happened next. In the end Beorn was impressed enough to give them food and shelter for the night and more besides if their story proved true. The dwarrow were disappointed by the lack of meat on the table but soon everyone was feeling full and cheerful. As they finished the Company made their way to the hearth and settled in with their pipes and their songs until only Bella was left. She didn’t mind, thoroughly enjoying the opportunity to eat her fill for the first time since Rivendell. Bella was quite content to savor her last honey cake and listen to the dwarrow’s song fill the large room.

“Where does it all go?” Boomed a voice as a large finger poked her side. Bella let out a squeak as she looked up and up into their host’s face.

“Excuse me! That was quite rude! And touching a lady without permission- certainly not the actions of a gentleman.”

Beorn looked surprised and in the back of her mind Bella noticed it had gone quiet. Then the tall man laughed and the tension bleed from the room.

“You are a fierce little bunny, aren’t you?”

“I’m not a bunny at all, I’m a hobbit.”

“And are all hobbits such fierce little warriors?”

“Certainly not.” Bella tried to picture a Chubb or Whitfoot facing trolls fighting goblins and almost laughed aloud at the image. Lobelia just might match a warg in meanness though. “Hobbits are peaceful, respectable folk. Not the type to leave the comforts of home.”

“Yet you did.”

“I did.” She agreed.

He gave her a thoughtful look and Bella tried to ignore it as she finished her cake. Then he smiled. “I
like you little bunny. You should stay with me when the dwarves leave. I will keep you well fed.”

Bella was quite certain she could hear growling coming from her companions. “That is very kind of you Master Beorn but I cannot accept. I could never abandon them.”

“Even if they are leading you to your death?”

“Even then.” Bella said with conviction. “I would rather die with them than live without. They are my family.”

“Such loyalty says good things about your dwarves.” He stood with a groan and addressed the whole room. “I am going to verify your story. Once I leave do not go outside at your own peril. These are not friendly lands to strangers. I will be back in the morning.”

After he left Bella went to join the rest of the company at the fire.

“Come sit with us, Little Sister.” Dwalin appeared at her side and didn’t give her much choice as he pushed her to the seat besides Balin with one large hand, taking the spot on her other side for himself.

“Little sister?”

Balin smiled at her. “Aye, Dwalin claimed you as kin. It was mostly done to protect your honor as our culture demands and ensure your and Thorin’s courtship was done proper. We had not meant to make much of it.”

“Thorin told me a bit about it earlier. Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“Didn’t want to make you uncomfortable.” Dwalin said with a deceptively casual shrug. “Not everyone considers it a boon to have a dwarf for kin.”

“That’s just nonsense.” Bella cut in angrily. “Whoever thinks that is an idiot! You lot are the best people I have ever known and I already think of you all as family.”

“Aye, we heard, which is why we are talking to you now. Dwalin and I were already planning to talk to you after… well… when we learned—”

“You can grow a beard.” Dwalin stated as if it made any sense in context of their conversation. Bella felt her face turn red and her hands automatically went up to cover her chin.

“None of that now, lass.” Balin soothed. “Thorin explained a bit about hobbits to all of us after his talk with you and there’s nothing to be distressed over. Grow it or not, it makes no difference to us though personally I think you’d look mighty lovely with it.”

“Balin.” Dwalin growled as the older dwarf began to ramble.

“Right, right. Just an old dwarf’s humble opinion. My point is beards are rather symbolic to our people. Our beards are who we are as dwarrow. That you can grow one— it is a sign from Mahal himself.”

“You’re a dwarf.” The warrior summed up.

“Yes, exactly. You are meant to be with us, be one of us and Dwalin and I would like to make it official. If you’d be willing, we’d like to adopt you as nan’ith, our sister.”

“We’re not the only ones.” The warrior grinned and gestured to the other dwarrow whom Bella now
noticed were watching avidly. “We just get to first since I won the wrestling match against Bifur.”

“Well?” Bella asked faintly, not sure how to take everything in.

Dwalin’s grin grew wide. “For the right to claim you as kin back in Rivendell. Had to play dirty to win against Dori.”

“I told you he cheated!” Came Dori’s shrill cry from the other side of the fire.

“All’s fair with kith and kin.” Dwalin yelled back.

Bella smothered a giggle and turned back to Balin. “W-what all does this adoption thing entail?”

“Well, Dwalin and I will gift you something to represent our family and you belonging to it, traditionally this is an heirloom of some sort or something symbolic such as a weapon for a warrior’s clan or a pickax for a miner’s. If you accept there’s a contract of Ib-bassu Barfith, which we take before the king or local lord and once we have their blessing we’ll announce your addition to our family publicly and throw a big feast.” Balin looked around the room they were in. “We’ll have to give you a proper feast once we have the mountain again and this lot will have to do for public but if I can get my hands on ink and parchment I can have a contract drawn up by morning.”

“Oh, so soon!”

“Not much point in waiting, is there?” Dwalin asked. “Though it’s roughly done and not as fine as you deserve. I suppose if you want we can wait until we’re in Erebor, find you a better gift there at the very least, but there’s no promise we’ll survive the dragon.”

Bella took one of Dwalin’s large hands in hers. “That’s not what I meant. I do not care for the gift or the public or the feast except that they are your customs. I would not care if we were out in the wilds. I was just surprised it could be done so quickly.”

“Tch, well, you did give me your hankie and declared us kin to our host a bit ago. We’re halfway there already.”

Bella grinned brightly.

“As for our gift, we do not have much in the way of heirlooms. When the dragon came there was no time to grab such sentimental items. Instead we offer you this letter opener that our father used in his role of advisor to king Thror and ambassador to the Iron Hills.” Balin from the folds of his robes withdrew what looked like a small dagger. It was obviously not meant for fighting, even Bella knew (after hearing many discussions on the subject during their travels) that gold made for a poor weapon. The designs carved into the blade and handle were geometric and beautiful with what looked like writing along the edge. On the hilt were inlaid sapphires and other stones she didn’t recognize.

“The writing is a common prayer for patience and perseverance. The sapphires are to help with perception and prosperity.” Balin explained.

“It’s beautiful.” Bella said, running her fingers reverently along the designs. “Are you sure you want me to have it?”

“Aye, lass. You’re to be our sister. It’s only right you have something that not just represents the family’s craft but actually belonged to our dad.” Dwalin said.

“Thank you so much! I will treasure it!” She flung her arms first around Dwalin and then Balin, careful of the letter opener in her hand.
“Good, good. With your acceptance I can begin the contract.” Balin chuckled once the hug ended.

She grinned widely before a thought occurred to her. “Is there something I should do? Do I need to get Balin a gift? And oh! A handkerchief- is that really a worthy gift? Though my mother did always say it was the most important thing you could carry and-“

Dwalin’s laughter cut her off. Balin looked at her with a warm smile. “There is nothing you need to do. If you wish to give a gift that is certainly acceptable and anything would be cherished. It has certainly been a while since I was able to make use of a fine handkerchief. Now, if there are no more questions I am off to find parchment.”

Bella watched Balin walk off with a strong feeling of contentment. She didn’t have long to ponder though as her thoughts were soon interrupted by someone taking the empty seat beside her.

“We’re next, ya know.” Bofur smiled down at her.

“What?”

“To adopt you. Once a respectful amount of time has passed we ‘Ur’s’ get to claim ya next.”

“Wait. You’re also going to adopt me?”

“It’ll actually be Bifur that does it but family is family whether as sister or cousin.”

“Didn’t I say we weren’t the only ones who wanted to?” Dwalin added.

“Well, yes but I didn’t realize they could. How is that possible?”

“What’ya mean?”

“Well, in the Shire once someone is adopted into a family, that’s the end of it. We don’t have multiple adoptions and really, only orphaned children get adopted, never adults.”

“But what if someone wishes to learn a craft from someone outside of their family?”

“Then they just apprentice with them I suppose.”

“Without Ib-bassu Barfith!” Dwalin looked scandalized but Bofur just nodded.

“It’s often that way with men too. We dwarrow are a bit different. When Mahal made the 7 fathers he gifted them each with a craft to pass down their lines. Our craft is more sacred to us than even our beards and never taught outside of families.”

“Hence the adoptions?”

“Exactly.” Bofur agreed with a large smile.

A distressed thought came to Bella. “I don’t have to learn all of your crafts do I?”

Both Bofur and Dwalin laughed at that.

“Nah.” The miner answered. “Though any of us would be honored to teach you.”

“No offense Little Sister but fierce as you are with your little blades, you’re not much of a warrior.”

Bella considered taking offense at Dwalin’s words but instead decided to feel relief at not having to
learn war strategies or coal extraction.

“Hmmm.” Bofur made an agreeing sound. “Dori might try to make you learn his though as neither of his brothers took up trade.”

“Dori?”

“Aye. He and his lot are after us.”

“Oh.”

Bella felt overwhelmed and it must have shone on her face because Bofur looked at her with sympathy and amusement. “Go to bed lass. It is getting late.”

“We could all use a good rest after the days we’ve had.” Dwalin added and there were murmurs of agreement from around the fire. Oin was already snoring where he was sitting.

Bella set up her bedroll near the hearth as Dwalin directed and listened to the rest settle in. She had thought after everything, that she would sleep easily but as snores began to fill up the air Bella could not get her mind to settle.

With a huff she uncurled and rolled to stare at the ceiling.

“What are you doing awake, bunnet?”

Still sitting on the other side of the fire was Thorin.

“Why aren’t you sleeping?” Bella demanded, sitting up.

“I believe I just asked you the same.”

“I’m not the one injured.”

Thorin just shrugged. Bella stared at him hard for a few minutes but when nothing was forthcoming she let out a huff of exasperation. “My mind won’t calm enough for sleep. I can hardly believe today happened and as terrible as parts were I’m terrified of waking and discovering it was all a dream.”

Thorin gave her a gentle smile and held out an arm in invitation. Bella did not hesitate to curl against his side. “Today was very much real. The good and the bad. I would never disparage your imagination but I know I could never dream up a day such as we’ve had.”

“I don’t know. You are the one trying to take a mountain back from a dragon with just 13 dwarrow and a hobbit. I would say you’re quite the dreamer. Not much of a planner but definitely a dreamer.”

With a chuckle Thorin pulled her closer. “Such a mouth on you. Is that how you would talk to a king?”

“Not a king. That is how I would talk to the one I hope to someday call husband.” Bella could hardly believe her own daring and was quite surprised her pounding heart hadn’t already woken the rest of the room.

“Bella.” Her name sounded like a prayer on Thorin’s lips and he looked at her with such emotion Bella’s breath caught in her throat. He was going to kiss her, she was absolutely sure of it. She licked her lips in preparation and when he lent in with a moan she leaned forward to meet him.

The loud clearing of a throat had them jumping apart before their lips could touch. Before them stood
a very unimpressed looking Balin, arms crossed over his chest, a piece of parchment hanging from one hand. “I think that’s quite enough late night conversations, especially for two people who are not courting yet.”

Bella thought her face might actually catch on fire. She jumped up from her seat. “R-right. Yes. Yes of c-course. You are quite right, Balin. I’ll just… I’m just going to… right. Sleep. I need s-sleep. G-good night!” She bobbed an awkward little curtsy and all but ran back to her bedroll, doing her best to hide beneath the blanket and disappear.

Underneath her hand she could feel something small and hard in her pocket. As her curious fingers touched cool metal she remembered the ring from the goblin caves and its power to make her invisible. _How strange_, she thought, _that I should have forgotten it._

Chapter End Notes

Hahaha! Thorin is an honorable dwarf but even he can get swept away in the right moment. Good thing Big Brother Balin was around to keep things respectable ;)

All my Khuzdul comes from the dwarrowscholar:
https://dwarrowscholar.wordpress.com/khuzdul/documents-dictionaries/

nan’ith: sister that is young/new/fresh. Basically little sister or new sister.

Ib-bassu Barfith: I had to put this one together a bit. I found out how to say 'to be covered in syrup' or that someone has a small penis but apparently dwarves don't have a word for 'adoption'. Anyways 'ib-bassu' is 'the bond', 'bassu' is 'bond of', and 'barfith' is families that are young/new/fresh. In short, 'the bond of new families'.

bunnel: treasure of all treasures (hidden wealth)

According to crystal-cure.com sapphires are supposed to contribute to mental clarity and perception. They can promote financial rewards. Seems like things an advisor/ambassador would find important and would therefore use to decorate their stuff.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Bella officially becomes a dwarf.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Bella awoke the sun was high in the sky and breakfast was waiting out on the veranda. Only Balin and Dwalin still sat at the table. Bella approached cautiously, the embarrassment of the night before still fresh in mind.

“Come and eat, Little Sister.” Dwalin called when he saw her. “We saved food for you. Had to fight off some of the others to do so.”

There was no teasing in the dwarf’s tone or expression and when Bella looked to Balin he just smiled kindly. Feeling assured she quickly took the offered seat and tucked into her meal.

“Slept in quite late. Something keep you up last night?”

Bella gave Dwalin a suspicious look but his face showed nothing but polite interest.

“I simply needed the sleep. Hobbits were not meant to go running through goblin tunnels or fight wargs. Very tiring business, you know.”

The warrior laughed. “Aye, it is but you seemed to hold up alright. More dwarf to you than hobbit I’d say. After all, you did catch yourself our king.”

Bella looked up sharply at that but Dwalin maintained an innocent expression. Almost too innocent.

“I suppose I did at that.” She answered, still suspicious. Dwalin just smiled and kept quiet-

Until she took a drink. “Caught him by his tongue from what I hear.”

Tea spewed across the table to Dwalin’s great amusement. His guffaws were loud enough to draw the attention of several other dwarrow though none approached.

“You told him!” Bella accused Balin, torn between fury and embarrassment.

The older dwarf just smiled and shrugged. “As your Champion and brother it was his right to know.” Balin said with a straight face though his eyes were pure mischief.

“Oh you-!” She turned back to her food with a huff, acting with more anger than she really felt.

“Aw, Little Sister, don’t be like that.” Dwalin coaxed. “It’s a brother’s prerogative to tease.”

Bella finished her scone slowly before responding. “That may be but it’s a sister’s prerogative to retaliate. Be warned, I may have been a single child but I grew up with many cousins.”

He just grinned, not looking the least bit worried. Balin clearing his throat caught both their attention.
“If you are done with your breakfast, Bella, I have the contact ready. Perhaps we could look at it… elsewhere?” He suggested, looking pointedly at the tea-splattered table.

“Ah, yes. Probably a good idea.” She blushed.

Following Balin, the three of them moved to the benches they had sat on the night before by the hearth. Once settled, Bella was handed a rolled piece of parchment. Opening it up she took a minute to admire Balin’s beautiful penmanship.

“I can’t read it.”

Dwalin leaned in to look over her shoulder. “It’s in Khuzdul.” He clarified in what Bella assumed was an attempt to be helpful.

“I can’t read Khuzdul.”

“Course not. Not yet.”

Bella turned to Balin to see if he would prove to be any more helpful.

“All our most important documents are written in Khuzdul. As soon as it’s official I shall begin your language lessons.”

“Isn’t it a secret language? I thought only dwarrow could learn it.”

“What do you think this contract is? Once we’re done you will be a dwarf in the eyes of the law and our people. Khuzdul will be your birthright as much as any dwarf’s.”

She stared at Dwalin, realizing she had somehow underestimated just what they were doing for her.

Balin reached over and pointed to the first section. “That’s what the first part talks about- what it means to be a dwarf, the story of our origins and our maker Mahal, and the significance of Ib-bassu Barfith. Below that is a brief history of our family and family tree from Durin VI, the last king of Khazad-dum,” Balin pointed. “To you.”

Bella traced the lines branching down like the roots of a tree until they reached Balin’s finger. There, written in runes she couldn’t read but found beautiful to look at was her name tucked snuggly between what could only be Balin’s and Dwalin’s names.

“This proclaims you to be a child of Fundin. When you greet people from now on the proper greeting will be ‘Bella Baggins daughter of Fundin’ or ‘Bella daughter of Bungo daughter of Fundin.’”

“That’s quite a mouthful.”

“And it’ll only get worse with each adoption.” Dwalin said with a laugh.

“It may take some getting used to.” Balin conceded before pointing to the next section. “Here I’ve detailed our family’s responsibility to you, Bella. Love, loyalty, service, and protection to summarize. We shall give any care required, see to any education needed, offer what guidance we can and Champion for you.”

“You’re paraphrasing.” Bella said, eyeing the rather long section being discussed.

“I am. The last section details your responsibilities to the family, which fall into the same four categories of love, loyalty, service, and protection. You will pledge fidelity to the family, offer your
care, guidance, and support as needed, and promise to battle at our side and guard our back as we will yours.”

“B-battle?”

“Both symbolic and literal. You will be expected to fight for the honor of the family as well as its members both on and off any battlefield.”

“Do not look so worried, Little Sister. We are not asking for more than you can give. Did you not battle wits for us with the trolls? And fought against orcs and wargs not just at our side but ahead of us to protect our king?”

“W-well, yes. I suppose I did.”

“If you have no other concerns then we just need to sign it and present out appeal before the king.” Balin produced a pot of ink and quill from the folds of his robes. He took the contract and signed first, his runes clean and elegant as Bella had come to expect. Then he passed everything to Dwalin who signed with equally lovely penmanship. She studied his signature for a moment and just smiled when he gave her a questioning look. His runes were not elegant like his brother’s but well formed and bold with some extra flourishes. It was not what one would expect from the warrior.

“You’ll need to sign in Khudzul, just copy from the family tree.” Balin instructed.

Bella’s hand was a little shaky as she took the quill but she had been known for her good penmanship and would do no less than her best for this. She went slowly, making sure each line was perfect. The finished result was quite lovely if Bella did say so herself.

“Very good. Now we just need to find the king.”

“He’s in the yard sparring with his nephews. Needed to work off some energy, our king did.”

Bella tried very hard not to blush at the pointed look Dwalin sent her. Pretending she couldn’t see him she followed Balin outside.

Thorin was exactly where Dwalin said he would be, in the yard with his nephews. The clash of swords, grunts, and occasional battle cries preceded the image of Thorin taking on both younger dwarrow. The sight was arresting and Bella had to take a moment to simply watch.

It was like a dance. Dwarrow were not elegant like the elves but the sons of Durin moved with a power and grace that was beautiful in its own right. Watching Thorin spin and dodge, thrust and parry, it was magnificent and Bella could feel her breath matching Thorin’s increasing speed. His attacks became faster and more vicious until he cleanly disarmed first one nephew and then the other, claiming victory.

“Easy there, Little Sister.” Dwalin murmured. “It’s some impressive fighting but he’s got a long way to go before he’s earned the right to court you.”

“You’re being ridiculous.” She said tartly, even as she felt her face burn up. “He’s already apologized. I don’t understand why that isn’t enough. It is certainly more than anyone else has ever done.” The last part she said more to herself but of course Dwalin heard.

“Bella, lass, look at me.” Bella hadn’t even realized she was staring at her toes until she looked back up. “That’s better. Just because those hobbits treated you poorly, that doesn’t mean that’s how you deserve to be treated. They were too blind to see the treasure right in front of them but we dwarrow-Mahal made us to recognize treasure.”
“Aye, Mahal taught us to appreciate treasure in all forms. To covet it and seek it out. To hoard it and protect it as an extension of ourselves. We can do nothing less than ensure you are taken care of properly. That means courted properly by someone who’s proven themselves worthy.”

Bella sniffed a bit but managed to keep from crying. “Hobbits may not know much about treasure but we do know about family and you both are better than I could have ever asked for.”

“And with that being said, shall we make it official?” Balin turned to where Thorin and his nephews were now resting, pretending not to be eavesdropping. “Sire, if we may have a moment, my brother and I come to you with an appeal.”

“Of course.” Thorin came forward. Despite having been sparring not five minutes before he looked calm and collected and so very regal. It was almost intimidating to stand before him when he was being all… kingly. Bella was reminded of when she had first met him and his cool distain.

“What is your suit?”

“We, the sons of Fundin of the line of Durin come before you to request Ib-bassu Barfith, the adoption of Bella Baggins of the Shire as our sister.”

“Do you have the contract?”

“We do.” Balin handed over the signed contract. Thorin took it and read carefully, insuring everything was done properly. Not that anyone could doubt Balin’s work.

“This is beautifully done.” Thorin complimented.

“Thank you, Sire.”

“I Thorin II Oakenshield, son of Thrain, son of Thrór, king of Erebor and her exiled people accept your suit. Step forward Bella Baggins of the Shire.”

Feeling inexplicably nervous Bella did as commanded, her hands twisting together. Thorin obviously noticed because he offered her a small, warm smile.

“Do you accept the family of the son’s of Fundin of the line of Durin as your own?”

“Oh, uh, y-yes. Of course.”

“And do you accept their love, loyalty, service, and protection as their right as your family?”

“Yes, I do.”

“And do you in turn promise to them your love, loyalty, service, and protection? To accept, assist, and care in all times- in prosperity and dry veins, at home and abroad, in times of celebration and sorrow, to the best of your ability until such a time as you rejoin the Maker?”

“I promise.”

“Balin and Dwalin, step forward.” They did. “Do you, sons of Fundin of the line of Durin accept Bella Baggins and the Shire’s love, loyalty, service, and protection as her right as your family?”

“We do.”

“And do you in turn promise to her love, loyalty, service, and protection? To accept, assist, and care for her in all times- in prosperity and dry veins, at home and abroad, in times of celebration and
sorrow, to the best of your abilities until such a time as you rejoin the maker?”

“We do.”

“Then, as Mahal created his family of stone so that they may stand strong and everlasting so too may your family be. Bella Baggins of the Shire you are now makhazduna and I name you Bella daughter of Fundin.”

Fili and Kili let out whoops from where they’d been watching. They rushed at her and hugged her hard enough she couldn’t breath. Bella didn’t mind though. It just felt so good to be part of a family again.

“That’s my sister you’re hogging. Run off now and fetch the others so we can make our announcement.” Dwalin shooed the two off and then swooped in for his own hug. He was gentle with her though, even as he lifted her clear off the ground. As soon as Dwalin let her go Balin came in for his hug as warm and comforting as anything. Bella happily sank into it.

“Welcome to the family, nan’ith.” He whispered into her ear. She just squeezed back harder, unable to speak through the emotion. They separated as the other dwarrow began to arrive.

“I hear there’s an announcement to be made.” Gloin said as he walked around the side of the house, Oin and Bombur with him.

“Aye, just as soon as we’re all here.” Balin replied.

It was but a moment for not only the rest of the dwarrow but Gandalf, their host, and several of the animals to join them. It was such a motley crew and Bella had to bite her lip to keep from laughing at the sight.

“We just need some vendors and perhaps a juggler or sword swallower and this would be a true summer festival.” Someone whispered in her ear.

Bella smothered a snort and looked up at Thorin. “You’re terrible.”

Thorin just grinned unrepentantly.

The announcement was a brief affair, made first in Khuzdul and then again in Westron. The dwarrow cheered loudly when she was once again named makhazduna, which was finally explained to her as to mean she was officially a dwarf. Beorn looked bemused by the whole thing but Gandalf congratulated her heartily and there were many hugs and backslaps. All the while her new brothers stayed at her side and Thorin remained a warm presence at her back.

Chapter End Notes

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Oh my gosh I had a hard time deciding where to end this chapter! I actually had 3 different spots and finally decided with the first because I wanted to keep the main focus of this chapter the ceremony instead of starting something new at the end.

Not a scholar of languages in the least. All Khuzdul comes from The Dwarrow Scholar.

Ib-bassu Barfith: The bond of new families

Khazad-dum: Also known as Moria in the Misty Mountains. It was considered the greatest Dwarvish city ever created. Durin's folk lived there for thousands of years until
Durin VI was killed by what would be called 'Durin's Bane'.
Makhazduna: She who is dwarfed. (This is the race, not the adjective- I double checked. 'Little' is mim, 'dwarf lady' is khazduna)
Nan'ith: Sister that is young/new/fresh. Little sister.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Bonding at Beorn’s. We get to learn a little more about hobbit customs this time.

Chapter Notes

Not quite a filler chapter but also not very heavy on plot. Mostly just some more Bella x dwarf interaction.

So when I first posted way back in February, I already had the first 5 or so chapters already written. Today is the first time I’m posting without being at least one chapter ahead. My hope is that I will be able to keep up with the weekly updates but I make no promises.

Unbeta’d so let me know of any glaring errors.

EDIT: This story now has fan art by the amazing Yon !!!! It’s so cute! Go check them out!

The mood was high after the announcement was made.

“Welcome to the family, cousin.” Oin said with a pat to the back that almost sent Bella sprawling.

“T-thanks.”

Before she’d quite gained her equilibrium again Gloin was there pulling her into a large hug. “Idmi Cousin! Nalili will be so happy to have another dam in the family. She and Dis often complain of being surrounded by so many fasal.” He laughed as though he’d said something quite humorous. “My Gimli will be quite please as well, have no doubt.”

Bella smiled and pat his arm, not having quite enough air to actually say anything. When he finally let her go she took a deep breath and then was promptly cut off by their host.

“Little Bunny is a dwarf now, eh?” Beorn crouched down before Bella. It didn’t put them on the same level but it did put him closer. “You still look like a hobbit to me but what do I know?” He ran a hand over her hair as he boomed out a laugh and stood up.

“Come. I understand this is a celebration. We shall have ourselves a feast!”

The dwarrow cheered again and happily trooped inside. Before Bella could follow she found herself being lifted into the air and set on a very large shoulder. “Come Little Bunny, we shall get you nice and fat on milk and honey!”

“M-mister Beorn!” Bella squeaked, holding on to his tunic with a death grip. “We’ve talked about
touching without asking first; it is very poor manners!"

Beorn just laughed and carried her inside. The table was already set for them, loaded with the promised milk and honey as well as roasted vegetables and baked potatoes, dishes of noodles in thick sauces and warm loaves of bread. There were also trays full of cakes and all the mead the dwarrow could drink. Even without meat it was a splendid feast. They all tucked in with enthusiasm though that didn’t stop the dwarrow from sending dirty looks in Beorn’s direction where he continued to keep Bella on his shoulder, offering up bits of food to the hobbit. If she wasn’t mistaken, Bella was quite certain Dwalin was pouting. Thorin looked like he was trying to set their host ablaze with his eyes alone.

Bella herself wasn’t happy with the arrangement but she was getting fed and while they ate Beorn announced his decision to help them with their quest.

“I went into the mountains last night and saw the burnt cliff and caught a goblin scout.” Beorn said between bites of food. “Your story was a good one last night but it is even better today now that I know it is true. I will offer you any help I can.” He looked around, shaking his head with a chuckle. “Killing the Great Goblin… I may learn to like dwarves yet!”

Knowing that they were going to receive aid was a big relief, not just to Bella but all the dwarrow. It seemed foolish to fuss in the light of all that and she certainly didn’t want to risk this new alliance. She’d hate to cause trouble, especially during what was a celebration.

As the food began to dwindle and the eating slowed down Bella was finally able to convince Beorn to put her down. She was almost immediately ensconced between Dwalin and Dori. She smiled when Dori offered her a full plate and tucked in.

Dwarves were almost as good at throwing a party as hobbits. They ate and drank and made merry for several hours. Bella had a grand time, especially since being surrounded by dwarrow kept Beorn from trying to pick her up or touch her again. Eventually things began to wind down and the dwarrow slowly moved to the fire or their bedrolls. Bella followed Balin back to the hearth, not yet ready for sleep. She listened contentedly as the dwarrow sang or told stories of deeds great and small. When Beorn came to join them Bella felt herself tense up until he left for the night, once again warning them to stay inside.

“He makes you uncomfortable.” Ori spoke up from beside her.

“Oh, well, it’s just… it’s nothing.” Bella stuttered, embarrassed someone had noticed her discomfort.

“It’s not nothing if it makes you uncomfortable, Miss Baggins!” Ori said with conviction. “You shouldn’t let him pick you up and touch you if you don’t like it.”

“It’s not like I can stop him.” She muttered to herself before turning back to the young dwarf. “It’s really not worth making a fuss over. I’d hate to seem rude, especially after Mister Beorn has agreed to help us. What if he takes offence and then withdraws his aid?”

“Then we’d make do, just like we dwarrow always have. Don’t you worry about that!”

“He’s right my dear.” Dori spoke up from her other side. “I think we’d all prefer for him to keep his distance from you. Especially a certain dwarf king.” He nodded to where Thorin sat, scowling into the fire.

“You should use this.” From over her shoulder Nori held out her little elvish blade.

“My sword!” I left it on the cliff! It- it was stuck in an orc.” She grimaced at the memory.
“Yeah, bad form that. We’ll need to teach you to take better care of your weapons though you do alright with your little blades I suppose.” Nori squeezed his way in between Bella and Dori, ignoring Dori’s grumbling as he was forced to shift over. “Anyways I picked it up when the eagles came. Meant to give it to you earlier but you’ve been a bit busy.”

“Thank you very much! That was very sweet of you.”

Nori gave a shrug, looking a bit embarrassed. “Right. Think nothing of it. Just thought ya might want it. Like for deterring large bears from invading your personal space.”

Bella gave him a horrified look. “Nori! Mister Beorn is our host! I can’t stab him! It would be very rude.”

“Well he’s the one been rude first.”

“You don’t have to stab him, Bella dear.” Dori cut in. “Just use it as a deterrent- to make him listen when you say no.”

“You really should.” Ori added, his eyes large and earnest.

“Aye, lass. What better way to get your point across?” Bofur called from his place next the Fili. The blond dwarf snorted and punching his arm while many of the others groaned.

“Bad jokes aside, nan’ith, it is a good idea if Beorn- or anyone- refuses to listen to your words.” Balin spoke up. “It is always acceptable to defend yourself. There is no rudeness in that.” From around the fire all the dwarrow nodded and gave their agreement.

“Of course, we could always keep a guard around you, make sure Beorn never gets close enough to touch.” Kili offered with a teasing grin.

“Ah, no. I think I’ll try my luck with the sword, thank you.” Many of the dwarrow, especially the older ones, chuckled at that.

The next morning Bella was one of the first awake. Only Bifur was up, smoking his pipe and whittling away at a piece of wood. There was no food out yet so, wrapping a blanket around herself to ward off the early chill, Bella went to sit beside him. He gave her a warm smile and nod in greeting and for a while they sat in companionable silence.

Bella was dozing lightly when she felt a nudge. She glanced over to see Bifur offering up something. It was a dwarf standing broad and strong, about the length of her hand. It was wearing intricate armor and its beard was decorated with tiny braids the detail of which seemed unbelievable to Bella. In its hand, reading up from its feet to stomach was an ax, much like the ones Dwalin carried.

“Oooh.” She breathed, running her fingers reverently along the figure. “Bifur, this is amazing.”

The older dwarf grinned and began pointing out certain details. Bella couldn’t understand what was being said but it was easy enough to admire his skilled work and murmur appreciatively.

“My father did some woodwork.” Bella said idly. “Nothing so fine as this but he liked to keep his hands busy.”

Bifur made an inquisitive noise so she continued talking.

“It’s not exactly a respectable hobby for a gentlehobbit. Most think the only time one should pick up
a knife is when sitting own to a meal. My father though, always said idle hands led to an idle mind.”

Bifur gave a small chuckle at that. Bella smiled in response.

“Usually he would write or translate maps but in the evenings around the hearth it wasn’t unusual to see him with a small knife and block of wood in his hands. He made little figures when I was a faunt or carved simple pipes for himself or friends.”

Bella turned the figurine over in her hands, only half aware of her attentive audience as she lost herself to memories. “He even carved my mother’s lovespoon. It hangs in place of honor above the kitchen hearth.”

Bifur said something Bella didn’t understand though it sounded questioning. She thought back over what she had said.

“Lovespoons?”

“Kun.” Bifur nodded.

“They’re a traditional courting gift, usually toward the end in the courting process. They represent the ability to care and provide for the person you love. Traditionally men would carve them throughout the process with symbols of their feelings and hopes and then gift them while proposing but that’s fallen out of fashion amongst the gentlehobbits and most commission them from merchants. My father had carved a split bowl to show sharing their lives, keys to say my mother was the key to his heart, a spade to show his willingness to work, and tulips to show his love. It’s quite beautiful.” She sighed.

“Galikh afran.” The dwarf smiled and with an arm around her shoulder, drew her close. Bella went willingly and snuggled into his furnace-like warmth. Feeling safe and comfortable and buoyed on good memories, Bella drifted off to sleep.

She woke again not much later to the sounds of the other dwarrow getting up and moving around. Dwarrow were noisy creatures, even when they were trying to be quiet. Especially when they’re trying to be quieter, Bella thought as one of them tripped over something and the rest shushed him loudly. She sat up with a smile for Bifur and stretched out the cricks.

“Come Little Sister.” Dwalin called once he saw her up. “Breakfast is on the table.”

The group discussed their plans to pack and leave that day. Beorn’s animals had already begun to gather food and supplies they would need. Beorn himself gave them advice and warnings for getting through Mirkwood. By the end of the meal Bella was feeling an uneasy mix of hopeful and worried, much as she had right after the map reading in Rivendell. At least Beorn’s advice was better than looking for a knocking thrush.

After breakfast Bella went to make sure what little she still had was ready to go. An animal brought her a pack that contained, in addition to a large amount of food, several pieces of cloth, a sewing kit, rope, soap, several pieces of flint, and a large knife. At this rate Bella was going to accumulate quite a collection of blades. The thought made her smile. In the Shire most collected doilies or bunt pans, but Bella thought it might be a good collection for a dwarf.

They ate one last meal with their host. Beorn warned them once again about straying from the path. Bella tried to ignore the sense of foreboding and instead took comfort from her brothers’ presence on either side of her. Surely nothing they might face in the forest could be any worse than what they had faced in the goblin caves.
Finally it was time to leave. The dwarrow made their goodbyes and gave sincere, if slightly cool, thanks for Beorn’s help. When it came to Bella’s turn, she didn’t feel prepared.

“Little Bunny!” The large man boomed, reaching out a hand. “Ouch! That is a sharp little stick you have.” Beorn frowned down at his stinging palm.

Bella could hardly believe she’d actually stabbed him. “I—I’m quite sorry Master Beorn. I understand you are our host and that was quite rude of me- my grandmother would be quite appalled at me right now- but, well, I did try to ask you not to touch. It’s really unacceptable to touch a lady so freely. Why, if we were in the Shire you would be considered quite the scoundrel and my reputation would be severely damaged. Not that stabbing you wouldn’t have the same affect but then at least I’m just considered a hoyden or ill-mannered and not a hus—“

Beorn’s laugh cut off Bella’s nervous ramblings. She stared up at the large man and allowed herself to relax slightly.

“So fierce! Are you sure you will not stay with me? I would take good care of you and not touch without asking.”

“I will not leave my family.” Bella said firmly.

“Very well.” Beorn smiled down at her though there was something sad about it. “I wish you and your kin all the luck in Arda. May you all regain your home so that you can come back and visit me and tell me the story.”

“Thank you Master Beorn. It would be lovely to visit again once everything is settled.” Bella answered, using the same tone and polite expression she used when dealing with non-Sackville-Baggins relatives.

And with that last exchange of pleasantries, they were off. Dori helped Bella onto her pony and Thorin tried to ride beside her but was unceremoniously pushed aside by Dwalin. Bella couldn’t help but giggle at the dirty look Thorin sent his way. Dwalin, far from being cowed, just smirked back.

“Don’t scowl at me your majesty.” He managed to make the title sound ironic. “You’re lucky I don’t demand blood for trying to take advantage of my sister the other night.”

“Dwalin!” Bella squawked. In the background she could hear chuckles and a hastily covered up guffaw that she just knew was Kili. Her face felt like it was on fire and she wasn’t the only one from what she could see beneath Thorin’s beard.

“No more unsupervised time together.” Dwalin continued, ignoring everyone else. “If not me, then Balin, Oin, or Gloin are to chaperone any time together. Or Dori. He won’t stand for no nonsense.”

Bella resisted the urge to grown and hide her face n her hands. Dwalin was so going to pay for this—just as soon as she thought of something suitable. Another glance at Thorin showed him staring stoically ahead. If it wasn’t for the red still staining his cheeks she might have thought him pondering important kingly things or the nobility of their quest.

It was quite nice to know she wasn’t alone in her embarrassment.

Chapter End Notes
Who realized Bella didn't have her sword?

I love Beorn, really I do (at least in the book. I find movie Beorn too solemn and kind of angsty). When I first was writing his interaction with Bella I was just thinking 'how cute', which is definitely what I think when I read it in other fics. Then it occurred to be how terrifying that would be (for anyone but especially a woman) to have someone so much larger touching and manhandling you. Add in Bella's history and low self-esteem and it really didn't seem so cute anymore.

Khuzdul as always comes from The Dwarrow Scholar.
Idmi: Welcome!
Fasal: Male genital organs. Dicks. In my head Dis and Gloin's wife (Nalili as I've named her) are sassy ladies.
Nan'ith: Sister that is young/new/fresh. Little sister or new sister.
Kun: Yes (to a positive question)
Galikh afran: Good tradition

Love Spoons are a traditional Welsh custom that I find very sweet. The information I used I found here: http://www.cymruted.com/html/lovespoon_symbols.html and here: http://www.britannia.com/wales/culture2.html
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

The Trials of Mirkwood part 1: Everyone is tired and hungry and very, very grumpy.

Chapter Notes

First off I just want to say again you are all amazing! I don't say it near often enough but I am so appreciative to all of my readers! You are all amazing!

We've finally made it to Mirkwood! I shall be more closely following the events of the book rather than the movie from here on out. (Also, Spiders and Flies is my favorite chapter in The Hobbit! Bilbo is just so badass- he really comes into his own)

Unbeta'd as usual.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Their first night out from Beorn’s they slept on edge, half waiting for a goblin attack. The next day though, they began to relax and by the third they were downright cheerful. Bella laughed and sang along, even mangling a drinking song in Khuzdul they’d tried to teacher her- much to everyone’s amusement. The only real thing of note was the large black bear Bella occasionally saw keeping pace with their ponies. The one time she tried to bring it up with Gandalf he shushed her and as no one else seemed worried she just assumed it was Beorn and tried to ignore him.

On the forth day they found themselves at the forest-gate. Mirkwood itself was dark and looming, a frowning presence Bella wanted to turn her back to and ride away as fast as her pony could take her. Actually, once she thought about it, it was much like Thorin when she first met him- dark, looming, and frowning.

Bella looked over to see Thorin scowling at the trees. The sight made her break out into giggles. When the others tried to question her, Bella just laughed harder and waved them off. The dwarrow all looked at her like she was mad but the atmosphere lightened and many strained faces eased enough to allow small smiles to peak through.

Those smiles were short lived however for Gandalf announced the need to release the ponies. There was much grumbling and grousing and even an argument or two but he soon put a stop to it. “Don’t be fools! Beorn is a bad enemy to have and your eyesight is not near as good as Bella’s if you have not noticed the bear following along with us.”

13 pairs of eyes cut over to stare at the hobbit. She fidgeted nervously. “You saw Beorn following us?” Thorin asked.

“Y-yes?”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”
“W-well. I-I thought you’d noticed him too.” Bella defended. “He was a great big bear!”

This caused a new wave of grumbling amongst the dwarrow. Bella felt a mix of amused exasperation and worry. Could any of them really be trusted with keeping watch if none of them noticed a giant bear following them?

“None of that matters now.” Gandalf interrupted. “Beorn is your friend but if you break your promise to him you will severely regret it. He loves those ponies as his children.”

Thorin glared. “We are not without honor! I gave my word and I will keep it.” He quickly dismounted and unburdened his pony. The rest followed suit though none looked terribly happy doing so.

“Would have made life so much easier.” Kili muttered under his breath. Bella was also certain she heard something about a ‘damn bear’ but chose to ignore it.

“You should recognize the kindness he showed allowing dwarves to ride his ponies.” Gandalf said to Thorin.

“We know exactly what kindness he showed us dwarrows.” Thorin said with bitterness.

As the ponies turned towards home and raced off Bella watched a large bear detach itself from the scenery and join them. “Well Mahal be, we were being followed.” Bofur said.


“Wizards.” Thorin returned with a scowl.

Males, Bella thought but didn’t say.

“And now I must bid you farewell. No, don’t try to dissuade me- I have already traveled with you further than I had planned and I told you back at the Carrock that I would be leaving you at Mirkwood.” Gandalf announced to the group at large, talking over those who tried to protest.

“Do you really have to go?” Bella asked from his side.

Gandalf looked down at her with a small smile. “I’m afraid I do. I have business to the south that I must attend to and I have already put it off for too long. But Miss Bella Baggins, previously of the Shire and now makhazduna, I leave you in the best of hands and what’s more important- for this quest at least- is I leave these dwarves in your capable hands.” He looked up at the rest of the company. “I go now but I am sending Bella in my place to see you through this journey. Remember the advice of Beorn and myself. Good-bye and take care of yourselves and whatever you do, do not leave the path!”

With that parting Gandalf mounted his horse again and rode off. Bella watched him go for a bit before turning back to the group with a sigh. No one looked particularly happy. It was with relief that Bella heard they would be camping there and save entering the forest until tomorrow morning.

“I don’t like the look of those woods.” Bella confessed to Thorin later as everyone sat around the fire eating their evening meal. She had laughed at them earlier when in the light of day they did not seem so threatening but as darkness began to fall, the trees seemed to grow more sinister. Worse still was the darkness, which was absolute and yet somehow seemed alive and waiting.

Thorin gave the forest an assessing look. “I have no great love of trees or forest and this one is less homely than most but I don’t think you have any reason to worry. Our path is clear and as long as
we stay on it Beorn assured us we would come to no harm. Do you doubt him or Gandalf?”

“No.” Bella said, though she still felt worried.

“Then maybe it is us dwarf you doubt.” Thorin said, his tone teasing. “Perhaps you do not trust us to follow directions or me to lead you down a single path."

Bella smiled. “You did get lost on the way to my smial.”

“All your hobbit holes look the same.” Thorin defended. “And Gandalf is terrible with directions.”

Bella just laughed and for a while surrounded by her dwarrow and the warmth of the fire she was able to forget about Mirkwood and its darkness.

They rose bright and early and after filling their water skins at a nearby stream, entered the forest. Bella’s pack was quite heavy though she knew it was lighter than the other’s and she was careful not to complain. She was sure everyone’s would be feeling lighter than they’d prefer soon enough.

The path was clear but narrow, forcing them to walk single file. It was as dark in the forest as it had appeared from the outside and Bella’s eyes did not see as well as the dwarf’s in the limited light. She walked safely ensconced between her brothers, something she was even more thankful for as her eyes adjusted to the gloom. The trees were old and twisted, looming over them, their gnarled limbs reaching out as if to grab.

As bad as the trees were it was the spaces in-between that were worse. There were strange noises, grunts, and the sounds of large things shuffling through the underbrush, coming from the darkness. Try as Bella might she could not see into the gloom to what were making the noises. What she could see were spider webs. Dark, thick cobwebs were everywhere -tangled in branches and spread between the trees. The only saving grace was the path was clear of them.

Nights offered no reprieve of rest or cheery campfires with songs and stories. The fires brought moths, large and in the thousands and huge black bats that terrified Bella. They gave up trying after only two nights and nobody felt like singing or even talking. Tension was high and made worse by the eyes that watched them in the dark. Green and red and yellow and huge pale eyes like insects but far too big glowed at them from just beyond the path and the branches above.

When the gloom deepened and the dark began to spread they would quickly make camp and eat a cold supper before trying their best to sleep. They took turns to watch, everyone in pairs, despite it being dark enough that Bella could not see her hand waving in front of her face. She was so very thankful to be paired with Dwalin and often spent their watch burrowed into his side and gripping her small sword in a tight, white-knuckled grip. She was so thankful for the protective presence of her dwarrow.

As the path wondered further on and on with no change except for the dwindling of their supplies anxieties began to rise. With these anxieties came tempers and what was once a protective presence became oppressive. It felt like the Misty Mountains all over again with the fear and tension and lack of privacy. Bella tried for the first week to continue with her shaving but it quickly became obvious that the water they’d brought in with them was the only water to be had. The few streams they stumbled across were dark and unhealthy. She couldn’t justify wasting water on something so unnecessary and shallow.

Without her scarf to hide her face, Bella cut a piece of linen. She tied it around the bottom half of her face like the mothers in Hobbiton did during the spring cleaning and while she felt quite silly it was better than showing her shame. Even if the dwarves didn’t see it as such. When Thorin first saw the
linen an expression of immense sadness crossed his features before he regained control of his face. He never said anything about it and continued to treat Bella with courtesy and respect but he seemed distant and the look haunted her.

There was plenty to distract her from her worries about Thorin though. The dwarrow were constantly complaining and every little thing became cause for a fight. While the dwarrow became louder Bella grew quieter, trying to keep the others from noticing her and drawing their ire. Sometimes when tempers had risen and angry words were exchanged she had to turn away and remind herself that these were her dwarrow whom she loved. It was the woods and the fear and exhaustion and- as their rations became smaller- the hunger which made them act so.

However Bella was also trapped in these woods- tired, scared, and so very hungry and finally after what seemed like countless days, she snapped. Kili, who’d always been a bit less mature than his brother, had responded to the growing strain by becoming what Bella’s mother would have called ‘pesky’. Where his jokes where once to elicit laughs now they were purposely provoking. So far only Bella had been exempt from his jokes; not even Thorin was completely safe though he and Dwalin fell victim less often then the rest.

“You look like one of those men bandits who raid caravans.” Kili commented from his place behind Bella. A hand reached up and tugged on the linen wrapped around her lower face. Bella flinched away from the touch, her own hands coming up to ensure it stayed in place.

“Kili.” She hissed, wanting to both warn him off and not draw anyone else’s attention.

“It’s really ridiculous.” The dwarf continued. “Are you trying to get into your role as burglar? Because it’ll take more than a piece of cloth to help you there.”

“No, I’m not.” Bella said feeling indignant.

“That’s good because I doubt it’ll do much for you with the dragon- unless you think he’ll be nicer if he can’t see your face.”

Bella knew Kili wasn’t trying to be mean, not really. She knew he was struggling just like everyone else; lashing out in his own way just like Oin’s yelling or Dwalin’s shoving. Though knowing that didn’t make it hurt any less.

“Oh! I know.” Kili said and his tone made Bella dread. “You’re hiding your shame!”

Bella stumbled in surprise. From somewhere nearby she heard someone gasp. All of Bella’s fear and anger and exhaustion and hurt and considerable hunger rose up inside of her. She didn’t even try to temper it.

“How dare you!” Bella screeched, giving the dwarf a slap. “How dare you use that against me!”

Kili looked taken aback for a moment but he rallied quickly. “I’m right, aren’t I? You’re hiding your shame. I don’t know why you don’t just grow it out and be done with it. Seems to me it would save a lot of hassle and look far less ridiculous.” His tone was somewhere between incredulous and amused.

“What do you know about it?” She yelled back, not caring who heard. She was 3 feet 9 inches of righteous anger.

From near the back of the line came Dwalin, scowling and glaring and pushing dwarrow out of his way. “What’s going on here?”
Nothing.” Kili said though his smile stated otherwise. Bella huffed and stomped away, not willing to embarrass herself further.

“W’ll never get out of this blasted forest standing around like a bunch of ninnies!” She said when no one else resumed walking.

“Get moving you mahabsan!” Thorin yelled. “We have precious little daylight as it is.”

The dwarrow grumbled but followed orders. Fili came up beside his brother and from the corner of her eye Bella could see them whispering angrily. Thorin tried to catch her eye several times but she resolutely ignored him and instead safely ensconced herself between Ori and Balin.

Dinner was even more subdued than had become normal. Bella sat as much to herself as was possible in the small clearing they’d camped down in. She may have been a small thing, even with only dwarrow to compare to but she had a formidable glare when she put her heart into it. However, if there were any creature to ignore the warning, it would most certainly be a Durin.

“You know he didn’t mean it, right? Kili wasn’t trying to hurt you.” Fili said as he took a seat beside Bella, his own dinner in hand. Bella’s look said more than her words could of. “Yeah, ok, maybe he did but he really didn’t mean it. He’s just struggling. We all are. It’s this damned forest.”

Bella sighed. “This is a sick place and it is infecting us. I can feel it.”

“Right. Exactly.” Fili offered a small smile. “For what it’s worth I’m sorry he said that to you. It was wrong of him. And I know he’s sorry too- or he will be as soon as his brain starts working again.”

“Thank you.” Bella returned his smile. They sat in companionable silence for a while, eating their cram and dried fruit.

“You now, you should just stop shaving.” Fili spoke up. “It’d be easier.”

“What?”

“Well, I mean, shaving is a lot of work? It’s certainly a waste of water.”

“Fili-“

“No, hear me out. You’d look so much nicer with a beard. Even a little one would be lovely. No one would expect you to grow a proper dwarvish beard. It would also prevent further conflict. I mean, then you wouldn’t have to hide anything.”

Bella just stared at the dwarf, her mind stuttering to a halt. She wasn’t sure if she should get angry or laugh or cry. It was near absurd, what he was saying not least of which because she had not shaved in what felt like weeks. In the end, Bella went for the safest route.

“Bella?” Fili asked as she got up and walked away. “Where’re you going?”

Bella did not respond. Without a word to anyone she set up her bedroll and tried to sleep. That night under the cover of impenetrable darkness, Bella curled up and cried silent tears, wishing desperately that she were back home at Bag End. In the morning the only evidence was her red eyes and stiff cheeks. No one noticed, all distracted by their own miseries.

Bella grumbled just as much as the rest that day. Her last nerves had been shredded and a part of her, still aching terribly from the day before, longed for a fight. She got it when she stumbled over a root and knocked into Bombur causing him to stumble as well.
Bombur, sweet Bombur, who loved food with a passion to rival any hobbit’s was dealing with the lack of food worse than most. “Would you watch where you are going?” He snapped at Bella.

“I would but I cannot see past your bulk to the path ahead!” Bella snapped right back.

Bombur sputtered angrily. Bofur jumped to his brother’s defense. “There’s no call to be rude now and it ain’t his fault you tripped over your own feet.”

“They’re certainly big enough.” Kili chimed in.

“Bella has a point. The path is narrow enough without Bombur’s large form blocking the way.” Gloin stepped up.

“You calling my brother fat?”

“Are you trying to tell us he’s not?” Dwalin shouted.

“At least he’s not wasting what precious little resources we have.” Nori cut in.

“What do you mean?” Dwalin asked.

“We’re all starving and trying to save what little water we have left and she’s shaving. I know she uses water to do that!” Nori accused.

Bella flinched back as though she’d been struck. “I stopped as soon as it was obvious there were no safe sources of water in the forest! Why do you think I’m wearing this confounded cloth!”

“We wouldn’t know, would we?” Bombur asked. “You hobbits and your strange ways. Take it off then and show us.”

Several others took up the cry and in that moment Bella wasn’t surrounded by loved ones but cruel strangers. “Fine!” She cried out and reached up to tear the cloth from her face. She was stopped by a firm hand on her wrist. Beside her stood Thorin, his face solemn.

“Enough.” He said to her quietly and then louder to the whole company. “Enough! We are not dogs to turn on one another when times get hard. We are dwarrow and we were made to endure! But even stone can crack and splinter without care. We must stand strong and support each other as kith and kin if we are to survive.”

The dwarrow all looked shamefaced. Bella herself felt the sickly warmth of shame and guilt settle in her stomach. She could hardly believe how she had behaved. And she’d almost showed them her facial hair! The very thought made her nauseated. Bella wasn’t sure when she’d last shaved but it’d been longer than during the Misty Mountains. The hair along her chin and jaw had to be near a half inch and it sickened her every time it rubbed and caught on the linen.

Bella knew dwarrow prized beards and found them beautiful. She knew they would not have looked on her with disgust and horror but she couldn’t imagine the situation being anything other than humiliating.

The feel of a thumb brushing against the sensitive skin of her wrist brought Bella out of her thoughts. Thorin still stood beside her, his expression one of concern.

“Are you alright?” He asked.

“Yes, yes. Fine, thank you.” Bella answered automatically, not meeting his gaze. She tried to take
her hand back but Thorin didn’t let go.

“Bella.”

She met his eyes at that. “T-thank you for stopping me.”

“When you are ready and can stand proud in your beauty- then we shall have the honor of seeing your beard. I would have nothing that brings you pain.” He said it like a promise. Like an oath.

“Thank you.” She buried herself in his arms and felt relieved and comforted when he returned the embrace.

Things were better for the rest of that day and Bella was content to follow behind Thorin stealing looks and smiles when possible. Even as darkness took over Bella was comforted wrapped in Thorin’s fur coat. In fact for several days the mood seemed much improved. Surely they must be almost through the forest. They all told each other this as the last of their food ran out and their water skins emptied. Then Bombur fell in the enchanted river and even when he woke up several days later things did not improve.

Instead things became much worse.

Chapter End Notes

So I really tried to show the strife and negative affects adverse situations (especially extreme hunger) can have on a group. No one is a bad guy, they all love and care for each other but no one has a level head and with such low blood sugar things are bound to get a bit ugly.

Really, Tolkien rather prettied up their behavior in Mirkwood in the book. It would be much more realistic to have them turning on each other and lots of violence. Think Lord of the Flies, The Walking Dead, or the Donner party. Of course then it wouldn't be much of the children's story.

Also, the thing Kili said about Bella hiding her shame. I don't know if anyone will be confused by that but I figured I should clarify just in case. Bella and the dwarves basically have opposite ideas of what is shameful. Bella is hiding her beard which she considers her shame. The dwarves see shaving as a sign of shame so Kili is actually referring to her having a smooth chin, not her beard.

Khuzdul comes from The Darrow Scholar:
makhazduna- she who is dwarfed
mahabsan- they who are scorned (I need to learn some dwarven curses. If anyone knows some please share! ;D)

EDIT: This story now has fan art by the amazing Yon!!! It's so cute! Go check them out!
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Spiders and elves and missing Thorins, oh my! They're still stuck in Mirkwood but Bella really comes into her own.

Chapter Notes

A day late but a new chapter is here! On the bright side I've already got the next chapter written so it will definitely be posted on time.

As always thank you so much to everyone who leaves comments and kudos! It is so humbling and flattering and wonderful! You guys are amazing!

Unbeta'd so feel free to let me know if you see any horrible mistakes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bella had known leaving the path was a bad idea. Both Beorn and Gandalf had warned them. It had seemed like such easy advice to follow at the time. Of course that had been before the hunger, the thirst, the fighting, the fear, and the cursed elvish bonfires that had tempted them away.

Bella cursed Beorn and Gandalf for not adequately warning them as she cut off a spider’s legs. She cursed the elves for drawing them off the path as she dodged its pinchers. She cursed the dwarves for not being able to follow simple directions as she stabbed at the spider’s head. She cursed herself for not trying to stop them as she hacked at its abdomen.

When at last the spider finally fell and did not get up again Bella collapsed against a tree and cried. She didn’t know where her dwarrow were or where she was. Ever since Bella had woken up to a spider wrapping her in its silk, she had been trapped in this living nightmare. No, this was worse than a nightmare for her mind could have never invented such horrors as this.

She was never letting a spider go free in her smial again!

After a few good sobs Bella’s tears began to slow and she made an effort to pull herself together. It was so tempting to just stay where she was until someone found her or she perished. She even, for a moment, thought the others had abandoned her. That thought was quickly pushed away. Her dwarrow, her family, were out there somewhere, possibly in danger, and she had to find them.

Bella looked down at her little blade, black with spider blood. It had seen her safely through the goblin tunnels, defended the life of a king, and now helped her defeat monsters. “You need a name, like in the stories of old.” She told it, feeling very much changed from the hobbit she’d once been. “I shall call you Sting!”

She wiped the blade clean on the grass and feeling strangely assured of herself at the reminder of what she had already been through, picked a direction and went in search of her family. Her ring
proved invaluable as she slunk along. If she hadn’t been invisible she would have never been able to sneak close enough to hear the spiders talking about their tasty meals and without that she would never have found her dwarrow all wrapped up and high in the trees. Even then she wouldn’t have recognized them for what they were if not for Fili’s distinct nose sticking out from one of the bundles.

Seeing her dwarrow hanging from the trees completely wrapped in cobwebs filled Bella with dread. She could hardly breathe with fear and early grief squeezing her insides. It was the movement of one of the bundles (Bombur she could tell for its large size), a definite wiggle of something alive, which propelled Bella into motion. Barely daring to think she picked up some rocks and began flinging them at the spiders, silly insults spilling from her mouth. All she knew was that she needed to draw those monsters away from her family.

It took her magic ring and all her hobbity skill to lure away the spiders without giving away her own position and getting caught. Getting the dwarrows down was another ordeal. For all she’d gained new muscle on this journey Bella was nowhere near strong enough to carry a full-grown dwarf, especially not while climbing down a tree.

The bundle that was Fili made a loud thud as it hit the ground. Bella winced and waited a moment to ensure the sound hadn’t drawn any more spiders before climbing down. “Sorry. Sorry.” She murmured as she went about cutting him out. He was exhausted and disoriented from the spider’s poison but he did his best to help and soon (though it seemed far too long to Bella’s worried mind) all the dwarrows were released.

Bella’s relief was short lived, however, as she counted and checked over her dwarrow. “Where’s Thorin?” She asked, a feeling of panic growing inside. “Where’s Thorin?”

The others took up her search but before they could accomplish much the spiders returned. The dwarrow tried to rally and fight but they were still feeling the effects of the venom and their movements were sluggish. It fell to Bella and her Sting to protect them. She hacked and slashed and cut until she was hardly aware of anything but her sword in her hands and the cries of her foes. None of it seemed to make a difference though. For each monster killed another quickly took its place.

There was only one option Bella could see to make it out alive. She was loathe to reveal her magic ring (though she could not think of why) but it was the only thing she could think of. “I am going to turn invisible and draw them away. Be ready to run- left I think. That was where we saw the elf fires.” It took some explaining to get the addled dwarrow to understand and there were some grumblings about elves but they agreed having no better plan. Slipping the ring on Bella soon did her part drawing the spiders off once again with rocks and silly insults. Who would have known spiders took such offense to being called “attercop”?

Her feelings of accomplishment were short lived. She found the dwarrow again easy enough. Once they had rested some they were all eager to hear the origins of her ring. Her brothers were especially taken with her wit and resourcefulness and all of them offered up cheers and praise for her saving them. Soon though, their missing leader began to weigh heavily on their minds once more and to Bella’s surprise the dwarrow turned to her for guidance.

“Don’t know why you’re so surprised lass.” Bofur said kindly. “You are the one who just saved our hides. We’d all be dead by now if not for you!”

“Oh no! Don’t say that! I can’t even stand the thought.” Bella cried.

“He’s just speaking the truth, Little Sister.” Dwalin said. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and drew her close. “You’ve got wit, luck, and a magic ring. What more could we want from a
leader?"

“You’re also the most sensible of us.” Dori added.

“And you’re going to be queen! You might as well get the practice in.” Said Kili, smiling widely at her.

“Oh dear.” Bella said, feeling quite overwhelmed and sat right down where she’d been standing. “Oh dear.” She looked around to see all the dwarrow staring down at her expectantly, many of them smiling. “Oh dear.”

Bella buried her head in her hands and took a moment to just breathe. Slowly she pulled herself together- drawing on hidden strength she’d only recently discovered. She could do this. “Right, right. There’s not much we can do tonight. The night will be upon us soon and we’ve already seen what kind of trouble wondering about in the darkness can cause us. We’ll do watch in four shifts of 3 to ensure everyone gets as much sleep as possible. Dwalin, Balin, Nori, and I will have the first shift. In the morning our first priority will be to find the path again. Wondering around lost in these woods will do neither Thorin nor us any good. Once back on the path we’ll need to find the elves- no! Stop arguing right now! They will know the forest the best and will be our best chance of finding Thorin again. We are traveling blind in these woods, sometimes literally, and we have no more food or water. We need help and they are the only ones around to give it. Now, go get what rest you can. We all need it.”

To her astonishment they all listened and after confirming Dori, Ori, and Gloin for the next shift, Bella found herself a log to spend watch on. It wasn’t long before someone joined her.

“Not bad for your first try at being queen.”

Bella glanced over at Nori, looking for any sign he was mocking her. “I-I’m not a q-queen.”

“Not yet perhaps but we all know it’s just a matter of time.” To Bella’s horror he winked at her.

“W-well.. I-I mean… I just… T-Thorin and I…” She sputtered, not sure what it was she wanted to say.

Nori laughed. “Calm down. No one expects you to take the throne right away but when you do we’ll all be behind you, you know that right? And not just ‘cause you’re family either. You are Uzbadhalkuna, the king’s equal. She who will be queen.”

Bella blushed feeling both pleased and embarrassed. “I- I don’t really want to be a queen.” She admitted in a near whisper. “I don’t even know the first thing about it. Hobbits don’t have royalty.”

“Well you did just fine tonight. Took charge, figured out what needed to be done, gave orders, and didn’t take no lip.”

“I was just making it up and doing what I thought made sense.”

Nori grinned. “The way I figure it, that’s basically what Royals do. They’re just better a playing confident than the rest of us mere mortals. And what you said made sense- they’re good orders, even if you do want to get help from the tree-shaggers.”

“Nori!”

The dwarf just shrugged. “You don’t know that they aren’t.”
Bella fought to keep a disapproving look on her face. “Well if they are you can only be thankful. It just might be their… familiarity with the trees that finds Thorin for us.”

Nori made an odd choking noise before he broke into a hearty laugh. Bella joined him and soon they were laughing like loons, holding their stomachs and each other up. It was cathartic after all the stress.

“If you don’t mind some of us are trying to sleep here.” Kili called out.

“S-sorry.” Bella gasped, trying to calm down.

“Quit your whining. ‘s not like we’re any louder than Bombur and Gloin’s snores. Or your own for that matter.” Nori called back. There were a few grumbled responses but soon all the darrow had calmed down and only the sounds of sleep could be heard.

After a while of sitting in companionable silence Nori spoke up again. “I don’t know that I ever properly apologized for the things I said the other day.”

“Oh! Oh well… we were… none of us were in our right mind. Still aren’t most likely.” Bella said, thinking of the way she’d fought the spiders earlier.

“True enough but that doesn’t make what I said right. I disrespected you horribly- accusing you of wasting our resources and such.”

“We all behaved poorly, myself included. I had to apologize to Bombur twice because he forgot the first time after falling in that river. Oh I felt just awful.” Bella sighed. “What I’m trying to say is I forgive you. Completely.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“You don’t want any reparations? One of my braids perhaps?”

“What?! No! Of course not. N-no braids necessary.”

Nori engulfed Bella in a hug. “Bella Baggins, you are a wonder.”

“What? Because I don’t want your braid? What is it with you dwarrows and trying to cut your hair around me? I actually had to take the knife from Kili’s hand when he apologized.”

Nori laughed, keeping quieter this time. “You forgive so easily! It is a good thing Thorin will be king or all Erebor’s criminals would go free under your rule.”

“You are being ridiculous.” She said without any heat. Bella settled herself more comfortably into the embrace and there they stayed until their shift was over.

The next morning they made a valiant effort to find the path again. Unfortunately the elves found them first. The dwarrows were weak and tired and had no fight left in them when they were surrounded with bows and arrows. They huddled in a protective circle and gave themselves up easily. What the elves never noticed despite their sharp eyes and keen ears was the small hobbit tucked securely in the middle.

“Put on your ring.” Dwalin had whispered to her as soon as the elves appeared and Bella quickly complied.
“Don’t fight them.” Bella whispered back. “Even prisoners get bread and water.”

If the other dwarrow were surprised when Dwalin was the first to surrender they quickly followed suit at his barked command. “Mahizbidu Uzbadhalkuna!”

The elves made short work of securing their prisoners with ropes and blindfolds and took them back to their king’s palace. Invisible and undetected, Bella followed along behind. It was all she could do to keep up with the fast pace they were pushing the dwarrow. Whenever able she would whisper instructions to Dwalin and the rest.

“Play weak, let them underestimate you.” She told them and they dragged their feet and stumbled.

“Don’t make them angry. We need their food and water.” She said and insults and angry words died before being said.

“Don’t tell him anything.” Was the last thing she whispered as they were lead before the elf king. He had an arrogant bearing and a mean look that reminded Bella of whenever she ran across Lobelia in the marketplace. She had liked Elrond and the elves of Rivendell well enough. These ones she did not trust.

Thranduil, the Elvenking, questioned them extensively. Who were they? Where were they going? Why were they in the forest? Why did they attack his people? The more questions he asked the more indignant Bella became. If this was what the dwarrow usually had to deal with she could fully understand their dislike of elves.

Her dwarrow were amazing though. They moaned and complained, held each other up, and played at being weak and miserable perfectly. Not that it took much acting being fairly weak and miserable as it was. The only information they divulged was their desire for food and water. At one point Balin made an impassioned speech about hospitality that Bella admired to the bottom of her hobbit heart. If the king felt no shame afterwards it was because he had no decency Bella decided.

Fili finally ended the questioning after a brilliant performance. Thranduil was once again asking them why they were in the forest when the dwarf began to sway. Bella watched in horror as the blood seemed to drain from Fili’s face before he dropped to the ground in a faint. The rest of the dwarrows immediately began to make a ruckus, especially Kili who kept shouting his brother’s name in a panicked voice. In the chaos created Bella snuck up and placed a gentle hand on Fili’s cheek. With barely any movement so no one but Bella could see Fili opened his eyes a little and looked around. When he didn’t see anyone he gave a small wink before closing his eyes and playing unconscious again.

“Good work.” She whispered before moving away. She was so proud of the prince.

Soon enough Thranduil regained control of the situation. He ordered the dwarrow to be taken to the dungeon and given meals. It was far from an ideal situation but it was much better than they’d had in a long while. Now if only Bella knew were Thorin was and that he was safe. With a prayer to Yavanna Bella followed her family down into the dungeons.

Chapter End Notes

All Khuzdul is from the Dwarrow Scholar (though sometimes I have to make stuff up :P)
*Uzbadhalkuna: Uzbad = King, halkuna = equal (lady): The king’s equal (a female)-Bella’s new title (at least until they’re married then she’ll be Uzbadyusth-King’s wife. I put these together because there is no word for queen and princess literally translate to the king’s daughter so that doesn’t work)
*Mahizbidu Uzbadhalkuna: Mahizbidu = Command: The king’s equal commands it

I may be a huge nerd but reading the English/Neo-Khuzdul dictionary is fascinating. The implications for Dwarvish culture is awesome. Point in fact: there is no word for husband but the word for wife, yusth, is gender neutral. Also you can have yusthuna, which is a lady wife or yusthun, which is a man wife. In fact most things we equate with a specific gender, including the words for man and woman, have both male and female versions. When it comes to gender identity, Dwarves seem to be pretty progressive :D I don’t know about you guys but I think this is all really cool!

Also, if anyone knows any dwarvish curses please share ;D
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

The Mirkwood dungeons.

Chapter Notes

I am soooooooooo, so, so, so sorry! I promised you a chapter on time and I failed to deliver! It was done and everything but real life got crazy and has stolen all my time! I am sorry! I should have another chapter up sometimes early next week but I make no promises. I'll be out of town for the second week in a row but I will do what I can!

Thank you so much for your patience and all the wonderful comments people left me! You guys are amazing!

Unbeta'd so please feel free to let me know of any horrible errors.

The next several weeks were a new kind of torment for Bella. As soon as the elven guards had entered the dungeons they had split off into different directions with the dwarrows ensuring there could be no communication between them. Poor Bella could not follow all of them at once so she stuck by Balin needing the comfort and wisdom of her oldest brother. That night she partook of some of his meal and slept fitfully outside his cell door. The next two weeks became a blur of stealing what food and sleep she could between finding all her dwarrow, carrying messages about, trying to keep morale high, and finding an escape. They were dark days and Bella struggled to find comfort in her family being well fed, even if the food was plain and bland. She was also able to shave again, which came as a huge relief. Her linen cloth had become stained with spider’s blood the smell of which made her ill. It had hurt terribly that first time. The hair was so long it pulled harshly at her skin as she ran the blade across. Not feeling comfortable taking her ring off hadn’t help either and she knew she had several cuts.

Thorin of course was always on her mind but she didn’t know how to begin looking for him with the rest of the dwarrow locked up. A few times she would sneak out with a hunting party but she could not keep up with the elves and she was afraid to venture far from the gate. Bella missed Thorin so much she ached with it. So many times she just wanted to give up. Bella was not a hero but she tried to stay strong for her family. She had to be their burglar and their queen until they had their king again. She would make Thorin proud.

It was only by chance and a lot of luck that Bella discovered Thorin was also being kept in the Elvenking’s dungeon. When she first laid eyes on him she nearly passed out with relief. She was happy no one was around to see her cry with her joy and then again later in frustration when days went by with no opportunity to talk to him. Finally, after what felt like a small eternity to Bella she found a time in which no one else was around. She crept close to the cell and without fear of capture took her first good look at Thorin. He looked wrecked. His clothes were filthy and mussed. His
normally well-kept hair was in disarray and tangled. The worst though were his eyes, sad and lost in a face aged since she had last seen him. An air of resignation surrounded him.

“T-Thorin.” She couldn’t keep the hitch from her voice. A twitch of his hand, the slightest tilt of his head was the only sign he had heard. Bella strengthened her voice. “Thorin.”

“I have gone mad. I am hearing the voice of my beloved.”

“Thorin, I’m here. I’m right here.”

Still the dwarf did not move from his slump though his eyes looked around, wild. “What cruel magic is this? Is this a trick of the elf king to make me talk? Is there no depth to which you will not sink?”

Bella could have slapped herself when she remembered her ring. She had worn it constantly since entering the wood-elves’ kingdom and the other dwarrows had grown used to speaking to her invisible form and being addressed by her phantom voice. With one last glance around she tore the ring off. While wearing it she hadn’t noticed anything amiss but suddenly with it off she felt like a great weight had been lifted from her body and mind. It was almost like emerging from water after being submerged for too long. She did not have long to contemplate it though as Thorin charged forward almost faster than her eyes could track.

Before she quite knew what was happening he was gripping her arms almost too tight and was pressed against the bars as close as possible. His eyes raked over her and she felt devoured by his gaze. “Bella?” Her name was whispered and broken on his lips.

Without thought she reached through the bars and cupped his face. “I am here.”


Bella huffed. “You’re really being quite ridiculous right now. Of course I’m not leaving. Where do you expect me to go? My family is here. You are here. I am not leaving until the rest of you can leave with me.”

“The company is here? Fili? Kili?”

“They’re all here, safe and sound and well fed if bored and stir crazy.” Thorin’s shoulders slumped in relief at the news. It suddenly occurred to Bella that Thorin had been just as much in the dark about the company as they had been about him. “They were captured after we escaped the spiders and were trying to find the path again.”

“Spiders? I think you must tell me the whole story.”

And so she did. Always keeping one ear out for guards she started with when the elf magic put her to sleep to finding the dwarrows in the trees to their capture by the elves. At some point they sat down, their sides pushed together through the bars. When she finally finished her tale they sat in silence while Thorin processed what he had been told.

“Extraordinary.” He said, awe in his voice. “You are extraordinary. Every time I think I know the extent of your wonders you surprise me again. I should learn to never underestimate you.”

Bella blushed and hemmed and hawed. “I’m nothing special. I’m just a Baggins of Bag End.”

“There is nothing ‘just’ about you Bella Baggins daughter of Fundin. You give me hope and that is everything. I had begun to despair ever reaching the mountain. I was even considering making a deal with Thranduil but now you are here and that changes everything. I am confident you will find a
“Way to get us out.”

“M-me? You t-think I can get everyone out?” Bella could hardly believe what he was saying. Perhaps Thorin really had gone mad?

“Not think, know. You rescued my dwarrow and took over their leadership. You are their *Uzbadysth*, their queen and have more than proven yourself. Also you are the only one not imprisoned and have a magic ring that makes you invisible. Who is in a better position to rescue us?”

There was nothing Bella could say to argue with that. It did make sense as much as she didn’t want to admit it. A large part of her had hoped that finding Thorin would be the answer to their situation or at least the end of her being the leader.

The rest of the company were all quite heartened to learn she had found Thorin and that he was whole and hale. Bella had to hush several of them when they expressed their happiness too loudly. “Shhhhh! Do you want to call a guard down here? And how will you explain your celebrating?” She scolded them.

All of the dwarrows assured Bella of their confidence in her ability to free them and settled in to wait with a fierce air of determination. Bella wondered if they had all gone mad. She spent much time fretting and worrying. Her ring was quite useful, yes, but not much good for 14 and there was still the gate to get past, which could only be opened by elven magic.

Despite everyone else’s belief in her, Bella began to despair. She didn’t understand how all these strong, capable dwarrows could put all their faith in little Bella Baggin. While she made daily visits to all the dwarrows she spent the most time with Thorin of course, and Dwalin who was by far the most realistic of the bunch.

“I don’t think I can do this.” She confided to Dwalin one evening. Her voice was barely more than a whisper. It was something she had not dared to say aloud before now.

“Aye, you’ve got the hardest job of the lot of us.” Dwalin acknowledged. “Though just sitting in these cells isn’t much fun either. You’ve got a lot on your shoulders but you can do it, more so than any one of us. That’s not just blind faith talkin’ either. Since the beginning you’ve shown quite a bit of sense and you’ve proven yourself *Uzbadhalkuna*. And if you fail –and that’s a pretty big ‘if’- we’ll just have to ransom ourselves out. It won’t feel good. Don’t much fancy giving any of my share to those tree-shaggers but we’ll do as we must. We always have.”

Bella felt better after talking to her brother. Strangely enough his pragmatic attitude did more to instill confidence than everyone else’s praises. Thankfully her luck did hold out; first in finding the second entrance to the palace where food and wine where brought in on the river and then when the butler and the captain of the guard drank themselves into a stupor the night of a large party. She had a plan—a crazy, risky plan but it was their only chance and Bella wasn’t about to let it pass by.

It was almost ridiculously easy to take the keys from the captain. Balin’s cell was the closest but Thorin’s wasn’t far off and Bella had a fierce need to see him as soon as possible. The walk down was nerve wrecking. The key ring was large and awkward in her small hands and every time it clanked or rattled Bella froze, certain she was about to be discovered. No one was around to hear though. The elves were so secure in their knowledge that no one could escape that all were happily taking part in the festivities upstairs. Finally she made it to Thorin’s cell and with a cursory glance around quickly opened his cell. Thorin didn’t immediately come out, instead looking cautiously at the open door.

“Bella?” He asked when he couldn’t see anyone.
Bella removed her ring and beamed at him. “I did it! I have a plan!”

“Bunnel, you are a marvel.” With a large grin he scooped Bella into a fierce embrace. Oh to feel his arms around her! It was like coming home but a hundred times better than she could remember Bad End feeling. She was overwhelmed and before she thought better of it Bella pressed her lips to his.

Thorin flinched like he’d been burned. “Bella, no. We can’t. Dwalin has not given me the right to court you yet.”

Bella pulled back, embarrassed. She wanted to push the issue. She was an adult, she knew her mind, but she didn’t want Thorin to think her wanton or vulgar. It made Bella think of when she was young and Ranugad Blackhyll would call her prudish or simple when she tried to tell him no. Bella wondered why it was always the males who got to decide the pace of the relationships and why women who didn’t follow along were called names. It all suddenly seemed so unfair and what’s more- unacceptable.

She had led the company in Thorin’s absence, had saved them from spiders and now from elven dungeons. They had named her their queen and Thorin’s equal. Bella could not tolerate the idea of being anything less in this relationship.

“Do you trust me?” She asked him, looking Thorin squarely in the eyes.

“Of course.” He answered without hesitation.

“Do you trust me to know my own mind?”

“Yes.” Thorin answered, beginning to look confused.

“Do you trust me to make the best choices for myself?”

“Yes. Bella, where is this going?”

“If you truly want me to be your Uzbahalkuna and trust me as you say you do then you need to listen to my judgment and listen to me when I say I love you, I plan to spend the rest of my life with you, and if you do not kiss me right now I shall be severely cross.”

Thorin stared at her, eyes wide and mouth slightly agape. Bella began to feel embarrassment creep in but she stood her ground.

“Do you uderst- mmph!” Thorin cut Bella off but as he did it with lips she wasn’t inclined to care. His presence surrounded her, lips firm against hers and beard strange and scratchy yet somehow very pleasing. Bella quickly wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed back, trying to get as close as possible.

When they broke apart for air Thorin did not move far and pressed his forehead to hers. “Your brothers will kill me if they find out.” He whispered in the small space between them.

“My brothers can go kiss an orc.” She responded flippantly. “I can make my own decisions. I am going to be your uzbadyusth.”

Thorin groaned and dived back in. This kiss was harder- more insistent. Bella’s mouth opened beneath his and he immediately set to exploring her with lips, teeth, and tongue. He kissed her with the devotion of a dwarf at his chosen craft and she soaked it up, using it to feed her own passions. By the time they pulled apart both were panting as though they’d run a far distance.
Bella couldn’t bring herself to pull fully away. She kept her arms around his shoulders and placed a kiss on his jaw, his cheek, anywhere she could reach.

“Bella, amralime. My bunnel.” He murmured, nuzzling into her dirty curls. “I love you.”

They stood like that for a few moments, getting their breath back and reveling in each other’s presence. Finally Thorin pulled away completely. “Come, we must free the others. The sooner we leave this accursed place the better. I find I cannot wait to reclaim our home and court you properly my queen.”

Bella beamed even as a blush stole over her face. She offered her hand to Thorin and when he took it led him out the cell door.

The rest of the company were predictably excited to be freed. Each dwarrow praised Bella effusively and greeted Thorin warmly. Dwalin gave her a large hug that lifted her clear off the ground as did Balin, Bifur, Gloin, Nori, and Kili. She was feeling a bit roughed up by the time they were all free.

It was unfortunate but Bella wasn’t surprised to see their enthusiasm fade drastically when she explained the plan. What did surprise her was how little they argued with her. There were some grumbles (something Bella had come to believe was simply a default for dwarrows) of course but no complaints to her. The fight she had prepared herself for never happened. Just maybe, she thought, I could get used to being queen.

Chapter End Notes

All khuzdul comes from the Dwarrow Scholar though some of it is a bit made up by me. I am not a linguist so if you know better I am sorry.

Uzbadyusth: Queen: Uzbad=king(person), yusth=wife -I made this up because there is no word in the English/Khuzdul dictionary for queen.

Uzbadhalkuna: King's equal: Uzbad=king(person), halkuna=equal(lady) -I made this up too.

Bunnel: Treasure of all treasures (hidden wealth) -I've also seen ghivashel but this is the word I found.

Amralime: My love
Oh my god, I’m not dead!

Did I say the next chapter would be at the beginning of the next week? Obviously I meant the end of next month. *Awkward chuckle* I am soooooo sorry about the wait. Silly me thinking I’d actually have some free time in the Summer.

I will try really hard to get the next chapter out sooner! And to all of you wonderful people who’s comments I’ve not responded to yet: you are all amazing and wonderful and I will try to reply very soon! Thank you so much!

The less said about the barrel ride down the river the better in Bella’s opinion. While the dwarrow did not have a good time of it either they were at least tucked safely and mostly dry in their barrels. Bella on the other hand had ridden on the outside, clinging for her life as she was submerged in freezing water and bashed against rocks. At one point the barrels were lashed together to make a raft and Bella had to be quite sneaky to not get caught. A difficult task with how sore and cold she felt all over so that all her movements were stiff.

By the time they finally made it to Lake-town Bella wasn’t sure she was still alive. She was shivering and barely able to move her arm much less her whole body. Her head was pounding terribly and she could barely breath through her stuffed up nose. She was almost certain there was an oliphaunt sitting on her chest. Despite all this, as soon as night had fallen and it seemed safe enough she unlashed the barrels and dragged the first one to shore. The dwarf that crawled out was a sad sight indeed. It might have been humorous if Bella had been feeling any less miserable herself.

“Never again.” Was all Thorin said as he collapsed on the ground. Bella just hummed in agreement. She was so tempted to collapse down beside him and burrow into his warmth but she knew if she did that she’d never get up again. Instead she waded back into the water for the next barrel. When she made it back to shore Thorin had managed to recover some and helped with unpacking poor Balin.

Together, with the help of Fili and Kili once they were released, they were able to find and free all the dwarrow. If they were all less than forthcoming with their thanks and praises, Bella herself was too miserable to care. Thorin at least spoke words of gratitude before the whole company. Bella decided she would feel quite pleased about it once she could feel her feet again.

Unfortunately they could not all rest immediately. It would not do to be caught so soon after winning their freedom. So it was decided, by virtue of being the only ones willing and able to stand, that Thorin, Fili, Kili, and Bella would scout Lake-town for accommodations and supplies.

It was incredibly easy to enter Lake-town. The guards were hardly worth such a title and they didn’t even need to sneak to go unnoticed. Not that it mattered as apparently when Thorin said ‘scout’ what he really meant was charge into the guardhouse and demand to see the master of the town. Ridiculous dwarf, yet even water dogged and ragged he cut a regal figure and the guards were quick to obey.

Despite the guards’ obvious lack of skill and her own weakened state Bella was careful to keep her
sword and various blades hidden as they were led through the streets. She was the only one of their group to still have a weapon and she wasn’t about to give any of them up. It would take someone much less intelligent than Bella not to realize that when it came to these dwarrow, one must always be prepared for the worst. They attracted more trouble than a newly clean floor and fresh backed pie in a household of faunts.

The guards brought them to a great hall that was filled with people and tables laden with food. Bella nearly swooned from the sight and smell of it. She had not eaten well in the Elvenking’s palace, having to steal her food.

Before anyone could say anything Thorin called out in a booming voice, “I am Thorin son of Thrain son of Thror King under the Mountain! I return!”

Naturally this caused an outcry amongst the room, especially from the raft-elves who were feasting with the men. For several tense moments Bella thought the master would hand them over to the elves and all her hard work would be for naught. Bella knew she could not go through that again. She was not that strong, especially not right now when it was taking everything she had to just stand there, mostly hidden behind Thorin’s bulk.

Then something very strange happened. Among the hustle and bustle and shouting Bella could hear snatches of a song. It was picked up by more and more people, both inside and out of the hall until it filled the air and surrounded them. Bella would not be surprised if their company on the shore could hear it clearly as well. It was not a familiar song to Bella but she recognized the cadence of the East from traveling with the company and it was obviously old. Forcing her aching head to focus she listened to the lyrics and was startled to realize it was about Erebor and the return of the King Under the Mountain bringing wealth and prosperity to the land once more.

With his people in such a state the master had no choice but to usher them in and make room for them at his table. Bella stuck close to Thorin and did her best to stay unnoticed. Plates overflowing with food and large mugs of ale were placed in front of them. Soon their companions were sent for and joined them at the feast. All around there was merriment and good cheer. All except the elves who quickly left and Bella herself who wished to be glad but was far too tired to feel much of anything. She did her best to eat; knowing she needed the food but she was till freezing and eventually, between one bite and the next, darkness overtook her.

When Bella woke up her first sensation was of pain. From the tip of her nose to the soles of her feet ached horribly. The next feeling was of drowning in clouds. She was surrounded by fluff, so soft and comfortable but she couldn’t breathe. Bella felt panic grip her and lashed out with arms and legs trying to find solid purchase but each movement just made her sink deeper. Just as despair began to take over hands, large and strong, took hold of her and soothed her brow.

“Bella.” A voice pierced through the haze surrounding her. “Bella.”

It seemed to take years for her eyes to open but her effort was well worth it when she was rewarded with Thorin’s face. He looked haggard. His eyes tired and his face worn but no less handsome for it.

“Hi.” She croaked.

Thorin’s face relaxed into a warm smile. “It is a blessing to see you awake.”

“Where-“ A coughing fit cut her off before she could finish her question. Thorin came closer and drew Bella up until she was leaning against his chest. From there he produced a glass of water, which he helped her drink from.
“The master of Lake-Town has given a house over to our use. He was gracious enough to provide it after you lost consciousness. You gave us quite a scare when you slumped over.” Thorin accused.

“Why did you not tell us you were unwell?”

“There were more important things.” She tried to wave dismissively but was too weak and instead it flopped atop the bedcovers like a landed fish. Thorin caught her hand in his and brought it to his lips.

“To me, mesem, there is nothing more important.”

“But this quest. Erebor. Your home!” Bella was taken over by another coughing fit. Thorin held her through it, running a soothing hand along her back.

“It is important, aye, and all the more so now so that I might provide you with a proper home. However, even should we fail it will not be the downfall of my people. We dwarrow are made to endure and endure we shall. It took us many years but we prosper in the Blue Mountains. Not rich by any means but none go hungry. But Bella, if you were to perish, it would be the end of me. I would be no more than a hollow cavern bearing nothing but echoes. A vein run dry.”

“Thorin.”

“Dwarrow love only once. There will never be another for me. Please, take a care for yourself.”

“Aye. Your brothers would appreciate it as well.” Bella jumped at the sound of Dwalin’s voice. Her gasp turned into cough and it took her several moments before she could see the third person in the room. Dwalin was in the corner looking half dead himself and terribly uncomfortable in a small wooden chair. With a pained groan he stood and came to stand beside her bed.

“It was not pleasant carrying your limp body.” Dwalin grumbled. “I’d rather not do it again.”

“I-I’m sorry.” Bella looked down at her hands and was surprised to see one was still in Thorin’s hold. “I didn’t mean to cause a bother.”

“’S no bother takin’ care of you. It’s our privilege as family but that don’t mean we like to see you in such a state. Would much prefer you hale and happy. You’re also rather heavy for being such a wee little thing.”

Dwalin laughed as Bella sputtered indignantly before leaving to fetch Oin. With some grumbling she settled back down snug into Thorin’s side. Propriety dictated that she should kick him out of her bed and even the room without a chaperone but he was so comfortable and produced the heat of a small furnace, which felt wonderful to her achy bones.

Bella hadn’t even realized she’d fallen back asleep when she was being prodded awake again. She opened her eyes to see Thorin gone from the bed and Oin looming over her poking at her poor sore joints.

“If you don’t mind.” She wheezed.

The old dwarf moved his trumpet to her chest and listened. “Take a deep breath for me.”

Bella tried but found herself coughing before she could get a full breath in. Oin’s frown deepened. “I don’t like the sound of your lungs.”

The rustle of fabric drew Bella’s attention to the corner where both her brothers and Thorin stood. “Is it serious?” Balin asked.
“Could be. Already reached her lungs but I know a poultice that should help draw it out and a tea to boost the immune system. Those and plenty of rest and she should be bright as mithril in a week or so.”

“All the time she needs, you have it. We will not set out for the mountain until Bella is well.” Thorin said. Dwalin and Balin stood beside him nodding their agreement.

“But the quest!” Bella protested.

Thorin frowned at her. “We’ve already discussed this.”

“By Ori’s calculation we have several weeks still until Durin’s Day- more than enough time to rest and still ensure enough time to find the door.” Balin assured her. “Besides, after the Wood Elves’ halls and our escape I say we could all do with a good rest.”

“I feel I could sleep like stone.” Dwalin grunted as he stretched from his hunched position. “She’ll live the night, aye Oin?”

“Oh, aye. No worries there.”

“Anything that needs doin’?”

Oin shook his head. “Not till market opens in the morning and we can buy the herbs I need.”

“Well then, I’m off to sleep and I suggest you do the same, Little Sister. Come on you lot, out.” Dwalin ordered using one hand each to push Oin and Thorin out. Oin went quietly enough but Thorin sputtered and argued all the way out the door.

Balin approached the bed and to Bella’s surprise and delight placed a kiss on her forehead. “Dream of jewels, nan’ith. If you need anything make some noise, I’ve no doubt at least one dwarf will be camping outside your door.” With a wink he too left and shut the door behind. Bella smiled in the dark of her room. She had not felt so loved in such a long time. Despite the way her body hurt and her head ached and not being able to breath properly she was overwhelmingly happy.

Bella’s recovering was neither slow nor quick but a gradual process, which nonetheless grated on her nerves. Hobbits, as a general rule, were a healthy lot and Bella hadn’t needed to suffer bed rest since she was a young faunt. Her dwarrow did what they could to make her confinement bearable. It quickly became a common occurrence for all of them to retire to her room after dinner for songs or stories until either Thorin or one of her brothers shooed everyone out.

Despite the Lonely Mountain and dragon looming over them like their own personal rain cloud, it was a time for rest and fellowship for the dwarrow. They were more relaxed than Bella had ever seen them and they happily wallowed in Lake-Town’s hospitality. Bella’s only complaint was that she wasn’t well enough to properly enjoy it.

It took almost a week before Bella was allowed to leave her room. It was a full four days after she had demanded to be released from her bed rest. Of course Dwalin and Balin bundled her up in shawls and blankets they purchased her and Thorin would add his great coat until Bella felt quite loved and far too warm. Throughout the night she would subtly remove her layers to cool down until someone inevitably came along and replaced them.

It couldn’t last they were all reminded as the winds changed and a coolness tinged the air. Durin’s Day was getting closer and preparations were checked and double-checked. In fact, as enjoyable as their stay had been, Bella was unsure why they hadn’t left yet. She had a suspicion though.
“You know, I’m feeling much better.” Bella said to Thorin who was sitting beside as usual for their meal.

“I am glad to hear that.” He said between bites of fish stew and thick, crusty bread.

“In fact, I’m feeling quite well.”

“Mmmm.” He hummed agreeably into his ale.

“Well enough to travel, even.”

Thorin put down his mug with a sigh and turned to give her his full attention. “What are you mining for Bella?”

“Isn’t it time we continued on to the mountain? We have supplies and I am at full health. I don’t understand what we’re waiting for.”

“Are you so eager to meet the dragon?”

“N-no, of course not.” Bella fidgeted with the shawl she was wearing. “But it is what I signed on to do. I am your burglar; standard contract and everything,” she tried to joke. It sounded flat even to her own ears.

Thorin didn’t smile. He stared at her earnestly as he stilled her nervous fingers with his own. “I could burn that contract. I am not at all eager to send you to face that wyrm, even with that ring of yours.”

Bella was surprised at how warm that one statement made her feel. She gave Thorin a shy smile. “Thank you.”

“For what?” Thorin looked confused.

“For caring.” Feeling bold Bella took one of Thorin’s hands and brought it to her lips for a quick kiss. She ignored the choked noise from Dwalin across the table though she couldn’t help the way her face heated up. “But we still must face the dragon. We can’t reclaim your home- our home- without doing so.”

“Bella.” He breathed. Bella didn’t think she’d ever tire of hearing the way he said her name. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Thorin beamed. His smile was large and boyish in his joy. He began to lean forward and Bella’s heart sped up, her eyes closing in anticipation. The unsuitable clearing of Dwalin’s throat and an actual growl from Balin on her other side had them jumping apart. Sweet Yavanna, they were still at the dining table with the entire company as witness! Both Thorin and Bella returned to their food with reddened cheeks.

As the meal began to wind down Thorin pulled himself together and stood to address the group. “We should turn in soon and get a good night’s rest. We leave for Erebor in the morn.”

A cheer when up amongst the dwarrows. Bella still felt fear for where their path might lead them but more so she felt hope. A hope for the future and for home unlike she had ever felt before.

Chapter End Notes
nan’ith= little sister
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Getting the hidden door open is only half the battle for Bella to enter the mountain.

Chapter Notes

Not my longest chapter but one of my favorite to write. I hope you all enjoy it as much as I do. The dwarrow are pretty emotional which might make them seem a bit ooc. All I ask is you remember they are trying to deal with the very real risk that they may never see Bella again. I tried to handle it as realistically and in character as possible.

Also, I've got a tumblr now. Please feel free to say hi and talk to me there. I'm a bit of an old lady when it comes to technology but I'm trying :P

Huge thank you to everyone who gives kudos and takes the time to comment! It continues to amaze and humble me.

Unbeta'd as always so feel free to point out any major mistakes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They did not leave the next morning despite Thorin’s announcement. It took the Master a day to organize boats and rowers to take them to shore. The dwarrows spent the day triple checking their supplies and caring for their already pristine weapons. They were all filled with a restless energy that manifested itself alternately in sharp jokes and sharp words. Movements were abrupt and harsh and it became a common sight to see one dwarf or another pacing about. Bella spent the day mending and sewing anything she could get her hands on. She even offered her services to the dwarrows though she drew a firm line at the pair of under things someone tried to hand her. No one slept well that night.

Finally though, on the morning of their 12th day in Lake-Town, everything was sorted with the Master and the rowers and the Company headed out. The mood was somber as they crossed the lake though Bella didn’t know if it was in difference to the moment or the dwarrows’ strong dislike of being on a boat. If she had to guess, Bella would say it was the later. Not that she could blame any of them. Hobbits were no better suited to the water than dwarves.

She was proven right when they finally landed. The mood visibly lifted when the dwarf stepped foot on land. They bid the men good-bye and set off with steps light and excited smiles. Especially the younger dwarrow were full of energy and songs- excited to be so near the legendary home they’d heard so much about. They became a bit more subdued when night fell and the mountain appeared no closer. Bella herself just wanted to be there already. She was not at all anxious to face the dragon by any means but she was beginning to think the anticipation was going to kill her. Her nerves were absolutely destroyed. As were her nails which she had taken to chewing in her anxiety. It was a terrible habit she thought she had gotten rid of years ago.
As the greenery died away and the land turned bleak and barren, Bella felt almost as if the world was changing to match her. Perversely the dwarrows’ high spirits stayed put, even in the face of Dale’s ruins and the search for the hidden door. Some days it was all she could do not to smack them when they started singing or when yet another conversation started up about what they were all going to do with their part of the treasure. Treasure, Bella would have liked to point out, they hadn’t won yet. It was almost like they’d all forgotten about the dragon!

It was with a cruel joy that she watched them fail to open the door. They attacked it with picks and axes apparently having forgotten the hidden message on the map and Bella felt some satisfaction as they grew discouraged. That is until she caught sight of Thorin’s face. The rest of the dwarrows had returned to camp for supper and Bella was sitting on the same pile of rocks she’d been sitting on for the last 3 days, all but forgotten as the rest threw themselves at the mountain. She was debating if her desire for food outweighed her current dislike of the Company when she noticed him. Thorin stood alone staring at the hidden door. His shoulders were slumped and his face, oh his face! He looked as if he’d lost his home all over again and Bella’s heart broke at the sight. No one should make that face, especially not Thorin who had already suffered so much in his life.

Without thought she found herself walking over to him. He startled at her touch but didn’t pull away from the hand on his arm. “We are so close.” His voice was soft and broken. “I can hear the songs of my youth in the stone. I can not fail.”

Bella wrapped her arms around Thorin and held him tight as she thought about what to say. “Of course you won’t fail. I won’t let you nor will anyone else in the Company. We are all behind you and will see you to the end.”

Thorin sighed morosely. “I am grateful, truly, but that will count for nothing if I cannot get the door open.”

“You ridiculous dwarf, have you completely forgotten why Gandalf insisted we visit Rivendale? ‘Stand by the grey stone when the thrush knocks and the setting sun with the last light of Durin’s day will shine upon the keyhole*.’” Bella quoted.

“Lulkhel!” Thorin cursed before turning around and wrapping Bella tightly in his embrace. “Bella, bunnel, you are amazing! I would be lost without you, amraline. I will forever be thankful to that wizard for bringing you into my life!”

“I love you too.” Bella said. “Now, let’s go get some dinner and I think your dwarrow could use some cheering up.”

They began to walk back to camp when Thorin suddenly stopped and gave Bella a suspicious look. “You remembered the elf’s words all this time?”

“Oh, obviously.” Bella answered, wondering what he was on about.

“So for the past 3 days as my dwarrows and I have been throwing ourselves at the door you’ve just been sitting there hoarding that information to yourself?”

“Ah, yes, well.” Bella stammered. “Hmmm. I-I, well, you see…”

Thorin just stared at her, waiting.

“You lot were getting on my nerves.” She finally admitted. “I’m sorry. I should have said.”

“Aye, you should have.” Thorin looked stern for all of 10 seconds before he erupted into chuckles. “Ah, bunnel, I am glad you are at my side.”
That night Thorin led his company in the songs of old- the stories of their creation, Durin the Deathless, and the original settling of Erebor. Ori sat at Bella’s side and translated the songs into her ear. For the first time since leaving Lake-Town Bella felt herself relaxing.

It was the next evening, as Bella sat on her usual rock perch, that she heard a light knocking sound. She glanced up sharply to see a thrush trying to break open a snail on the hidden door. “Thorin.” She croaked. One hand flailed in the direction of where the dwarrows were, afraid to let her eyes move away from the thrush; half worried she was seeing things. She cleared her throat and tried again. “Thorin. Come here. Quick!”

Many of the dwarrow looked up hearing the anxiousness in her voice and Thorin raced to her, Dwalin and Balin at his heels. “What is wrong? Are you hurt?”

“All right.” She said as he finally noticed the knocking thrush. “Thorin look.” Still without taking her eyes away Bella pointed. “Mahal be.” He said, tears in his eyes.

“I didn’t. Not really. I was just sitting here when the bird flew over.” Bella tried to protest but no one was listening. By this point the rest of the dwarrows had come over and they were all staring at the door. It was with breathless anticipation that they watched the light of the setting sun move across the stone. As the sun sank lower and lower so too did the dwarrows hopes until it dipped below the horizon. There were several cries and groans but Bella hushed them. “Wait.” She said, still staring at the door. “Just wait.” It would work. It had to work. Bella was not prepared to let this quest fail.

Her faith paid off with the arrival of the moon. As the moonlight hit the door a small piece of stone flaked off revealing a small hole. “Thorin.” Bella whispered at the sight of the keyhole. She could hardly believe the directions in the moon runes worked. She sent a silent prayer of forgiveness to Thorin’s grandfather.

“I see it.” He replied. Almost as if in a trance Thorin pulled out his father’s key and approached the door. The key slid in easily and when he turned it the outline of the door appeared in the stone. Together as a group they pushed the door open.

Bella’s first impression of Erebor was of complete darkness. She regretted the comparison but it reminded her of the darkness in Mirkwood-complete and all consuming. Her fear, which Bella had conveniently forgotten about, came back full force. Somewhere in that darkness was a dragon. Calling upon all the strength she had discovered along this journey she forced down her fear. “I guess this is it then.” She said with forced levity. “Time to earn my share.”

Every dwarrow eye flew from the open doorway to Bella. Many of them wide and incredulous. “What?” Asked Fili.

“Surely you all remember. It is what Gandalf recruited me for.” Bella explained. “I’m to see if Smaug lives. It’s in the contract I signed.”

Protest and righteous outcries met her statement. Almost all the dwarrows were making their feelings known. Loudly. It was touching really, watching them argue for her safety. When was the last time she had people who cared so much about her welfare? Bella threw her arms around the nearest dwarf, which happened to be Kili. “I love you all, my silly dwarf! So much!”

“Uncle, she can’t.” Kili pleaded, his arms wrapping protectively around Bella. “Tell her she can’t go
“I’ll go in her place!” Gloin declared, wielding his ax as though about to do battle.

“I’ll go!” Bofur offered. And then Kili and Fili and Bifur and Ori and soon offers were coming from all over and Bella thought she just might cry.

“I have to go.” She said before Thorin had a chance to agree with them. From the look he sent her he would have. “I have to be the one to go. Smaug won’t know my smell which will give us a much needed advantage if he is still alive and I have my ring.”

Despite her arguments, the dwarrows look hopefully to Thorin. He in turn looked to Balin. Bella was annoyed that they would not accept her word but understood it was out of concern for her. In truth a large part of her longed to hear there was another, better option. She was not surprised though when Balin shook his head, a sad look on his face.

“But-” Kili tried to protest. Bella gave him a comforting squeeze.

“It’ll be ok.” She reassured. “Surely by now you have faith in my abilities.”

“Of course we do.” Fili said. “But we love you and in there we won’t be able to protect you.”

“Oh my dear boy!” Bella let go of Kili to give Fili a hug. “Considering all that’s happened so far, I’m more worried about who will protect you lot while I’m in there.”

There were several chuckles at her attempt at humor though more than one sounded suspiciously wet. “We need not worry just yet.” Thorin finally spoke up. “Morning is soon enough to venture into the mountain I would think.”

For a moment Bella wanted to protest. Waiting would only give her more time to fret and worry and let her panic grow. The look on his face however had her keeping her silence. They made camp that night in front of the open doorway and Bella spent the entire evening with a dwarf pressed against her side. More often than not there were multiple dwarrow to the point she was quite sure an outside observer would not be able to see her through all the hair and muscle.

They all stayed up far later than their norm, no one wanting to see the morning come. Eventually though they had to sleep and bedrolls were laid out. Dwalin glared when Bella joined Thorin in his but said nothing when she sent him a challenging look. She had noticed a softening of her brothers’ attitudes towards Thorin since he played nursemaid to her in Lake-Town. Even so, Dwalin’s lack of protest emphasized to Bella how unlikely it was that she’d survived tomorrow.

“I’m scared.” She whispered into Thorin’s chest. His arms tightened their hold around her.

“So am I.” He admitted and then he began to hum. Bella recognized it as the song her dwarrow had sung in her smial all those months ago. In that moment she fell in love with Thorin all over again. She wouldn’t have thought she’d be able to sleep that night but surrounded by Thorin as she was with his voice in her ears she drifted off.

Bella woke the next morning feeling surprisingly rested. In fact it took the strained look on everyone else’s face to remind her what the day would hold. Breakfast was a tense affair and Bella wasn’t sure if anyone ate more than a few bites. She knew she didn’t feel hungry and what little she had eaten sat in her stomach like lead. The hardest part was bidding the Company goodbye. They were as clingy and blubbering as fauntlings their first night away from home. Of course seeing their tears led to tears of her own. She was on her third round of hugs when Dwalin gently pulled her away.
“Come on Little Sister. It is time for us to go.”

Bella looked up at him in confusion. “Us?”

“Aye, you didn’t think I’d let you walk in there alone did you?”

“But-“ Dwalin cut her off with a large hand over her mouth.

“The smell, I know. I won’t go all the way but I will be walking in with you.”

“Thank you.” Bella said once Dwalin removed his hand. He just gave her a tight smile and went to stand by the doorway next to Balin. Before she could follow Thorin was there, pulling her into a tight embrace. “Come back to me.” He whispered into her hair and it sounded like a sob.

“I promise.” She said even though they both knew she could promise no such thing.

Thorin pulled back just far enough that he could rest his forehead against hers. “You Bella are a jewel beyond worth. You are my heart and I will forever be thankful to have you in my life.”

Bella wasn’t sure if the sound she made was a laugh or a sob. She had never known it was possible to feel such joy and sorrow all at once. “I’m the one who should be thankful. I was so alone, so full of fear that I was barely existing. You and your ridiculous dwarrows have brought color and, well, life back into my life. I love you. I love you so much.”

Thorin made a broken, needy sound and crushed his lips to Bella’s. It was a desperate kiss, full of love but with a bittersweet taste to it. If she weren’t about to walk into a dragon’s lair she’d feel embarrassed about being in front of the whole Company. As it was she didn’t care and instead kissed back with everything she had. If only she could stay in this moment forever. Unfortunately it couldn’t last and eventually they pulled apart. Thorin placed one last kiss upon her brow and then walked her to her brothers. They both looked solemn and Dwalin was glaring at Thorin but neither one said anything about the kiss.

Balin stepped forward, tapping his forehead against Bella’s before hugging her. He always had the best hugs, warm and comforting as she remembered her father’s being. It was what she needed to steel her resolve. “I love you, nadad.”

“I love you too, nan’ith.” He responded, holding her for another long moment. When he released her it was with obvious reluctance. “May Mahal go with you.”

Bella took a deep breath as she turned to face Dwalin. “Shall we?”

“Aye, let’s do this.”

Bella reached out, her hand only shaking a little and Dwalin immediately took it up. “Let’s go see a dragon.”

Chapter End Notes

*Direct quote from The Hobbit

Khuzdul from The Dwarrow Scholar(except for one word):
Lulkhel- fool (idiot/oaf) of all fools. Thanks goes to zellieh for giving me this and
several other khuzdul insults that I hope to find use for!
Bunnel- treasure of all treasures
Amraline- my love
Nadad- brother
Nan'ith- sister that is young/new/fresh (little sister)
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

SMAUG!!!

Chapter Notes

Oh man! I have been putting off this chapter forever! I was sooooo terrified to try and write the scene between Bella and Smaug!!! I really hope I did it justice and you all enjoy!

*Mild cursing in this chapter.

Also, I drew myself some fanart! It's Bella and Thorin snuggling from the end of chapter 8. You can find it on my tumblr

Unbeta'd as always.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The walls of the tunnel didn’t echo as Bella would have expected but instead the stone seemed to absorb the sound. Even that of Dwalin’s heavy boots. They walked in silence for the first bit, each lost in their own thoughts or in Bella’s case focused on keeping her feet moving. Dwalin’s hand in hers was her anchor and she found strength in his touch. Her steps faltered though when they turned a corner and lost all daylight, plunging them into pure darkness.

“Shhhh, Little Sister. It’s alright.” Dwalin soothed, giving her hand a squeeze.

Bella gave a small huff. “That’s easy enough for you to say. Not all of us have your magical dwarf vision.”

“‘Magical dwarf vision.’” Dwalin chuckled. “Aye, it is at that. Just like your magical hobbit feet.”

“There is nothing magical about my feet!” Bella felt indignant. Magical feet indeed! “Just because I don’t clomp around like an oliphaunt!”

Dwalin laughed and after a moment Bella joined in, though both took care to stay quiet. “Thank you.” Bella smiled in the dark and leaned briefly into Dwalin’s bulk. Her brother just gave her hand another squeeze and began humming softly one of the old songs. Bella distracted herself by trying to remember the words. She hadn’t realized she was speaking until the humming broke off into a choked laugh.

“‘Uthrab.’”

“What?” Bella looked up at Dwalin.

The word in the song is ‘uthrab, stolen lands. It is about our loss of Khazad-dûm. You said fuslasul,
Bella felt her face heat and was very thankful for the dark. “Oh. I’m going to kill Fili.”

Dwalin snorted. “Can’t kill your kin. S’not done.”

“He’s not my kin yet. I’ll just make sure I do it before I marry Thorin.”

“Aye, that’s a plan. ‘Course it means Kili’s left as heir- at least till you produce a bairn of your own.”

Bella’s amusement left her as Dwalin’s words hit like a punch to the chest. Didn’t Dwalin know? How could he not know? Hadn’t Thorin said he explained things to the company back in Rivendell? Bella’s thoughts were swirling but she didn’t have long to dwell on them. Around the next turn came the faintest glimmer of gold and Dwalin brought them to a halt.

“This’ll be as far as I go.”

Bella looked up at Dwalin with eyes wide. As much as she’d been prepared to enter the mountain alone she wasn’t near prepared enough to let Dwalin go.

“Tch, don’t look at me like that, lass. I’ll be right here the whole time, waitin’ for you. I can’t go in there with you but by Mahal, I’ll not be leaving you alone.”

“R-really?” Bella could hardly believe her ears.

“Aye. Not sure what good I’ll be against a dragon- you’re much more likely to succeed with your magical feel and ring but I’m here if you need me.”

“Brother!” Bella threw herself into Dwalin’s arms, not able to stifle her tears.

“Hush, Little Sister. It’ll be fine.” His words were comforting but his embrace was tight and almost desperate. “Just run in, see if the beast lives, and run out. Oh, an’ grab the Arkenstone if you happen to pass by it.”

“That’s the big, sparkly one, right?” Bella asked and as she’d hoped, startled a laugh out of Dwalin.

“Aye. The big sparkly one.”

They held on to each other for several more minutes. Finally Bella forced herself to pull away. If she didn’t make herself go now she never would. “I will see you soon nadad.”

“That you will, Little Sister. May Mahal’s hammer protect you.”

With a deep breath she straightened her coat and made her way towards the gold. At the corner, right before the tunnel turned again she stopped and looked back. Dwalin stood right where she left him, tall and proud with a fierce look upon his face. “Baruk Khazad.” He said.

“Baruk Khazad.” With the dwarvish war cry on her lips she turned the corner. As soon as she was out of sight she slipped on her ring.

With each step down the tunnel the air became warmer, the light grew brighter, and Bella’s steps grew smaller. As she got closer Bella began to hear a strange noise. A deep, bubbling, rumbling sort of noise that she felt more than heard. With a sinking feeling she realized it was the dragon snoring. She stopped and leaned against a wall, stifling a small sob. Smaug was alive.

Bella wasn’t surprised. She had suspected as much from the beginning but oh, how it hurt to be
Mind made up, Bella began walking again. When she finally reached the treasury it took several moments before she could see anything beyond the shine of gold and precious gems. Whatever she had pictured finding, from the other’s descriptions or her own imagination, was but a fraction of what was before her. The treasures stretched out into all directions and it was with a sense of disbelief that Bella realized the room was large enough to hold the majority of Hobbiton. Surprisingly, the dragon was the last thing she noticed. She had been so overwhelmed by the gold she had almost forgotten about the beast. Of course it wasn’t entirely her fault she didn’t see the dragon immediately as he was half buried amongst the treasure and she was despairing at finding one sparkling stone amongst all this mess.

Her dilemma was made all he more perilous as silence descended and a stillness that made Bella feel numb after the rumbling snores. “I smell you thief.” A voice, larger than any she had heard before, caused Bella to break out in tremors. With a squeak she threw herself behind a pillar as the dragon shook off his golden blanket and stood in all his glory. “Come out now and I’ll make our death a quick one.”

Bella’s mind was racing a mile a minute, trying desperately to come up with some sort of plan. Of course, as seemed to often happen when she was nervous, her mouth started talking without her consent. “Th-thief!” She squawked, true indignation coloring her tone. “I am no thief, thank you very much!” She consciously ignored the existence of the contract naming her ‘burglar’.

“You dare lie to me?” Smaug roared, rearing up to his full height. “I can smell you, thief. You reek of dwarf! You have come to steal my treasure! My precious jewels and gold! But let me tell you thief, you have made poor friends in dwarves. Did they promise you a share?” Smaug sneered about the room, trying to pin point Bella’s location. She in turn was trying to move around as silently as possible, dropping the occasional item to try and disperse her smell. “Send you in to do the dangerous work as they sulk in safety. Do you really think they’ll pay you Thief? Dwarves are famous for their greed.”

That was really just too much; having a dragon warn her of dwarven greed. As if he had any room to talk! Of course Smaug had no idea she was exactly the wrong person to try and turn against the dwarrow. Instead of causing doubt it just made Bella mad at the insult to her family.

“You are a fool!” Bella said, angered past the point of common sense. “Yes, dwarrow value gold but that is because it provides shelter over their heads and jewels provide food for their children to eat and they love treasure for the skill and craftsmanship as their father, Mahal taught them. But more than that, more than any piece you sit on, they value and desire their home. I am not here to steal from you but to give back what is theirs!”

“And who are you?” Smaug sneered, honing in on her location. In her righteous anger she had forgotten that though invisible, she still cast a shadow. “Who are you to make such claims? You are not a dwarf though I smell them on you strongly enough.”

“I-am.” Bella squeaked, realizing the dangerous situation she was in but her voice quickly firmed up. “I am makhazduna. I am she who sheds her race and grows one anew. I come from under the hill and under hills and over hills I have traveled. And through air. I walk unseen. I am the clue-finder
and web-cutter. I have buried my family and drowned them and pulled them alive again from the water. I am uzbadhalkuna, the king’s equal.” *

Smaug stared at her, or at least in her direction, and then he did the most amazing thing. He laughed. “Those are impressive deeds and titles you carry but they do you little good when you are dead.” The dragon turned away for a moment and when he came back he was holding something in his claws. Even from a far distance Bella could see how the thing sparkled and reflected light in a way that made the surrounding treasures seem dull. “Tell me, Thief, do you know what this is?”

“The Arkenstone.” Bella breathed. Big, sparkly stone indeed. She suddenly understood why Dwalin had laughed so hard when she called it that.

“Yes.” Smaug rumbled. “Once upon a time the greatest possession of the line of Durin. What do you think would happen if you brought it to your dwarves? Would you be a hero? And how would they pay you with me still in their mountain? Perhaps they mean for you to steal it from me piece by piece until you grow weary and old and die of old age? Or perhaps, once they have what they want they’ll rid themselves of you one way or another. It would not be unusual for dwarves to do to an outsider and you are not one of them for all that you claim fancy names and stink like them.”

At one point in time the dragon’s words would have hurt. She would have listened to his lies and allowed doubt in her dwarrows and in her self to grow and cause her pain. However, Bella was not the same hobbit she’d once been. Where once she had been alone and afraid of the world, now she was stronger and had the support of a family again.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.” Bella said with confidence.

With a casual flick of his claws, Smaug sent the Arkenston sailing through the air to land a few feet from Bella. “Take it, Thief. Give it to your masters and we’ll see who is a better judge of dwarves’ character.”

Bella’s mind stuttered to a halt. *Surely not*, she thought. It couldn’t be so easy.

“Take it.” Smaug insisted, settling back down into the gold. “I can eat you all next week as easily as today and I want you to prove me right first.”

*Arrogant lizard.* Keeping one eye on the dragon, not confident it wasn’t a trap, Bella picked up the Arkenstone. She almost immediately dropped it again, not expecting the stone to be so heavy. Smaug chuckled- a truly sinister sound- as Bella grumbled under the weight and tried her best to sneak her way back to the tunnel. She didn’t think she succeeded in being stealthy but she figured it hardly mattered now. Smaug couldn’t fit through the tunnel and he already knew the company camped outside the mountain.

“I’ll be seeing you soon little thief.” He promised as Bella entered the tunnel. She didn’t respond, didn’t slow down until she was several turns away. A giggle escaped as she collapsed against the wall. It was quickly followed by another and then another until she couldn’t hold back the laughter. It was loud and near hysterical and soon accompanied by tears until she didn’t know if she was shaking with laughter or sobs.

Bella didn’t know how long she had been sitting there before she became aware of large hands on her and an anxious voice. She looked up and through the tears she could see Dwalin’s worried face. “Are you alright? Bella, are you hurt?”

“He gave me the Arkenstone.” She choked out amongst a new wave of chuckles.
“What?”

Bella opened up her hands and revealed the stone. Even in the darkness it shone with its own inner light. “He gave me the Arkenstone.”

They both stared at the stone, Dwalin’s eyes wide in wonder. A strange sound escaped his mouth. Bella only realized it was a giggle when he made the sound again. Soon he was roaring with laughter. “Oh, Little Sister!” He scooped her up and help her close. “You are a blessing from Mahal! Only you could get a dragon to give you his treasure!” He danced around the tunnel, with Bella still in his arms, their joyful laughter echoing about them. Eventually they calmed down though Bella found she was still shaking something fierce. “T’is the adrenaline.” Dwalin assured. “It’ll fade, though a warm meal and fire would go a long ways to help. Let’s get back to the others and tell them of your triumph.”

Bella agreed and they were quickly on their way. Dwalin carried her the entire way despite her numerous and loud protest. The walk back to the surface seemed to go much faster than the walk down. It wasn’t long before they were bursting out of the tunnel. The bright light of day blinded Bella and she buried her face in Dwalin’s chest with a squeak. Immediately they were surrounded by twelve worried dwarrow all talking and shouting at once.

“All of a sudden his hands were on her, poking and prodding, searching for injuries. “Thorin, I’m fine. Really. Just-oh! Just stop!”

At her shout he backed up but his gaze was suspicious. “You aren’t hurt?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Then why is Dwalin carrying you?”

“Because he is an utter pillock.” She glared at said brother who not only failed to look repentant but he had the audacity to smile smugly. “Put me down!”

Dwalin finally listened though he didn’t lose his smile. “Show him your sparkly stone, Little Sister.”

Feet back on the ground, she opened her hands and lifted up her prize. All around Bella there were gasps of surprise and awe. Thorin was looking at her hands as if he couldn’t believe his eyes. “The Arkenstone.” He whispered. Slowly, he took the stone from her. For a moment he held it close, a strange look upon his face before he lifted it high for all to see. “The Arkenstone!” He shouted and the rest of the dwarrow cheered.

Bella looked up at her love, glorious in his triumph and her cheeks hurt from smiling so hard. There was still the dragon to deal with but tonight they would feast and celebrate their success.

Chapter End Notes

*Bella's speech is very much inspired by Bilbo's in The Hobbit with some parts directly
It very much is not mine.

**Khuzdul:**

'Uthrab: greater/greatest stolen land- in this case it's used in reference of Khazad-dum

**Khazad-dum:** Dwarven name for Moria which was lost to the dwarrow in T.A. 1981 after they unleashed Durin's Bane. Balin later led a colony there in T.A. 2989

**Fuslasul:** tiny sexuality (*male genital organs). Poor Bella instead of singing of regaining lost homelands was singing about trying to find her tiny dick.

**Nadad:** Brother

**Baruk Khazad:** Dwarven battle cry, "Axes of the Dwarves"

**Makazduna:** She who is dwarfed (made dwarf)

**Uzbadhalkuna:** The king’s equal (female)

**Mesmel:** Jewel of all jewels

Brief (hopefully) explanation of Smaug and his giving away the Arkenstone. I don't know if I really do or not but I feel like I need to justify my choices. 1st off, to be completely honest, this came from my getting halfway through the chapter and thinking 'what if it actually went to plan? What if Bella actually got the stone and they could call Dain, how much would change?' and once that bug bit me I had to try it out.

So.

The way I see it, Smaug is like a giant evil cat who likes to play with his food. He doesn't mind giving the Arkenstone away because he's confident he'll get it back along with his meal after having a bit of sport first. Even if Bella and the dwarrow were to try and run away he'd be able to track them with his gold (gem) sense or something.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Dragons will only tolerate someone at their doorstep for so long.

Chapter Notes

Not dead! I can hardly believe this took me so long though! I am so sorry! Life has been a roller-coaster lately!

Thank you so much for your patience! Hope it's worth the wait. The beginning might feel a bit tortured, I swear It would take me days to write a page! I felt so uninspired.
The last half came very quickly though.

Unbeta'd, so let me know of any horrible mistakes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bombur was quickly put to work putting a feast together (as much of one that their supplies allowed) and Balin sent to dispatch a letter to Dain, letting him know they had the Arkenstone and to bring his army prepared to fight a dragon. Once orders were issued and most everyone had a job, Thorin led Dwalin away from the rest.

“If we could have a quick word?” Not giving Dwalin a chance to answer Thorin dragged him off.

Bella watched with a mixture of annoyance and curiosity as they got into a heated discussion. Both were gesturing wildly and she was a bit worried they’d come to blows. Finally Thorin gestured to his pocket where the Arkenstone resided with a roar. Dwalin looked surprised before he seemed to relent. His shoulders slumped slightly and he nodded. Bella’s curiosity was quite perked as he led them back to her. Dwalin rested his hands on her shoulders and pressed his forehead to hers.

“Remember you’re in charge. Don’t let him press for somethin’ you don’t want.”

“What?! I- I mean yes. Yes, of course.”

“Good. He’s a good dwarf, despite my grumblings. I’m happy for ya.” Dwalin gently tapped their foreheads together before walking off, leaving Bella and Thorin alone. She turned to him with a curious look.

“Will you sit with me?” He asked.

“Of course.”

Thorin led her to the fire. Now that they were alone he seemed unsure of himself. This in turn made Bella nervous. He fiddled with his pocket that held the Arkenstone and opened his mouth several times only to close it again without saying anything. Bella was really beginning to worry. Surely only something bad would be causing Thorin this much distress. The dragon’s words came back to
her. ‘Once they have what they want they’ll rid themselves of you… you are not one of them.’

It was ridiculous. She knew that. Bella knew these dwarrow far better than the dragon and they loved her—had made her one of their own. But even as she mentally scolded herself she could not stop the fear from gripping her heart.

“I think I will go for a walk.” Bella said as she shot to her feet, a spew of nervous rambling coming out of her mouth. “It’s really quite nice and I’ve still got some… what was that word Dwalin said? Adrinno-something. I’ve still got some of that. Should go walk it off. Yes.”

“Bella.” His tone was gentle and patronizing and Bella hated it.

“What?” She snapped, angry at herself for her fear and at him for making her feel this way. Her anger changed to confusion when the Arkenstone suddenly appeared in front of her face. “What?”

“I present this gift to you as a formal declaration of my desire to court you with the intention to marry and make you my queen.”

“Oh!” Bella was sure her eyes were larger than the stone before her but she seemed to have lost control over her body. “Oh my!”

Thorin huffed a small laugh. “This can’t come as that much of a surprise. I made my feelings known back in Rivendell and several times since then.”

“Well, yes.” Bella said, blinking her dry eyes. “But the way you dwararrow have been carrying on, I didn’t think any courting would happen until I was old and grey.”

He smiled at her teasing but his body was tense. “So do you accept?” He pressed and Bella was surprised to hear anxiety in his voice.

“Yes!” Her grin felt huge, there was so much joy glowing through her. “Yes, I would like nothing more.”

Thorin’s shoulders relaxed and he held the Arkenstone towards her. “You bring me much joy. Please accept this as a token of my regard for you and the sincerity of my intentions.”

“The- Thorin, no! I can’t take that!” Bella couldn’t believe he would suggest such a thing.

Thorin’s face clouded over. “You said you accept my suit.”

“And I do but that’s the Arkenstone! I know how important it is to your people. You can’t give it to me.”

“And yet I am.” Thorin’s eyes were strangely intense as he pushed the stone into her hands. She fumbled a bit but managed to not drop it. He stared at it for a moment in her grasp and Bella wondered what he was thinking. When Thorin met her gaze again he was smiling and there was a possessive gleam to his eyes. “My two most precious jewels together.”

Bella shivered at the dark rumble of his voice and before she quite knew what was happening Thorin’s lips were on hers. This kiss was much harsher than the last. Thorin’s tongue immediately demanded entrance to her mouth and took from her with the same possessiveness she had seen in his eyes. It was enjoyable, oh so enjoyable, but even as she felt flooded with pleasure Bella found herself overwhelmed and a little unnerved. He had never been so forceful with her before. It was both thrilling and a bit frightening. “My jewel, my Bella.” Thorin murmured against her lips.
The celebration that night was quiet as they were still on the doorstep of a dragon and the food was lackluster. Despite that the mood was higher than it had been since that night so long ago in the Shire. They were celebrating not only Bella’s success and the retrieval of the Arkenstone but also the beginning of her and Thorin’s courtship. There were many toast to her prowess as a burglar and their long and happy life using dark beer and cheap wine.

Bella laughed gaily with them, tucked firmly against Thorin’s side. She made several toast of her own and blushed brightly when Bofur started composing a ballad in her honor. Several others took it up and came up with verses of their own. She finally put a stop to it by throwing her cup at Nori’s head when the lyrics turned crude. Thorin’s laugh rumbled through her and his arm never let up its tight hold around her.

Their high mood lasted them through the rest of the week. They smiled and laughed and sang, though never too loudly. A message from Dain let them know he and his army were not far out. The end was in sight and the dwarrows of the company could already taste their victory. They made battle plans and talked of how to spend their gold.

Bella was merry with them. Though she had seen the dragon and knew just how insurmountable a challenge he seemed, it was hard not to believe they’d win when surrounded with such faith and blustering cheer. The only negative- and really it wouldn’t be much of a negative- was Thorin’s unwillingness to let Bella out of his sight. It became a minor struggle every time she needed some privacy either for certain bodily functions or to shave. He always had an arm around her shoulders or waist and often trapped her in the firm embrace of his arms.

She basked in the attention and if it felt claustrophobic at times Bella only had to remind herself that this was what she wanted. Thorin’s love was far more than she could have ever hoped to deserve. And if his looks became more angry than sad when she shaved, it was a small thing. Especially considering the dwarven norms she was breaking and he always covered her freshly shorn skin with kisses as though reclaiming it.

Of course such a stalemate couldn’t last forever. Surprisingly enough it wasn’t the dwarrows or the dragon who broke the peace. The company had been camped outside of the mountain for a week and Bella was spending a quiet morning putting braids in Thorin’s hair while Nori and Bofur tried to give tips. Thorin himself was sharing a pipe and friendly conversation with Balin, seemingly unconcerned that his hair was being done up like a young Shire lass. The rest were spread bout in various states of good-natured lethargy. Their peace was interrupted by the urgent caw of a large raven.

“King Thorin.” The raven greeted with a quick bob of its head that might have been a bow. “There are men come from Lake-Town dressed for battle and an army of elves join them. They march for Erebor.”

“What?!” Thorin roared, rising to his feet. The other dwarrow followed suit. “Theives! They mean to steal our treasure!” Other angry voices joined his. Bella blushed to hear some of the curses being shouted.

“How do we know they’re coming to steal anything?” Bella asked.

“Thorin looked down on her with a mixture of exasperation and amusement. “Why else would they come, marlę, and dressed for battle?”

“But why?”

“My gold of course! Like as not they believe we died defeating the dragon or perhaps they think a
measly 14 will be easily overcome. Either way, my Jewel, they have not come for tea.”

“Oh! The dragon! Thorin, we must warn them. If they think he’s dead they’ll…” Bella trailed off, not wanting to put words to her dark thoughts.

“They’ll get themselves killed.” Thorin finished for her with a grim smile. “Any why shouldn’t they? It only serves them right for marching to our door.”

“Thorin Oakenshield!” She snapped, hands firmly on her hips. “We are not going to let those people walk right into a dragon’s lair without warning. Yes, they are marching to our home, yes, that is quite poorly done of them and we are decent fold and we will let them know that the dragon lives!” Bella turned to the bird. “Mister Raven, if you could be so kind as to find whoever is in charge and let hem know about the dragon I would most appreciate it.”

The raven in question looked back and forth between the hobbit and the dwarf king, obviously unsure what to do. The tension held for several moments before Thorin let out a harsh breath. “Roac do as my uzbaduna bids and warn the shekdar.” Roac bobbed another of his odd bows and flew off. Bella smiled up at Thorin and laid a gentle hand upon his arm. “Thank you.”

Thorin gave her a nod but didn’t return the smile. “Balin! Dwalin! Dain shall be here in a few days time, we much prepare for his arrival. It seems we shall have more enemies to face than we’d realized.”

Bella watched him stomp off with her brothers with a sad feeling. She knew warning the others had been the right thing to do but she also understood Thorin’s anger. Really, what did those men think they were doing? And the elves! As if any of them deserved one speck of treasure. They might not deserve a dragon raining fire down on them but if she were there right now- ooh the tongue-lashing they would get! With a huff Bella went to see where she could make herself useful.

For the first time since their courtship began, Thorin kept away from Bella. As much as she had felt claustrophobic at times having him so near, Bella did not like this distance. Finally, after supper when night had fallen and the others began to settle into their bedrolls, she sought him out near the fire. He barely acknowledged her presence as she sat next to him. She refused to be disheartened by it.

“I know what it feels like to have your home threatened.” Thorin still didn’t say anything but he turned his head towards her so Bella knew he was listening. “Its not the same of course. Hobbits prefer to battle with words and baked goods over tea rather than sword or arrow on a field but they’re no less determined for all that.”

“Someone tried to take your home?”

“Oh yes.” She flapped a hand, trying to sound nonchalant. “More than I could rightly remember at the moment.” That was a lie. Bella could clearly recall ever time someone told her what a shame it was that her big, beautiful Smial should remain empty. The same look of covetousness and poorly hidden disdain on each face. She did not want to seem petty though. “My first cousin Otho and his horrible wife Lobelia were the worst by far. Certainly the most persistent. She was the only to tell me to my face that I didn’t deserve such a home- or any home really, being the halfling that I am.”

“Don’t.” Thorin interrupted in a hoarse voice. “Don’t call yourself that.” He pulled her into his embrace and Bella went willingly. She hadn’t remained as unaffected as she would have liked during her story and the comfort was most welcome.
“If I could I would show all of the Shire the sharp edge of my blade for treating you such but as I doubt you’d ever allow such a thing I shall make do by showering you with gold and precious gems and creating for you a more perfect home than any of their small minds could dare to imagine.”

Bella buried her smile into his chest. “Ridiculous dwarf. As long as you’re there it shall be perfect enough for me. I was just trying to show you I understand how you’re feeling, at least a little bit.”

“And yet,” Thorin sighed, “you’d have me save them.”

“I would. What those men and elves are doing is wrong. I did not walk halfway across Arda and face a dragon just to have someone else come and steal your mountain. They will not steal your mountain! But letting them all die without warning is also wrong. Dain will be here soon and with a whole army prepared to face Smaug. Hopefully by that time Gandalf will have designed to join us and I am quite certain that together we can solve all of this.”

Thorin huffed into her curls. “Let it be as you say, Mesemel.”

“Hmmm.” Sleepiness began to take hold. “It will be, you’ll see. And if not, I’ll invite all the elves to tea and poison the lot of them.” The last thing Bella heard as she drifted off to sleep was the deep rumble of Thorin’s laughter.

A much less pleasant rumble woke everyone early the next morning. Bella raised her head from where it had been resting quite comfortable on Thorin’s chest. “What’s that?” She asked blearily.

“Dragon!” Balin cried, jumping to his feet. The others also got up with different levels of gracefulness. Bella herself would have fallen onto her face if it wasn’t for Thorin’s steadying hands.

Now that she was up and more awake Bella could recognize that the rumblings came from a large creature moving through the mountain and its angry bellows. If she listened carefully she thought she could just make out the words. It sent sharp waves of fear along her spine and clenching at her gut.

“What shall we do?” Ori cried and many of the dwarrows looked quite stricken.

“To the tunnel!” Thorin yelled over the racket. Everyone rushed to obey the order. A few packs were hastily grabbed but most was left behind.

“The dragon won’t be able to reach us but his fire will.” Nori pointed out, panic clear in his voice as yet another roar filled the air.

“We’ll have to shut the door!” Dwalin said. Several protests immediately sprang up.

“You’d have us trapped with no way out but through a dragon?” Gloin yelled.

“It’s that or die now.”

And Dwalin was right. Not only were the dragon’s roars getting louder but now they could hear the wind stirred by his great wings. “Close the door!” Thorin decided and Dori and Bifur rushed to obey. Much of the noise was muffled with the door closed but not all of it. They huddled together in the absolute darkness, shaking with fear and waited for what seemed like eternity.

Eventually it quieted and that was almost worse. At least with the noise they had some idea where the dragon was. Hours passed, or so it seemed to Bella and despite her fear she began to grow restless. She might be used to a quiet life but sitting idle in the dark was a new and unwanted
“Love, hold still.” Thorin whispered as she squirmed beside him yet again.

“Sorry, sorry.” She murmured, even as she wiggled a little. “It’s just, well, it’s not very comfortable in here is it? And we’ve been in here an awfully long time.”

With a sigh that sounded far more suffering than he really felt Thorin pulled Bella onto his lap. “Is this better?”

Bella was thankful for the darkness because she was certain her face was bright red. She buried it in Thorin’s chest, just to be safe- dwarrows did have exceptional night vision after all.

For a while, Bella was content with her new seat but even still she felt boredom creep in. “Thorin.” She whispered.

“Hmmm?”

“What do you think happened? Why did Smaug get angry?”

“I would venture your warning went unheeded. Smaug would not take kindly to an army at his door.”

“Serves the binakrag right.” Fili muttered from where he had been sitting on Thorin’s other side. Several others muttered their agreements. Bella knew that if Thorin was right then the men and elves had brought it upon themselves. Even so, the thought left a bitter taste in her mouth. She knew that whatever their intentions, she would mourn their needless deaths.

Days seemed to pass and if any of them slept it was a shallow, restless sleep. The air grew thick and stale and even Bofur who had the most experience in tunnels small and dark was beginning to feel anxious. They took to discussing what should be done for they obviously could not stay forever in the tunnel. There was lots of talk back and forth until Kili cried out “I would rather be smashed by Smaug in the open than suffocate in here!” No one had much to say against that.

“I still have my ring.” Bella said. “I could scout and see if it is safe.” Voices rose up in protest but she quickly silenced them. “I have gone into the dragon’s lair once before and I survived. Do you doubt me now?”

“Tch, of course we don’t Little Sister. We’d just rather you not put yourself in danger again so soon.” Dwalin tried to pacify her.

“Are we not all in danger? If not from the dragon than from suffocation and starvation?”

There was no fighting the truth of that statement. Finally it was decided they’d all walk to the end of the tunnel and hide there while Bella investigated with her ring. It wasn’t a perfect plan and no one liked sending Bella on her own but it was the best they had. They walked as silently as a troop of dwarrow could walk which, to Bella’s consternation, was not very quietly at all.

Thorin led the procession, one hand clinging tightly to Bella’s. The grip was almost too tight but she didn’t complain. Instead she just clung back. Silently Bella longed for a time when danger was no longer on the horizon. Surely, after everything, they must eventually reach a point where they no longer waited for the next threat.

This time, as she walked down, no golden glow came from below. Even once they were well past where she thought she’d left Dwalin before, everything was pitch black. Bella was unsure whether
this boded well or not. What was more promising was the silence. No deep rumbling snores. No sinister voice. Not even the softer cadence of a large pair of lungs filling and emptying. Bella was so focused on listening for any sounds that when Thorin halted, pulling her to a stop with him, she nearly fell.

“We’ve reached the end of the tunnel.” He whispered into her ear. Bella nodded, unsure if he could see. When she went to put her ring on he would not let go. Instead he squeezed tighter and whispered, “be safe.” Then his hand was gone though she could still feel his presence. With unsteady hands she slipped the ring on and continued on her own.

Despite expecting it, it was a shock when the tunnel wall beneath her fingers disappeared. Once again she almost fell but managed to catch herself. Only to fall two steps later as the gold beneath her feel shifted unexpectedly. Bella managed to keep from crying out but the clanking of precious metals seemed thunderous. She froze in her prone position listening furiously. Behind her she could hear loud whispering from the dwarrow but the rest of the chamber was silent.

Finally, she could stand it no more. “Smaug, you great worm! If you’re there come out and catch me! Unless you don’t think you can!” She could hear the dwarrow shushing her almost loud enough to echo but nothing from the cavern itself. “Light!” She called back to her companions. “Someone bring a light!”

Bella sat up where she was and waited for the dwarrow to debate the safety, light a torch, and then come to her. Dwalin and Balin were the first to arrive. “Did you lose your mind?!” Dwalin roared. “I thought you were a smart one! What were you thinkin’ calling out the dragon like that?” The warrior descended into angry Khudzul even as he and Balin pulled her into a tight embrace.

“I am so glad you’re safe nan’ith.” Balin said, smiling brightly. “But if you ever do something like that again I will make sure you regret it for the rest of your days.”

“Aye, and you’d have some help with that I imagine.” Chuckled Gloin as the rest arrived and threw themselves into the hug. Bella could hardly breath for being so buried under dwarven bodies and hair. She had no complaints though and accepted their love, rough as it was, gladly.

Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on tumblr

Khudzul is from The Dwarror Scholar

marlel- love of all loves
uzbaduna- Queen (King lady)
shkedar- supreme cowards
mesemel- jewel of all jewels
binakrag- honorless
nan’ith- little sister
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Gold madness and armies on the horizon.

Chapter Notes

Is this a new chapter?

It is! It's a new chapter.

I did not get near as far as I would have liked- I wanted to include the confrontation between Thorin and the armies but it just didn't happen and eventually I figured you'd guys would just rather have the chapter.

I cannot make any promises or even estimate for when the next will be. Real life is kicking my butt right now and I'm looking for a new job amongst other things. I do promise that I am still working on this story, even if very slowly.

If you've left me a comment I promised I've read them all and I am so touched and thankful for every one. I will do my best to find time to respond personally but I want you all to know that even if I don't write back, I am very thankful.

This chapter, like all chapters, is unbeta'd.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It wasn’t until the hug ended and she was given space again that Bella realized someone was missing. She looked past shoulders and arms to see Thorin standing just outside the tunnel. He was looking out over the treasure, bright and sparkling even in the dim light of a single torch, with a queer expression on his face.

“Thorin.” She called, feeling unsure. For a moment he looked at her with unseeing eyes, lacking all warmth and recognition. The cold bled out and a smile formed warm and genuine.

“Bella.” He loped to her and enfolded her into an embrace. “That was foolish, Mesemel.”

“At least we know Smaug’s not here anymore.”

“Yes, indeed.” As Thorin looked out over the room the queer look returned. “It is ours again.” His voice rose, shouting for the whole company to hear. “The mountain is ours!”

The rest cheered but Balin looked troubled. “Slow down there, lad. Just because the dragon has not returned doesn’t mean he’s not out there somewhere.”

“If he comes, we will kill him! We will not lose our home again!”
“Aye, but it might be best to be prepared.”

Thorin mulled that over. “Balin, take Dori, Nori, Bifur, and Kili and scout the front gate. See what the situation outside is and if there is any sign of the dragon. The rest of you, find the armory and take stock of what weapons and armor we have available. Outfit yourselves as you see fit.” The dwarrows agreed and the two groups went their separate ways. Bella would have followed but Thorin kept a grip on her waist.

“Thorin?”

“Not you, Mesem, you are to stay with me.”

“What will we be doing then?”

Thorin gave her a large grin. “Exploring our kingdom.”

Bella’s first impression of Erebor proper was heartbreaking. The air was stale and smelled of death, dust, and dragon. There were skeletons scattered about, huddled at the end of hallways and against doors. At one point in time their empty eyes and silent screams would have terrified her. Now they just made her sad. Silently she offered them back to the earth.

Thorin tried to direct her attention away from the skeletons, pointing out and showing off the wealth and craftsmanship of the mountain kingdom. Bella was more than willing to be distracted by murals inlaid with sparkling jewels and intricate carvings enhanced with precious metals. Even coated in a century’s-worth of dust it was stunning. Bella’s imaginings didn’t come anywhere near the true beauty of Erebor, even after all the stories. She couldn’t even think what it would look like once properly cleaned, lit, and full of life once more. It would be breathtaking to say the least and she could not wait to see it.

Of course first they had to ensure the dragon was gone, do something about the men and elves, and then some serious scrubbing. Bella was considering if Dain’s army could be convinced to help with the cleaning when Thorin interrupted her musings. “Come.” He pulled on her hand. “I want to show you the royal wing.”

If the rest of Erebor was stunning, the royal wing seemed worthy of the Valar themselves. It was obvious that generations of master craftsmen and artisans had lovingly made this wing their life’s work.

“The wyrm must not have been able to fit this far into the mountain. The value of these rooms rivals the amount in the treasury.” Bella could well believe it. She was pretty sure that lamp stand in the corner could pay for Bag End; furniture included. “There’s a mine-full of diamonds in the ceiling of each bedroom to mimic the stars and most of what’s left of the mithril from Khazad-dûm can be found here. These murals are worth almost as much as you, my Jewel. Almost as much as the Arkenstone.”

As they walked down the hallway Thorin continued to point out the precious metals, gems, and items. Occasionally he’d pull her into a room to point out an especially priceless piece of furniture. As the tour went on Bella to her dismay, found herself enjoying it less and less. It was discomforting, the way Thorin talked about his childhood home. There was no sharing memories or tales of his youth, no explaining the significance of the stories depicted in the murals. He didn’t even bother to tell her which rooms had belonged to whom as they entered them. When she tried to ask questions, he would just brush them aside. All he would talk about was the worth of things- of giant rubies and silver and gold. Bella was becoming quite distressed by the time they reached the end of the wing.
They stood before large doors, twice a dwarf’s height and three times as wide that appeared to be carved entirely out of gold. “This is the king’s chamber.” Thorin said gleefully. He pushed the door open and Bella thought she was going to be ill. The walls were plated with gold as was the ceiling, the furniture was carved with gold, the fabric—what little she could see of it—was woven with gold and gold was used to decorate everything. Everywhere she looked all she could see was gold.

“Are they not magnificent, Mesem? My grandfather had these rooms remodeled during the height of his reign.”

“This would be the same grandfather who went mad, yes?” She asked before she could think better of it.

Thorin turned to her with a fierce scowl. “Vicious lies and rumors spread by my grandfather’s enemies! They tried to blame him for the dragon’s coming! As if dragons are not creatures of darkness and destruction that need no prompting.

*This probably didn’t help,* Bella thought, looking around the room again. “At Rivendell. I heard—“

“My grandfather was not mad!” Thorin roared. “Is it so wrong to enjoy that which is beautiful? To surround yourself with it? Surely as a hobbit, a race that loves comfort, you understand.”

Oh dear.

“Uncle? Bella? Are you guys he- whoa!” Kili stood in the doorway, his eyes as wide as saucers and Bella had never been so glad to have a conversation interrupted.

“Kili!” She said with false cheer. “Did you need something?”

“Huh?” He blinked at her for a moment before snapping back to himself. “Right, yes. Balin sent me. You’re going to want to see this.”

Bella immediately followed and while Thorin seemed more reluctant to leave the king’s chambers, he too left without complaint. Kili led them straight to the front gate to a parapet overlooking the valley they had traveled just days before. In the distance one could see Dale and even further the lake but that’s not what caught Bella’s attention. In the middle of the field lay the dragon surrounded by soldiers, both men and elves. It was obvious Smaug was dead though how they had managed it Bella had no idea.

“They killed the dragon.” She breathed.

“Aye, they did.” Balin answered, appearing at her side. “Though not without some damage to themselves.” Even from far away Bella could see many dead and injured. It was hard to tell but she thought maybe a third of the combined armies were down. Of those left, even accounting for those healing the injured or dealing with the dead that still left a goodly number of soldiers camped outside their door.

“We need to rebuild the gates.” She said, realizing the mountain was wide open for anyone to walk in.

“Aye, and so we shall. Nori, get the rest. The gate shall be our first priority.” Nori gave a quick nod and was off. Thorin turned to Bella. “You still have the Arkenstone?”

“Oh course.” She pulled it out to show him and Thorin’s shoulders relaxed slightly.

“Good. You must keep it safe from those who would take it.” He sent a dark look towards the
armies, leaving no doubt whom he meant. His face cleared though when he looked back at her. He
took in the sight of her, still holding the Arkenstone with a slow, trailing glance, his eyes lingering
briefly on the jewel. “Mesem, my Mesmel. You are too beautiful for words. You and my jewel shall
make me the envy of all nations.”

Thorin placed a quick kiss to her brow before wondering off. Bella watched him go with an
uncomfortable feeling.

“It’ll be alright, nan’ith.” Balin put a comforting arm around her shoulder. She just nodded in reply
and looked back out at the valley below. Oh yes, she had a very bad feeling indeed.

Bella knew dwarrows were great builders- had seen evidence of this all throughout Erebor, but she
hadn’t truly understood until she ventured out the next morning to find a massive wall filling the
gaping hole the gates had left behind. “Oh my!” She murmured as she looked up its towering height.

“Not our best but not bad for one night’s work.” Bofur said.

“Will it hold?” Bella didn’t doubt their ability, not really, but that they could build such a wall in one
night, much less a sturdy one, baffled her.

“Will it-! Will it hold?! Bella Baggins daughter of Fundin, I know you didn’t just ask me that! How
could you question our craftsmanship?”

Bofur would have continued on with his mock indignation for sometimes if not for Dwalin. He
slapped Bofur upside the head with a grunted ‘give it a rest.’

“It’ll hold.” Dori assured. “As long as they don’t have any battering rams and even then they’d have
to work for it.”

“Hopefully it won’t come to that,” said Balin.

Nori snorted. “They’ll be here soon, one way or another. They were watching close enough
throughout the night.”

That news really shouldn’t have surprised her. She would probably have done the same in their
place. “They didn’t try to stop you did they?”

“No, just watched.”

“I don’t suppose they’ll leave now that they know we’re alive?” Bella asked without much hope.
The expressions on the other’s faces just confirmed what she already knew. She sighed. “We need
someone to keep watch of their movements and to alert us if anyone approaches.”

“Thorin already has Kili and Fili up there keeping watch.” Balin informed her.

“Where is Thorin?”

“He went to the armory before first light.” Dwalin said.

“Huh.” This seemed strange but she decided not to question it for now. It was better than back to his
grandfather’s awful room. They had had quite a row the night before when Thorin had said they
would be sleeping there. It had ended with Thorin stomping off and Bella sleeping between her
brothers. “Well, I don’t know about you lot but I could do with some breakfast. Someone run and get
me fresh water while I see what I can throw together.” There was a general murmur of acceptance and Ori and Bifur headed off with several skins.

Bella quickly put together a thick porridge using the dried fruits from Lake Town. She quickly served up her dwarrows along with extra bowls for Fili, Kili, and Thorin.

“Want me to take those to the lads?” Bofur offered.

“No, I’ll do it. I’d like to talk to them anyhow. Eat your breakfast. If Thorin isn’t back by the time you’re done you can take him his.”

Bofur grunted in acknowledgement and Bella carefully made her way up to the battlements. It was a bit rough going with hands full. The stairs were just a touch too far apart for her hobbit-sized legs. It was only with a great amount of luck that she made it to the top with only one small spill. The boys were both at the railings, looking out with expressions far more serious than she was used to.

“I’ve brought breakfast.”

“Bella!” Kili bounded over, his smile back in place. Fili followed behind at a more sedate pace.

“You’re a jewel.” Fili said as he took his bowl and Bella had to suppress a wince.

She settled in beside the lads as they began to eat. “Any news from down below?” She asked.

“They know we’re here.” Kili answered between bites. “They watched us build the wall.”

Bella nodded. “Nori mentioned as much.”

“They’re preparing to march on us.”

“What?!” She looked at Fili with wide eyes. “Are you sure?”

Fili pointed to several places on the field below. “See, they’re preparing to move. They’re building a formation over there.”

“How do you know they’re not planning to leave?”

“They’re moving their healing tents, do you see? So they’re behind their lines.” Kili answered. “And that isn’t a marching formation- those are thinner and long. They’re preparing for a battle.”

Bella felt sick. “Why. Why would they do that?”

“Greed.” Fili said.

She looked out over the field of soldiers and was scared. What could they do against an army? Bella mentally went over their supplies, wondering how long they could withstand a siege. “How long until they get here?”

“It’ll take them some time still. That’s the thing with big armies- they’re slow. ‘S why Dain isn’t here yet.” Fili mulled it over for a moment. “Not before nightfall I’d say. We can most likely expect their herald first thing in the morning.”

Bella nodded. That gave them some time to plan then. “Thank you. You boys keep an eye out and let me know if anything changes. I’ll have someone relieve you at lunch.”

They both agreed and Kili gave her another hug before she went to rejoin the others, empty bowls in
hand. Thorin was waiting for her back at their camp. He was sitting near the fire, scowling into his own bowl of porridge.

“You’d best eat that before it turns to glue.”

“My jewel!” Thorin greeted her with a warm smile and it was like the fight the night before had never happened. Except that it had happened. Except that his eyes had a strange light to them, almost like fever. Except for he still wouldn’t call her by name. “I have a gift for you!”

“Oh?” She sat down beside him. “But you already gave me the Arkenstone.”

“You are my Mesmel. I would spend all of our days adorning you in precious gems and metals so that all may see your value to me. Your fingers shall drip rubies and pearls will hang from your neck. I shall make golden bangles for your ankles and beads for your hair and you shall sit beside me and shine like the Arkenstone- my perfect jewel forever.”

“How… nice.” That sounded perfectly horrid. Bella did not understand this change that had come over Thorin. Was this to be their life together? The King Under the Mountain and her, his adornment? A jewel to accompany the Arkenstone. It’s still better than being alone, a voice whispered across her mind.

She ran a nervous hand along her jaw and grimaced. In all the excitement she hadn’t given any thought to shaving. There was several days growth and it made a horrid rasping sound as she brushed against it. The feeling of another’s touch had her flinching away. Thorin didn’t seem to notice her discomfort and merely grabbed her chin to hold her still.

“So beautiful.” He breathed. His face held earnest wonder but his eyes continued to look wrong. It felt like he was looking past her instead of really seeing her and it was highly uncomfortable.

“You got me a gift?” Bella asked in a strained voice. She let out a sigh of relief when he released her.

“Yes. Come with me and I will show you.” She noticed absently as they left that Thorin had hardly touched his porridge.

He led her up through the mountain and Bella worried she knew where they were going. Sure enough he brought her to the royal wing. “Thorin.”

“I put your gift in our room where it would be safe.”

Safe from what? She wanted to ask. After all, only the company resided in the mountain. However, she was too perturbed by the thought of ‘our room’ to say anything.

The room was just as gold and hideous as she remembered. He brought her to a side table where waited the only non-gold item in the room. Curious despite herself she reached out to touch the strange shirt. “Mail?”

“It is mithril. It is stronger than steel and valued more than gold though it does not shine as bright. I would have you protected in nothing less.”

“It is beautiful.” She conceded. Even in a kingdom like Erebor there wasn’t more mithril than minor decorations done in strategic places. But what there was shone beautifully, like starlight, even covered in muck. The shirt in her hand was truly beautiful and most likely second in value only to the Arkenstone. She felt greatly humbled.

“Put it on. I want to see you in it.”
Bella took off the musty coat she’d received from Lake-Town and Thorin helped her pull it over her head. He smoothed the mail out more to touch Bella suspected with a blush than to lend any help. She let out a squeak when one hand found it’s way to her bum.

“E-excuse you.” She said but if she thought that would deter him she was wrong. Thorin grinned down at her and left his hand where it rested. Her blush heightened as Thorin’s eyes traced hungrily over her, lingering at where the collar of the mithril ran along her throat.

“Mesemel.”

As she looked at him, Thorin’s eyes seemed to clear some. His hands, both of them, moved to her waist. “The mithril becomes you though it could never come close to matching your worth. I value you above all things. Promise me, whatever may happen, that you will remain safe.”

“You know I can’t promise that. Not unless you can promise me the same.”

Thorin’s brow furrowed and for a moment he looked furious. It passed quickly but left behind that clouded look to his eyes again.

“I will protect you, don’t worry. No one will touch what is mine.”

Before she could respond Thorin was storming away, bellowing for his dwarrows. Bella did not immediately follow, her hand brushing again against her chin. For a moment she considered leaving it but only a moment and then she was off to find a razor, water, and some privacy.

The rest of the day was spent making battle plans and strategies. Bella had started with them, listening with growing unease to the talk of formations and weapons as if war was a forgone conclusion. She finally left when Thorin had given her a look of betrayal at her suggestion of settling with the other armies to avoid fighting.

Dori was the one on watch on the battlements. He said nothing, just sat beside her in silent support as she sat with her back against the wall. In this spot she could enjoy the sunshine without having to watch the approaching armies.

“They won’t even listen to my suggestions!” Bella finally burst out, voicing her anger and frustration. “They are determined to fight the men and elves!”

Dori was silent for a moment. “It was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do, letting my brothers come on this quest.” He said. “I was little more than a babe when Smaug came but I remember it vividly. Knowing what was waiting for us at the end of this quest, it was all I could do not to lock them safely away until they were over 200.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“You mean besides the fact it wouldn’t have done any good? If there’s anyone better than Nori at getting past locked doors, it’s Ori.” Dori sighed and leaned his head back against the wall. “Erebor is their home. They may not have been born here but they are of the line of Durin, albeit a distant branch, and it is their right to fight for their home. I could never take that from them.”

Bella mulled this over. “There is going to be a war.”

“Aye.”

“I would stop it if I could.”
“I know lass. We all know but it wouldn’t be right. They bring armies to our door and we can’t ignore that. We must fight for our home.”

“I’m scared. I don’t want anything to happen to any of you. I don’t- if something were to happen to any of you- I couldn’t-“

“Shhh, now.” Dori wrapped an arm around her and pulled Bella into a comforting embrace. “Have some faith. We dwarrow endure.”

Bella let out a small, wet laugh. She curled into his warmth and tried to settle with the idea of war.

Chapter End Notes

Khuzdul:
Nan’ith= Sister that is young/new
Mesemel= Jewel of all jewels
Mesem= Jewel
Repetitive Thorin is repetitive
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

More gold sickness and the confrontation with men and elves. It goes about as well as you’d expect.

Chapter Notes

New chapter!!! Hoorah!!

Unbeta’d as always so let me know of any grievous errors.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a good while later that Bofur and Bifur found them.

“Hey, what are you doin’ cuddlin’ up to our sister?” Bofur called at them with a smile.

“What?”

“Well, Bifur’s sister. My cousin. Assuming she accepts o’ course.”

Bifur stepped forward and held something out to Bella. She took it and found herself looking at a stone dwarf. It was like the wooden one he had carved for her at Beorn’s. The one that lay lost somewhere on Mirkwood’s floor. But if the wooden one had been beautiful this one was magnificent. It had gems and precious metals inlaid into it but sparingly and tastefully done in a way that enhanced he carving instead of distracting from it. And what a carving! The dwarf was so lifelike Bella almost expected it to begin moving on its own.

“Do you like it?”

Bella looked up to see both Bofur and Bifur looking at her with anxious, hopeful expressions.

“It ain’t so grand as that letter opener your brother’s gave you but Bifur’s folk were grand carvers. His ma’s kin are mostly responsible for those big guys at the gate. “Bofur continued before Bella could respond. He gestured with a careless hand toward the towering stone dwarrow that guarded the entrance to the mountain. ‘Big guys’ indeed. “That there is an abanu’uzraf, a… likeness or a stone image I suppose. Not really a word for it in common. They’re supposed to bring good luck and protection and the like. That one there is of Durin the First’s wife. Not only is she the mother of the Durin line, the story goes Durin met her during his wondering years in a far away land. Kinda like you and Thorin. She generally is associated with good health, happiness in the home, and wisdom.”

Bella waited patiently for Bofur to stop rambling, a fond smile on her face. It was nice to know she wasn’t the only one with that nervous habit. Bifur however was watching her and at Bella’s smile he positively beamed. As Bofur finally stopped for a breath he dived in and scooped her into a hug.

“Nadad.” She said, hugging Bifur hard.
“Nan’el. Mabarafûna.”

“So… you accept then?”

“Of course I do! As if there was any doubt!” Bella scolded happily as she let go of Bifur to hug Bofur. “Iraknadad!”

Bifur grunted something but all Bella could catch was ‘go’ and Thorin’s name. She would have to work doubly hard on her Khadzul.

“Aye, let’s go find the king and make it official.” With Bofur on one arm and Bifur on the other Bella bid good-bye to Dori and allowed herself to be led back into the mountain.

They found Bombur first and then Balin who greeted them with a smile and contract. “I finished it just this morning.” Bella exchanged a hug with her oldest brother and then they were off again.

Thorin was in the audience hall, looking at the broken throne of his grandfather. He didn’t seem to notice their presence until Bella touched his arm. “Mesmel.” He greeted with a smile. “What can I do for you?”

Bella gestured to the dwarrow behind her. Bifur stepped forward to make his request. She was surprised to see Thorin’s face darken as the other talked. “I would speak with my intended in private for a moment.”

Bella exchanged confused looks with the others but followed when Thorin pulled her away.

“Thorin, what’s going on? What’s wrong?”

“You don’t have to do this.”

“What?”

“Just because they ask does not mean you have to accept the ib-bassu barfith. It might have been appropriate at the beginning of our journey but you are a daughter of Fundin now and the future queen of Erebor. It wouldn’t do to have such lowly relations.”

“Lowly?” Bella repeated, hardly believing the words coming from Thorin. “And what exactly is ‘lowly’ about them? Their decision to follow you on this mad quest? Their loyalty and courage? How about all the times they helped save my life? Saved your life? How can you call them lowly?”

“It is true they are the best of dwarrows and will be suitably rewarded. But Mesem, they are commoners and not even particularly wealthy ones.”

“Were you not a blacksmith?”

“That was a long time ago! I am King Under the Mountain now. I am no longer that dwarf!”

“Yes.” Bella said, pulling away from where he still held her arm. Inside she could feel anger and sorrow burn in equal measure. “I am beginning to see that.” A tear slipped free and with effort Bella pulled herself together.

“Mesmel?” Thorin reached for her but she quickly stepped back.

“When you are ready I will be waiting with my family for you to perform the ib-bassu barfith.”

Bella did not look back as she walked away. She was too scared she’d see only a stranger.
Despite Bella’s fears, Thorin did perform the ceremony. He was not as warm and joyful as he had been at Beorn’s but he did not make his disapproval known for which Bella was thankful. After the ceremony was completed there were lots of cheering and congratulations. The cheering renewed when it was discovered that Bombur had somehow managed to make a cake for the occasion.

“Only the best for my family.” He’d told her with a wink.

Bella did her best to keep her distance from Thorin and enjoy the celebration. As before the other dwarrow seemed to be aware of her discomfort and she was never without at least one brother or cousin by her side. Not that Thorin seemed especially interested in being near her. He kept mostly to himself and seemed subdued and introspective. Bella hoped this was a sign that he was finally realizing something was wrong. That he knew he had gone too far. Bella could only pray things would get better because she wasn’t sure she could share a life with the dwarf Thorin had become.

Later Bella would reflect how fortuitous it was they’d been able to have that celebration. It was the last moment of joy for many days to come. That next morning the combined armies of men and elves arrived at their gate.

The next morning they were all pulled from their breakfast by a sober Nori. “They’re here,” was all he said but it was enough to get everyone scrambling to the gate.

Bella had seen the armies in the previous days. Somehow, seeing them now organized and in battle formations- there seemed to be so many more. So many soldiers at their door, prepared for war. Bella sent up a desperate thought to Dain and his army and what could possibly be taking so long.

When the army noticed them up above the gate a small contingent came forward. Bella recognized both the Master of Lake-Town and the elven king. Nothing good could come from this, she was sure. Where is Gandalf when you need him? She thought furiously.

“Hail Thorin, King Under the Mountain! It does us glad to see you and your dwarves alive and well.” The Master called out.

“Somehow I very much doubt that.” Thorin muttered- not at all quietly. “Who are you to march upon our gates as though for war?” Some of the men shifted uncomfortably. Bella noticed Thranduil didn’t as much as blink.

Despite Thorin’s obvious hostility the Master rallied quickly. “We rejoice to find you and yours alive and well when we expected to find none living. But why do you hole yourself away like a robber in his hold? Are we not allies? We would speak with you.”

“What is it you would speak of?”

“We have amongst us, those that slayed the dragon and delivered the treasure to you. Is that of no importance to you? Moreover, many of Esgaroth residents are descendants of the people of Dale whose heirlooms and wealth are mixed in with yours. Is this not something to speak about? Also, many of our men were injured fighting the dragon you awakened. Surely we are owed some recompense?”

“I will not speak with thieves and vultures! You brought the dragon upon yourselves!” Thorin roared. “Perhaps if you had not been so quick to raid our tombs and our dead your men would live still! You have the dragon’s breast plate, embedded with the treasure of my people. Take it and be satisfied.”

“Is this how you would speak to your friends?!” The Master’s face had turned red and angry.
Bella had had enough. “What friends are these who would come with a smile and an army? We have not had time to lay our dead to rest and say our rites and you are demanding entry and payment? Leave! Go home and take the elves with you and later, when we have fulfilled our duty to our kin we may discuss the matter of the wealth of Dale.”

Her words were met with silence on all sides and for a moment Bella worried she had spoken out of turn. She glanced to the side at Thorin but he was still glaring darkly at the armies. Balin, however, caught her eye and gave a small, proud smile. Biting back a sigh of relief she turned back to the ground below to find Thranduil looking up at her. Bella could almost feel that everything was about to go wrong.

“Who are you, Halfling, to speak for a king?” he asked, face and voice showing no emotion.

Bella couldn’t help the little hurt noise she made. Everything was silent for a second and then Thorin exploded.

“You DARE!” He raged, even as he snatched Kili’s bow and quiver. “How dare you speak such to my jewel!” Before any could stop him - not that any of the dwarrows looked anxious to do so - he fired an arrow at the Elvan King.

“Thorin!” Bella squeaked, not sure if she was relieved or disappointed when the arrow missed it’s mark. She latched on to his arm as he went to draw another, apparently oblivious to the large number of archers now trained on him. “Thorin stop! You can’t just shoot arrows at people!”

“He called you a Halfling!” Thorin hissed.

Bella flinched a little at that word but she held her ground. “That is hardly worth starting a war over.”

With a growl Thorin grabbed her arm and dragged her away from the wall and the other dwarrow. “They already started the war by marching to our door! Or have you missed the army out there?”

“Of course I haven’t but that does not mean you should exasperate the situation. Especially over such a little thing.”

“Little- Little!” He roared. “How can you say such a thing? He has offered you the greatest insult of your people!”

“He doesn’t know that!” Bella argued. “You told me yourself that it is a common name used for hobbits.”

“That is hardly relevant. It is about honor.”

“Who’s honor? Yours or mine?”

“What does it matter? When he insults you he insults me!”

“Yours then.” Bella said, feeling disappointment seep through her like a poison. “You are not the dwarf I knew. I don’t know who you are anymore.” As she spoke she reached for her pocket and the trinket that resided there. Bella pulled out the Arkenstone and thrust it into Thorin’s surprised hands. “If this is the king you will be I no longer wish to be your queen.”

Before Thorin could speak or even move she shoved her ring onto her finger and disappeared from sight.

“Bella.” He called after her. “Bella!”
She’d had no destination in mind when she’d ran off. For a long while Bella wondered aimlessly-only taking a care to avoid the places she knew the dwarrows frequented. Eventually she settled in a long, narrow room covered in wondrous murals. She didn’t know what stories were depicted, Thorin hadn’t told her, but she did know they were from the first settling of Erebor. *I know how much that collection of pearls is worth though,* she thought bitterly as she ran her eyes along the intricate carvings.

It was there Balin found her, head tucked into her knees, as she debated with herself if she had made the right choice. With a small groan he lowered himself to sit beside her, a warm, comforting presence and waited for her to speak.

“I think I made a mistake.” Bella finally confessed. “I gave Thorin back the Arkenstone and told him I didn’t want to be his queen. What if I’ve given up my only chance of happiness?”

“Oh, *nan’ith.*” Balin wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her to rest against his side. “I cannot tell you if you are making a mistake or not, only you can decide that. What I will say is that Thorin is not himself and even if he was amad always said that if you mined for happiness in someone else, you were doomed to only ever find pyrite.”

“I don’t’ know what that means.” Bella admitted.

Balin chuckled softly. “What have we told you of Durin the Deathless?”

“He’s the first king of the Longbeards isn’t he?”

“Aye, one of the Seven Fathers first crafted by Mahal and breathed life into by Ilúvatar. He is the father of our line and, relevant to this conversation, the only one to awaken alone. Mahal created the other six fathers with partners for when they awoke. Some take this as assign that we are meant to search for our ones- the other half of our soul- but most agree that is showed we are whole just as Mahal made us. Most of our kind never marry and there is no shame in it. A loved one can complement us and bring joy to our lives but we are already complete.”

Bella mulled these words over. Hobbits didn’t have ones in the Shire or passionate love affairs but being married wasn’t seen so much as a choice but a necessity. Certainly bachelors past a certain age and spinsters were viewed with distrust and even contempt. She thought of her life there and the 30 years she’d spent as a Halfling amongst her people. “You know.” She said, haltingly at first but with growing confidence. “It may take some getting used to but I think I might prefer the dwarven way of thinking.”

“Hardly a surprise as you are a dwarf now.”

“I suppose I am at that.”

“And not just any dwarf, *nan’ith,* but uzbadhalkuna which means you can speak with the men and elves’ delegation tomorrow.”

“What?!” Bella squeaked. “I can’t do that!”

“Of course you can.” Balin said with forced cheer. “Thorin has locked himself away in the throne room and refuses to come out so you must. Besides I’m sure you’ll do a better job than he did today. Just don’t shoot any arrows and it will be well.”

“No. No, no, no, no, no. Did you forget I returned the Arkenstone? It wouldn’t’ be right!”

“Bella. Even before your courtship began you were named uzbadhalkuna by Thorin himself and that
has never been retracted. You have every right to negotiate on our behalf. And you won’t be alone. Fili and I will be at your side. Dwalin and Bifur too and Kili most like. Mahal forbid he gets excluded from anything.”

“You promise? You promise you’ll all be with me?”

“Nothing could keep us away.” Balin sighed and looked every one of his years. “We are without our king right now and until he returns we need you to be strong once more.”

“Do you think he will?” Bella asked in a small voice. She hardly hared to hope. “Do you think Thorin will come back to us?”

I have to.” Balin answered honestly.

They sat in silence for a while, both lost in their own thoughts of Thorin. Finally Bella sighed and shook herself out of her musings. “Come on nadad, we have some planning to do.”

The next morning Bella woke feeling dread and a queer anticipation. Who would have imagined little Bella Baggins playing host to kings and leaders. She stopped by the Throne room on the way to the battlements. The thick doors were shut but Bella thought she could hear Thorin inside moving about. For a moment she started at the ornate carvings, debating with herself but in the end she just walked away.

Most of the dwarrow where already gathered when Bella arrived. Nori whistled when he caught sight of her. “You look like a right proper dwarrowdam.” He complimented.

Bella felt her ears heat up. She thought she looked quite silly but Balin had convinced her to braid her hair beneath her chin. “Some of our women fold do this,” he explained. “Especially those with sparser hair on their chins. The men out there might not appreciate it but you’re dwarven royalty of the line of Durin and I’ll not have you going out to parley looking anything less.” In addition to the fake beard Bella wore several beads in her hair, the mithril shirt Thorin had given her, and sting at her side. She had put her foot down at the necklace dripping with rubies and the crown Balin had tried to place on her head.

"Is everything ready?" She asked.

"Aye." Bofur answered. "Bombur's just finishing up now."

"Right. Good." She scratched nervously at her chin under the fake beard. "Good. And the men and elves?"

"They've been milling about some but no movement towards us. Kili's keeping an eye on their camps."

"Good. I'm going to check on Bombur and then we'll set the kettle on to parley."

Chapter End Notes

Translations
Abanu'uzraf= stone of greater/greatest likeness (*model). Like an idol.
Nadad= brother
Nun'el= sister of all sisters
Mabarafûna= she who is made family
Iraknadad= Cousin (male)
Mesmel= jewel of all jewels
Ib-bassu barfith= the name I use for dwarf adoptions. Literally 'the bond of families that are new/young/fresh'
Nan'ith= sister that is new/young/fresh. Little sister.
Uzbadhalkuna= The king’s equal (female)
The delegation of men and elves approached the mountain that morning to find themselves before a strange sight. A table large (enough for a half dozen men to sit comfortably) and round was set before the mountain gates. On it were cakes and small sandwiches and a large kettle steaming with tea. Seated directly facing them was the strange Halfling from the day before daintily sipping from a large mug she had a dwarf sitting on either side and another three standing behind with visible weapons and fierce scowls.

"What is this then?" The Master of Lake-Town asked.

"You wished to parley sir, we are here to parley." Bella answered calmly.

"Do the dwarves mean to make a mockery of us?"

"We would not dare presume. I am Bella Baggins daughter of Fundin and Kirur, named makhazdûna and uzbadhalkuna by Thorin son of Thrain son of Thror, King Under the Mountain. I shall be speaking for the king and mountain."

"And why does the king not speak with us himself?" The Master sneered. "He insults us by sending out a halfling in his place?"

All the dwarrows bristled at the insult and Bifur called the man a name that would have made Bella blush in other circumstances. Today however she kept her calm and merely raised a hand to settle her dwarrows. "I would have you know good sir, that to my people 'halfling' s the gravest of insults. I shall allow it to slide this one time because of your ignorance but should I hear it again, that person declares themselves my enemy." She took a sip of tea and scratched at her chin. "As to your complaint; I am uzbadhalkuna the King's Equal and if you will not speak with me then you will speak with no one."

"Interesting." The Elven King cut in, even as the Master looked to speak again. "Very interesting. I will parley with you." With those words he came and sat across from Bella. The Master sputtered some but also came and sat at the table with another, grim-faced man. The rest of their delegation stayed behind.

"Wonderful. Now we can get started." Bella stood to serve tea, careful not to let her hands shake. "I may be a dwarf now but I was raised hobbit and in the Shire nothing important is discussed without tea. I understand this may be a bit unconventional to you big folk but I do hope you'll indulge me. Unfortunately dwarrow know nothing about proper tea cups." She said with a smile as she passed a mug to the grim man. Once everyone else had been served she topped off her own mug and loaded her plate with two of everything, quickly eating a small cake before settling down to business. "There. Now that we're all fortified with necessities we may begin."
"Is this a joke?" The Master asked. He had not touched his tea nor any of the food on offer.

"Oh no. Hobbits never joke about tea."

Bella thought she saw the Elf King hide an amused look behind his mug and the grim man was on his third sandwich. She felt quite satisfied in herself ad her dwarrows. Not bad at all for their first time hosting together, especially considering the circumstances. "Right. I believe I have introduced myself to every one's satisfaction. With me I have Prince Fili, heir to the throne and my brother Balin son of Fundin, head advisor to the king." Bella saw the Master open his mouth, most likely to say something impertinent again but she did not give him the chance. "I am familiar with the Master of Lake-Town from our stay but who else am I speaking with today?"

"I am Thranduil, king of Greenwood and all that lies within, though I am sure you were already aware."

Bella gave a polite nod but kept her mouth shut. It was too tempting to comment upon the spiders she'd encountered in his woods. She doubted he wanted to take credit for them. Idly she scratched at her chin again. Here fake beard was really quite itchy.

"This is Bard of the Lake-Town guard." The Master introduced the grim-faced man. "He shot the dragon."

Bella raised an eyebrow at the almost dismissive way the Master talked but she did not let her smile slip. "Impressive. You have the gratitude of Erebor, Bard Dragonslayer. I myself spoke with Smaug so I am aware of what a feat that was." All three looked at her with various levels of disbelief. Thranduil, of course, was the first to recover.

"Now that introductions have been made, might we get down to business?"

"Yes, of course." Bella conceded gracefully. "After all we are here to parley, not gossip like old biddies. Now, let me see that I understand the situation correctly. You've brought your armies to the mountain, marching against a company of fourteen, rouse the wrath of the dragon- whom you do at least manage to kill- and then come to us demanding payment that you had initially planned to steal- presumably from amongst our corpses- for damages that you brought down upon yourselves. Am I missing anything?"

Thranduil glared down at her, the Master sputtered angrily, and Bard continued to look grim. Bella smiled. "Good. I'm glad we are all on the same page."

Talks did not improve after that. Not that Bella had really expected them to. She had hoped to shame them into leaving with their own behavior but even she could admit it had been a long shot. Now her main goal was simply to keep her family safe and stall until Dain and his army arrived. She didn’t want war but there was no way she would allow these big folk to bully their way into the treasury. Hopefully Dain was bringing a lot of dwarrow along to fight the dragon.

Finally, after hours of talking in circles and thinly veiled insults Bella needed a break. “Gentlemen.” She called to get everyone’s attention. “I cannot speak for you but I know I have been given much to think on and discuss with my companions. I propose we retire for lunch and return here in, let’s say, two hours’ time?"

It was agreed and with a great sense of relief Bella allowed Fili to escort her back into the mountain. Politics were not for the faint of heart. The combined conceit and rude behavior of Thranduil and the Master was enough to almost make Bella nostalgic for Lobelia’s company.
“How did it go?” Ori asked. Bella just made a face and went in search of some food.

“They want a 12th of the treasure!” She heard Fili answer to much outcry from the others.

“How dare they ask such a thing?” Gloin said, a hand reaching for his axe. Where once such a gesture would have made her nervous now Bella felt amused at the idea of Gloin challenging the combined armies of men and elves to battle. It was a blessing there were some level headed dwarrow to stop him should he try.

“They want it for killing the dragon.” Dwalin answered with a deep scowl. “’S not like we asked for their help.”

“It was a benefit to us and they did lose several of their people.” Balin pointed out.

“And whose fault was that? They brought the dragon down on themselves!” Kili cried out. “Who’s side are you on (old man)?”

“I’m on the same side as you. I just possess the capability of seeing more than one point of view unlike many I could name.”

Balin’s words generated a large outcry and Bella watched from a safe distance as the dwarrows detedriorated into a fight.

“I’ve brought you some soup.” Bombur offered, appearing at her side.

“Thank you! You are a treasure, cousin.”

Bombur blushed and hummed at the compliment.

“Tell me, has Thorin come out of the throne room at all?”

“’Fraid not. He’s gotten awfully quiet the past hour or so. I was just thinkin’ to go check when you lot came back. Thought maybe he might appreciate some of those cakes we made for the parley.”

“That’s a grand idea. If you put a tray together I’ll take it to him.”

“Oh, um, well.” Bombur looked slightly nervous. “You sure that’s a good idea? I mean with you… well…”

“You’re very sweet, Bombur. I’m sure it’ll be fine. Besides, he deserves to be updated on how the talks have gone.” In truth she wasn’t sure at all. That didn’t stop her from desperately wanting to see Thorin. Confound her heart.

Bella thought she heard Bombur murmur about deserving a ‘swift kick up the jacksies’ but chose to ignore it. “Well, if you’re sure irakana it won’t take but a minute to put something together.”

She thanked him and then worked on finishing her soup before he got back. When Bombur returned it was to the sight of her tugging on her braids with a frustrated look. “Don’t do that, you’ll ruin them.” He scolded.

“If I could I would just take the blasted things out.” Bella sighed. “These braids are irritating my skin horribly. I might as well grow my own beard if it’s going to be this uncomfortable.”

“Perhaps you should.” Bombur agreed but thankfully said no more on the topic and Bella pushed it from her mind. Really, there were much more important matters to worry about than her facial hair.
“Oh, and if you could start on the special tea for the next parley session that would be great.” Bombur gave her a wink and a bow before leaving.

The throne room doors were closed just as they had been that morning. Listening carefully she couldn’t hear any of the shuffling or muttering from earlier. Feeling more than a bit nervous she knocked.

“Thorin?” She called softly when she got no response. Still silence met her. “Thorin, I’ve brought food.”

When Bella still heard nothing she began to worry. “I’m coming in,” she warned.

She didn’t see Thorin right away. The room was well lit. Like the rest of the mountain it used a combination of glowing rocks and clever mirrors to provide light. Instead, at first glance the room appeared empty. “Thorin?” A slight shuffle brought Bella’s attention to the throne. He was not sitting on the throne as she might have expected but on the ground, his back resting against the far armrest. All she could see of him was the top of his head.

On quiet feet she crept forward and around until she could look at his profile. He had removed the ornate armour and dusty furs of the day before. His grandfather’s crown was between his outstretched feet.

“I have never been so conflicted.” Thorin finally spoke. His voice was little more than a rasp. “Always I have known what to do; where my duty lay.”

Thorin looked up at her and it was like her first glimpse of him in Thranduil’s dungeon again. He was dishevelled and looked worn and tired. His eyes were fever bright and pained with dark bags beneath and his shoulders were slumped as though with the weight of the world. To Bella he looked ill and defeated- so different from the proud and angry king of yesterday. “I have won back my kingdom but my enemy sits on my front step and I do not know what to do.”

“They’re not your enemy.” Bella tried to soothe.

“THEY MARCH UPON MY HOME AND INSULT THE WOMAN I LOVE!” He roared, lunging to his feel. Bella was so started she dropped the tray in her hands. It landed with a great clatter. One of the small cakes rolled to a stop at Thorin’s feet. The noise snapped Thorin from his anger. His entire body seemed to deflate and he rubbed a tired hand across his face. Despite herself, Bella could feel her heart go out to him. “I just want to hold you close and keep you safe but you will not let me.”

“You want to set me up on your throne like a second Arkenstone to show off as you please. I can’t be that for you. I am alive, not a piece of treasure.”

“Of course you are alive but you are still my treasure. Mine to protect.”

“You would start a war and get everyone killed and it would not be for me. It would be for your pride! I am just another pretty stone for your collection. A mesem.”

Thorin looked like he had been slapped. “No.” He denied. “Never just a stone. Never just that.”

“That is how you have treated me. It is all I feel I am in your eyes. And the truth is, it is almost enough. A pretty stone is better than a halfling but you promised me so much more once. You promised me love.”

“Oh Bella.” Thorin’s voice broke and he looked broken with it. “What have I done?”
“Been a right idiot, that’s what.”

“Aye, that is the least of my sins. Tell me Bella, can I fix this?” Slowly, almost hesitantly he reached out for her.

Not fully convinced of the wisdom of her actions she grabbed his hand in both of hers and brought it to her cheek. Her braids were in the way of feeling his calloused palm but his heat sunk through to her skin. “It won’t be easy Thorin Oakenshield but as my dad said, only weeds come up easy.”

Thorin gave her a small smile, hopeful and more than a little confused but his eyes were clear and he was calling her by name. “I don’t know what that means.” He admitted.

All of a sudden Bella felt like she could breathe again after holding her breath for too long. Relief rushed through her, making her feel giddy. She giggled. “It means we have work to do. First and foremost is getting you fed and cleaned up. Then you can join me talking with the men and elves.”

“You are talking to the armies?” Thorin asked, his frown returning.

“Someone has to.” Bella said as evenly as possible, praying she hadn’t just undone everything. “How else can we stall until Dain’s army gets here?”

Thorin stared at her for a long moment before letting out a deep breath. “How indeed. Forgive me for my lack of faith. You are a wonder, Bella.”

She smiled shyly and was just about to suggest they find some new food when there was a knock on the door. “Cousin?” Bombur’s head appeared in the doorway. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine.” She answered, feeling the truth of those words start to sink in. “Just fine. We’ll be needing some more food though. I’m afraid I dropped the tray.”

Bombur frowned at the mess. “I suppose I can take a few things from the tray going out. Not like those _uthrab_ will miss them after they drink the tea, eh?” At the mention of the tea, Bombur winked yet again, as he had been doing every time it was brought up. Dwarrow really had no understanding of subtlety at all.

“Tea?” Thorin asked, looking between the two.

“Oh, aye, I suppose you wouldn’t know on account of being all,” here Bombur made some vague gesture that Bella supposed was to represent Thorin’s madness. “And, well, Bella here is having us brew her special Hobbit tea to poison the men and elves out there.”

“What?!” Bella fidgeted under Thorin’s incredulous stare. “It- it’s just a little poisonous. It won’t kill anyone! Just… just make them a bit sick. Just to give us more time.” She looked up at Thorin with earnest eyes. “I told you I would poison them before I allowed them into our home! And talks have not gone well. Not at all. Even Balin is ready to poison the lot and I’m worried we’re running out of time-”

“Shhh, Bella. Peace.” Thorin soothed, stilling her hands with his own. He looked down on her with a small amused smile. “What did we ever do to deserve you?”

“You gave me a home and a family.” She answered honestly.

“Yet in this we are the richer. I am just sorry I have left you alone during this time.”
“Thorin Oakenshield, you have been a right beast but if you think I’ve been alone you are quite mistaken. Balin and Fili have been at my side during the talks while Dwalin, Bifur, and Kili have stood at my back and I have had the support of all the Company.”

“Aye! We’d not abandon Bella!” Bombur added, still in the doorway.

“I am glad to hear it.” Thorin said. He smiled still but the expression was troubled with guilt. Bella imagined it would be for some time and while Hobbits were not ones to hold grudges she was not sure that was a bad thing. It didn’t do for one to forget their mistakes too soon.

Bella left Thorin in Bombur’s care and went to make sure everything was in place for the next round of talks. The tea and food was ready to be taken out and it seemed her dwarrow had settled their earlier argument. No one was sporting black eyes or bloody noses so it couldn't have gotten too heated.

“How’s Thorin, Little Sis?” Dwalin asked when he noticed her.

Bella couldn’t hold back her grin. “Better. Much better. He’ll be joining us when we return to parley.”

“You sure that’s a good idea?” Fili asked. Several of the other dwarrow exchanged worried glances. “He did shoot an arrow last time. Not that I disagree with his reasons.”

“He really is better.” Bella promised. “I wouldn't have him join us otherwise. The whole point is to avoid fighting until Dain arrives.”

Most of the Company seemed reassured but Fili still looked worried. “He is your king. You will have to have faith in him and in me.”

“You’re right.”

“She usually is.” Thorin said as he walked into the room. He was dressed well. His clothing was less rich than the day before yet he still looked every inch the king with his Durin blues and well grafted armour. His brow was clear of a crown but his braids had been redone with added beads that shone bright in his hair. This was the king she had always imagined. This was the dwarf she wanted to stand beside.

“My kin.” Thorin offered the assembled dwarrow a deep bow. Bella didn’t fully understand the significance but she recognized the honor being bestowed. “Loyalty, honor, and a willing heart. That is all I asked for in those who would follow me. You have given me all that and much more beside. There has never been another in all Arda who has been as blessed in their companions. You are all kin to me and I treasure you as Mithril. Thank you from the deepest mine of my heart.”

The dwarrow all smiled, obviously pleased with the speech.

“Yep, he’s better all right.” Dwalin interrupted with a roll of his eyes. “Always did have to say 10 words where one would suffice.”

The Company laughed and any residual tension that might have remained dissipated. Thorin went around accepting back-slaps and talking to his dwarrow individually. It was a renewed and happier group that returned outside for the talks. Thorin and Bella led the group, Bella insisting on carrying the tea tray herself.

The men and Elf king were already waiting when the dwarf contingent arrived. They were not alone. Standing with them was a familiar grey figure. “Gandalf!” Bella cried, dropping the tray in her
hands. Poisoning the men and elves was one thing but she would not risk poisoning the wizard.

“Bella Baggins, you are a sight for sore eyes,” Gandalf greeted warmly. “But your tea, my dear. It has been too long since I’ve had the chance to indulge in a hobbit’s hospitality.”

“Yes, it really is too bad.” She murmured, hoping her blush would go unnoticed. She primly sidestepped the growing puddle. “Perhaps if wizards called ahead instead of surprising us poor creatures you would be able to indulge more often.”

Gandalf just grinned at her scolding. It was quickly replaced with a frown as his eyes landed on the dwarf beside her. “Thorin Oakenshield. I was under the impression you would not be joining these talks.”

“I had not planned to. There is much to do in the mountain. My people still need proper burials! But at the request of my uzbadhalkuna I am here,” Gandalf ran an assessing eye over Thorin but the dwarf did not back down. “I would prefer we get started so that I may sooner get back to laying to rest our fallen and preparing our home for our people to return to.”

“We would also like to go home and bury our dead.” The Master spoke up. “If you would but pay us what we are owed this could all be over.”

“We owe you nothing!” Thorin growled.

“We killed your dragon for you!”

Thorin opened his mouth to retort but was cut off by Gandalf. “Enough of that! I’ve come with far more important news than your petty squabbles.”

“And what is this news wizard?” Thranduil asked, looking rather skeptical.

“Orcs.”

It was a bit impressive how quickly everyone began working together once the threat of orcs had been made. Only the master had resisted. “Why should we fight for you again when you haven’t paid us for the first time? It’s not like we’re in danger. Lake-Town can just draw up our bridges and wait for the trouble to pass.”

“You are a fool if you think that will keep you safe.” Gandalf said with a dark look. “And what shall the men do when the orc settle in as your neighbors? For it shall take everyone available to defeat the hoard that is coming.”

The Master sputtered but before he could say anything Bard spoke for the first time. “Long have I served you on your guard but I am the heir of Girion, Lord of Dale and it is me the men follow and they will go where I command. We will fight with our allies.”

This had the Master in a rage and yelling accusations at Bard but for the most part he was ignored. With a push from Bella, Thorin stepped forward. “Your aid is most welcome, Bard heir of Girion. It has been many years now but I knew Girion. He was a good man and I see much of his make in you.”

“Thank you.” Bard nodded in acceptance of the compliment. Then a small, sly smile appeared on his grim face. “I am please to say you improve with further acquaintance.”

Bella couldn’t stop the giggle that escaped. Thorin frowned at her but didn’t comment. “Come, let us sit. It appears we have war plans to make.”
Planning took the rest of the day and well into the night. As darkness began to fall Thorin ordered for the dwarrow to bring torches and at one point Bombur and Bofur came out with food and a weak ale. Bella understood very little of it all but she did her best to pay attention and provide input where she could. Most of her time, though, was spend playing peacekeeper between the three fractions. It kept her on her toes having to redirect conversation or sooth over words and she thought she might be developing a bruise from elbowing Thorin so often. Gandalf of course was no help at all just sitting there smoking and watching it all. And then on top of it all Bella’s infernal braid beard was itching like crazy. She was constantly trying to scratch and rub at her chin without anyone noticing.

It took far longer than Bella would have liked but eventually they had a plan and a back up plan and even a few contingency plans. They had plans prepared for if Durin’s army arrived before the arcs or during the battle or not at all. It seemed a bit excessive to Bella until she remembered the hoard of foul creatures marching towards them being led by the defiler himself. And, oh, how Thorin’s face had tightened with anger and grief at that bit of news. If Bella’s legs had been longer she would have given Gandalf a good kick to the shins for that.

The rest of the Company was still up when they returned. Thorin shared with them the key points of their plans, promising more details in the morning. That night the dwarrow didn’t break out into family groups as they usually did but slept in one large pile. Bella felt rather warm and squished in the middle but she couldn’t bring herself to complain.

Chapter End Notes

Translations
makhazdûna- she who is dwarfed
uzbadhalkuna- King's equal
irakana- female cousin
mesem- jewel
uthrrrab- thieves
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

The battle and reconciliation.

Chapter Notes

All I have to say is that if you didn’t give up on this story I am so very grateful and awed.

Am I happy with this chapter? Not terribly but really, at this point I just want to post something.

As always, everything is unbeta'd.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As soon as the sky was light enough everyone was running around and putting plans into place. Several of Bard’s men went to raise Lake-Town’s bridges, keeping their women and children as safe as possible in the upcoming battle. “You should go with them.” Thorin had told Bella.” They will shelter you from the storm that is coming.”

Dwarrow may be made of stone but they still bruised beneath the strength of hobbit feet.

“That’s the last I’ll be hearing of any such nonsense, thank you very much.” Bella huffed while Thorin nursed his wounded leg. “Now stop being ridiculous- I didn’t even kick you that hard- and go let Dori help you finish getting ready.” The silver-haired dwarf who had been waiting patiently a respectful distance rushed forward and ushered Thorin away.

“We will speak again before the battle.” Thorin had yelled back, trying to look around Dori who was firmly pushing him along.

With the king in capable hands, Bella went to find Dwalin and see what armour he had managed to scrounge for her. He was in the room they’d made camp in with the rest of her family. Most of them were already dressed for battle. She walked up to where Dwalin and Bifur were having a deep discussion over a rather large pile of armour.

“You won’t make me wear all that will you? I won’t be able to move.”

“I’m tempted to since you are foolish enough to go out on that battlefield.”

“As foolish as you.” Bella retorted.

“I’m trained for this.”

Bella just crossed her arms. She had already had this discussion with Dwalin. And with Thorin and Dori and Bombur and even Gandalf. “If my family is fighting then I will be at their side. I signed a
Dwalin opened his mouth to argue further but Bifur elbowed him hard in the side and approached Bella with a smile and a breast plate. He held it up to her body. “Zanid,” he muttered before tossing it aside. This process was repeated several times, with input from the others, before they settled on one that mostly fit. She could already tell it was going to chafe at the sensitive flesh of her underarms but she didn’t dare complain. She didn’t want to give them a reason to stop her. Not that they could but she didn’t want to give them a chance to try.

The next quarter of an hour was spent doing the same with vambraces and leg guards and a helmet until they declared her ready. Underneath it all she wore her mithril shirt. Together it all weighed a ton and felt unwieldy to move in. “I’m going to be useless on the battlefield.” She grumbled.

“We don’t need you to be useful.” Bofur said. “We need you to be safe.”

Bella scowled at him and contemplated stabbing him with one of her small blades. Instead she spent the time fussing over the others as they geared up and making sure everything she needed was in easy reach. All of her razors and daggers were tucked safely away- the only one left out was the one she’d used to shave that day. It was near dull anyway; she had the razor burn to show for it. Bella also had her Sting strapped to her hip, her magic ring, a handkerchief, and a flask of the ‘special’ tea. It was doubtful she’d have opportunity to offer someone a drink on the field but she would not be going to battle anything less than fully prepared.

Far too soon for Bella it was time to take their places upon the field. “You will stay with me.” Thorin told her as the Company marched out. “If you must go to battle you will stay where I can protect you and keep you safe.” Bella huffed but didn’t argue. She hardly wanted him distracted on the battlefield but it was comforting knowing he’d be keeping an eye on her. As much as she had proven herself over their journey she was well aware of her deficiencies as a fighter.

The waiting was the worst part. It was terrible. It was unnaturally still and quiet. No talking or jokes being shared. The world seemed to be holding its breath, waiting with her. It unnerved Bella. The moment seemed like forever yet no time at all before the hoard was upon them.

The goblins hit the line of dwarrow and men like a wave hitting rock. The force of it almost threw Bella back if it weren’t for Thorin and Dwalin in front splitting the tide, her cousins beside her and Bifur behind supporting her. She hacked and slashed at any dark limb that came near her. Being so small she was at risk of being trampled but she used her small stature to target the enemies’ legs and make her dwarrows’ jobs easier. Bella was determined to be an asset in any way possible.

It was horrifying business but the one blessing Bella would reflect later is that war did not leave much time for thinking. And it became even more chaotic when Dain’s army arrived. It was all action and hacking and moving and dodging. The mind had no place on the battlefield. Well, perhaps some place, Bella owned when during a lull in the fighting she realized she had somehow become separated from her family.

“I was in the middle!” Bella huffed. All around her people were fighting and dying and blocking sight of anyone she knew. She wasn’t sure what to do. She looked to each side desperate for the sight of anything familiar. They hadn’t made a contingency for Bella being on her own. Unfortunately the orcs weren’t standing back and waiting for her to find and rejoin her family. Bella hacked as best she could but without the knowledge of her dwarrows surrounding her she couldn’t focus as she had before. Her swings were more frantic and she missed more often than she hit.
Bella never saw the large club that caught her side hard enough to lift her off the ground and throw her several feet. There was just an explosion of pain and when she landed she laid there unmoving and unaware.

Eyes opened to blue sky and a lethargic feeling. Her thoughts were strangely liquid and slipped through the fingers of her mind whenever she tried to concentrate. It wasn’t until she attempted to move and flames of pain flicked across her whole body that she began to understand the situation. Slowly, as the pain receded to a banked fire sounds began to return. Mostly cries and wails but also deeper groans and sharp shrieks of pain. The blue sky above her was blemished with a black dot wheeling through it. A carrion bird.

Bella tried to move again but she was becoming aware of her breath coming in laboured and painful and she wasn’t getting enough air. Not enough air. She couldn’t breathe. Panic gripped her and her body tried to get more oxygen but she couldn’t breath. Could breathe and she was scared and confused and everything went black.

When Bella opened her eyes again there was no blue sky above her but darkness and panic gripped her. She struggled to sit up, the adrenaline helping to subdue the pain or at least to help her forget it for a moment. Her breathing was constricted and came in sharp gasps that didn’t provide enough air. When hands grabbed at her shoulders she fought and hissed like a wildcat.

“Peace Little Sister, peace.” The words meant nothing other at first but she knew the voice instinctively. She relaxed into Dwalin’s hold knowing she was safe. “That’s it Little Sister. Lay back down. You’re not doing your ribs any favors being up like that.”

‘Thorin,’ she tried to say. ‘My family. How is everyone else?’ But all that came out was a croak.

“Shhh, don’t try to speak.” Dwalin soothed. “Your only job is to heal right now. ‘Sides, I can guess well enough what you want.”

Dwalin helped her drink some water and tucked her more firmly under the covers before settling back into his seat and finally, finally, telling her what she wanted to know. “Rest of the company is alive. We all made it through the battle whole- or at least mostly whole. Bombur lost a finger. Obviously some bumps and bruises. The lads have got a couple of nasty knife wounds and there’s a few broken bones spread out amongst us but you’re the worst of the lot.” Here her brother fixed her with a fierce glare. “Something I’m quite upset with you ‘bout. You were supposed to stay with us.”

“I tried!” Bella would have yelled back if she could have gotten enough air. As it was her words came out as little more than a hoarse whisper.

Dwalin looked unimpressed. “I’m gonna lock you away where you can’t get into any more trouble if Thorin doesn’t do it first.”

“Where?”

“He’s in his own bed healing. He’s fine!” Dwalin was quick to reassure as Bella started to panic again. “He’ll be just fine. Just a thigh wound that needs to close before he’s allowed back on his feet.”

Bella huffed in annoyance- of course Thorin got himself hurt- but honestly it was all so much better than she could have hoped for. The Valor themselves must be watching over her dwarrow. As the relief sank into her bones her body relaxed and she sank back into sleep.

This set up a pattern for the next several days. She would sleep for long hours while her body healed...
broken up with visits from her dwarrow. Almost all the company visited her at some point, usually in
twos and threes, and all took the time to scold her for her recklessness. Often she scolded right back-
as well as a hobbit with broken ribs could- for their own injuries. Thankfully Bombur could still hold
a spoon and Ori was managing well with his crutches and Fili’s infection had cleared up quickly.

The only dwarf Bella didn’t see during this time was the one she most longed for. Thorin was
confined to his own bed, his leg wound slow to heal, but he sent little notes to her via Balin and
Dwalin. At first they were filled with apologies and self-recriminations but he soon moved onto other
topics after Bella told Dwalin to smack some sense into him for her. After that Thorin wrote of his
frustrating meeting with the men and elves and even Dain, of the plans slowly starting to form that
would renew Erebor and bring his people home, pleas for her advice and insights, and mostly words
of love and renewed promises. Bella answered every note and tried to give what advice she could
though she had much less to write about. There were times when they had members of the company
running back and forth all day delivering their messages.

Despite being the more heavily injured, Bella was released from bed rest before Thorin. Once the
danger of internal bleeding or a punctured lung from her fractured rib had passed, Oin decided it
would be good for her to move around. “Gotta work those bruised muscles.”

It was a painful and slow process at first with a lot of strange stretches and feeling out of breath. She
was lying on her injured side (which seemed counter intuitive at first but Bella had to admit it
allowed her to take deeper breaths) and trying to move her legs in the way Oin had taught her when
she heard the door open.

“Kili, if that is you come to laugh at me again I will kick your shin again, right in the bruise.”

“A fierce threat to be sure though the view is worth any damage you might do. Just aim for the left
leg, I’d rather not have both damaged.”

Bella let out a squeak and tumbled down. Pain shot through her side causing a second squeak.

“Amralime!”

Bella looked up to see Dwalin rushing towards her. Behind him Thorin stood awkwardly in the
doorway, a worried frown on his face. Gently Dwalin helped Bella right herself and sit in one of the
comfortable chairs her brothers had brought in. Once he had her settled he walked back to Thorin.

“Be careful with my sister.” He admonished, giving Thorin a hard punch to the arm.

“I didn’t do it on purpose!” Thorin responded, sounding like nothing so much as a faunt in trouble
that Bella couldn’t help but giggle. He looked to her at the sound with a warm smile before it was
replaced with shock at the sight of her. “Bella.”

Bella rubbed self-consciously at her chin. Thorin limped over to her with the help of a crutch. It took
everything in her to not flinch as he ran his fingers along the hair on her cheek.

“You’ve grown your beard.” He said, his awe palpable.

“Well, started to.” Bella tittered nervously. “Not quite a beard get.”

“It’s beautiful.” Thorin’s eyes, which had been locked to the lower half of her face, snapped up to
meet her own. “But you said… you didn’t…”

“Yes, well, I was injured you know.” Bella wondered how to explain. “By the time I was aware
enough to notice and able-bodied enough to do something I already had a good bit of- growth and,
well, it just seemed like such a hassle and with me living with dwarrow I just thought-”

The fingers that had rested against her cheek moved to silence her rambling. “You are beautiful, Bella. I need you to understand that.”

“Okay.” She squeaked when she realized Thorin was waiting for a response. He nodded in approval.

“Good. But, Ghivashel, you explained to me your feelings on having a beard- how it made you feel and that is not what I ever want for you. I thought you understood that I would never want you to sacrifice your dignity or comfort for our culture.”

“I did! I do. I’ve greatly appreciated your support with my decision to shave and now I’d greatly appreciate your support with my decision to not shave.”

“Are you sure, Bella? This is what you want?”

“I’m not completely comfortable with it.” Bella admitted. “But I want to try.”

“My brave hobbit.” Mindful of both their injuries, Thorin leaned down to pull Bella into a kiss. It was heartbreakingly tender and sweet. Enough so Bella quickly forgot the strange feeling of her hairs catching on Thorin’s beard as they pressed together.

The kiss lasted only a moment but she felt warmed to her core. With gentle hands she pushed him back, dodging with a small laugh when he tried to swoop in for another. “As lovely as your kisses are I believe we have things we need to discuss first.”

Thorin let out a deep sigh but settled back into the second armchair without complaint. “I suppose we do at that.” Thorin agreed though he didn’t seem happy about it. “To begin with you deserve my deepest apology-”

“No!” Bella was gratified to see both Thorin and Dwalin jump at her shout. “You’ve already apologized multiple times, I do not need another. No more apologies and no more promises. Since Lake-Town you have been a dwarf of many words and they have brought us little good.” She took a moment while Thorin stared at her gobsmacked to gather her courage and signal to Dwalin. He brought her the ornate box from her bedside table. Fili and Kili had picked it out for her at her request and she thought they’d done a good job. The box itself was made of polished oak and the lid was inlaid with silver and mother of pearl to depict Durin the first and his wife. It was a little big for her purpose but otherwise perfect.

“At the steps to this mountain you gifted me with the Arkenstone and professed your wish to marry me.” Bella paused and ran a nervous hand across her chin, suppressing a grimace at the feel of hair there. “I don’t want it back.”

Thorin flinched at her words. His expression become heartbroken and resigned and behind him Dwalin was sending her panicked looks. Bella continued quickly. “Don’t get me wrong. I love you, Thorin Oakenshield, and I want to be your yusth and uzbadîna but we can’t just start back where we left off because we left off some place horrible and every time I see the Arkenstone it just reminds me of that. Instead I have a gift for you- one to remind you of the hope and determination we started with.”

Bella forced herself to stop talking and passed over the box. Thorin took a moment to examine the box, a small smile appearing as he traced a finger across the lid. He opened it to reveal a pocket knife. It was large enough to fit a dwarf’s hand and finely crafted with strong dwarven steel. She’s had Bifur help her with the handle, carving flowers and Bofur had added a few jewels and silver
highlights to accent the petals.

Thorin gave it a look of wonder, picking it up and examining it closely. “This is a queenly gift but I’m afraid I do not know flowers well. Will you tell me about them?”

“Of course.” Bella smiled and leaned near as best she could. “Up top are violets for faithful love, and then gilly-flower which means bonds of affection. There’s alstroemeria and dogwood to show devotion and durability and here along the edge, lilly of the valley to symbolize a return to happiness.”

“And what of these here, the leaves and these peridot flowers?”

Bella felt her cheeks warming but answered, “We hobbits… we- we pray with our flowers. Use them to show our thoughts, feelings, hopes, and dreams. This knife… it’s, well, it’s my love for you but also a prayer of sorts… a sign of my hope and that is these leaves, ivy, and cinquefoil, which hobbits use for marital happiness and affection.”

Bella felt strangely shy as she finished her explanation. She had laid her heart bare and while Bella felt confident that her sentiment was both wanted and returned she still felt vulnerable. She kept her eyes on his fingers, not quite willing to meet his eyes. They were large and blunch but surprisingly gentle and dexterous. Now those fingers caressed her gift with reverence.

“I shall cherish this always.” Thorin spoke with a voice thick with emotion. “And when I go to the hall of my maker it shall be kept as a treasure of our people.”

“That’s—that’s nice.” Bella said, not sure how else to respond.

One of the hands she’d been watching reached out and lifted her chin until she finally met Thorin’s gaze. His eyes were so blue it was like falling into a summer sky. “I commit all that I am to you.” He vowed. “I will do all that I can to be worthy of this gift and your love.”

Bella gave a small sniffle but smiled warmly at him. “Overly dramatic dwarf. Just continue to be yourself.”

They stared at each other for a bit, all loving gazes and ridiculous, besotted smiles. Finally, Bella pulled herself away, heeding the call of her injured ribs. She blushed a bit when she caught Dwalin’s eye and he made kissy lips at her. She sent her brother an appropriately rude gesture and settled herself into a more comfortable position. “Now we’ve got that settled, why don’t you tell me about this morning’s meeting with the elves. Balin said something about them wanting access to the mountainside?”

Thorin grimaced at the mention of elves but also settled into his chair, preparing to share the latest politics with his azbadhalkûna and begin strategizing. Bella still wasn’t fully confident in her ability to be a voice amongst kings but, she thought as she watched Thorin continue to caress her gift while they talked, for this dwarf she would learn.

Chapter End Notes

Khuzdul:
Zanid- Big
Ameralime- My love
Yusth- Wife/bride
Uzbadûna- Queen (I just did king-lady because I couldn't find the word)
Uzbadhalkûna- King's Equal (Bella's official title; at least until they're married)

Peridot-"...thought to strengthen life, bring about prosperity, growth and increase openness. Peridot is also believed to help one understand relationships, and to alleviate depression, anger, fear, jealousy and anxiety." - www.gemselect.com
I just thought it was fitting even it isn't not quite the right color.

Tumblr
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

This story is complete! After literally years on this story I can hardly believe it. While this has been such a joy I can honestly say I'm glad to be done. I hope people enjoy it.

Huge thanks to my beta! Thank you Ashleigh for correcting my weird grammar and being a sounding board for me! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bella stomped into her room and threw herself onto her bed as well as she could with her middle still sore. She had thought fighting side by side would help people get along but obviously that was not the case. Thranduil and the Master were just as petty as before, and the Master now twice as rude; ignoring anything Bella had to say now that Thorin was there. Bard remained grim and silent while Thorin was alternating between brooding and guilt-filled. As a result he did not speak up near as much as he should. It was enough to make any proper Hobbit want to tear their hair out and have a good tantrum. As it was Bella was quite ready to return to her poisoning plan. “It would serve them right,” she mumbled into her pillows.

“What would serve who right?”

Bella turned her head to see Thorin had followed her into the room. “Will it always be like this?” She asked instead of answering the question.

“The meetings? Not always. Thranduil will go back to his woods soon enough and we’ll seldom have to meet with him. The Master as well, once Dale is established, can be kept at a distance. Bard seems keen to re-establish the city and despite his ties with the Master seems a good sort.” Thorin paused as he lowered himself to her side. He still needed a cane to get around but his mobility was improving quickly. “Of course once I call our people home we’ll have zabbad to deal with and that is not for the faint of heart.”

The groan Bella released was heartfelt if exaggerated. It turned more pleased as Thorin began to run his fingers through her hair. She snuggled deeper into her pillows and idly wondered how many people she could poison before someone became suspicious. Perhaps she could divert attention by poisoning herself? Just a little bit of course.

“What are you thinking about, marlet?” Thorin asked. His thick fingers scratched gently against her skull and Bella could feel the tension melting out.

“You don’t want to know.” She mumbled into her pillow.

“I would have your thoughts always, but I will not push.”

“My beard itches.” She finally mumbled and as she said it she realized it was true.

Thorin laughed. “Aye, I remember when I lost my baby fuzz and my true beard first grew in.” He pushed gently at her shoulder until Bella gave in and rolled onto her back with a groan. Those wonderful fingers that had been working magic on her scalp moved to her chin and jaw. She counted
it a win that she didn’t flinch away though she couldn’t stop her grimace. The fingers did feel good though, rubbing against her irritated skin. “Your beard is quite dry, you are not taking care of it. I have oil in my room which will help. Would you allow me to care for you?”

Bella could feel the weight of Thorin’s words. There was more to what he was asking than the obvious. She brought her own hand up to cup his against her cheek. “I would be honored.”

“Amraline.” He breathed before covering her lips with his own. The kiss was slow and languid yet passionate and filled with fierce love. Eventually, when both were short of breath he pulled back. “I will return shortly.” With one last peck Thorin rose and left the room.

Bella took advantage to get rid of some of the many layers Balin insisted she wore for state business. It seemed a bit ridiculous to her but Bella was working to adjust to her adopted home and culture. She would be the queen her people deserved.

Thorin returned as she struggled with the clasp to her gown. “Let me help with that.” He offered, moving to undo the complex clasp. Bella breathed a sigh of relief as the heavy gown fell away.

“I quite miss my trousers.” She grumbled.

“I do as well.” Thorin said with a laugh. “They afforded me a better view.” He let one hand skim across her bottom. It was barely felt through all her layers but she flushed red as a tomato.

“You’re horrible.” She grumbled but allowed Thorin to lead her back to the bed. There he produced a small vial of oil that released a familiar spicy scent when he opened it.

“This is my favorite beard oil.” Thorin explained as he began coating his fingers. “The skin and hair on your face is different than on your scalp so you must care for it differently. This oil will moisturize your skin and soften the hairs.”

With a tender touch he began to rub his fingers across her jaw, massaging the skin and then spreading the oil along the length of her beard. It was short still- not yet more than half an inch but it felt substantial to her and even as she enjoyed his ministrations she struggled to accept them.

“Talk to me.” She demanded, hoping a distraction would help ease her discomfort.

“What would you have me say?”


“That does little to narrow down the selection.” Thorin laughed. “A story. There was one I was especially fond of as a child about a princess whom walls could not hold. Shall I tell it to you?”

“Please.”

And so he did. Between Thorin’s soothing fingers and mesmerizing tone Bella found herself lulled into a state of extreme relation. She opened her eyes a good time later as Thorin pulled his hands back. “That was lovely.”

Pride shone brightly in Thorin’s eyes. “I am glad. It is my privilege to care for you.”

“Could I- would it be okay if I… if I returned the favor?”

“Please.” The word burst out with an exuberance that both amused and flattered Bella. She let Thorin take her hands and coat them in the oil before leading them up to his face.
softer than hers and she enjoyed the springy texture of it. She was careful at first but grew more bold with each encouraging sound. She ventured up to his hairline and down his neck to tease at the collar of his shirt or sometimes she ran her fingers playfully across lips.

He smiled and nipped at her fingers. And then immediately made a face at the bitter taste of the oil. Bella giggled and pulled back. Thorin chased after, intent on capturing her lips but before he could Bella danced further out of reach.

“I need dinner and a bath. As do you.” She scolded lightly.

“Aye, I do.” He conceded good naturedly. “May I come by again tomorrow to care for your beard again?”

“Yes, that would be lovely.”

After that evening a routine was formed. Each evening when the work was done and the reports sent off with Balin, Thorin would come to Bella’s room. They would care for each other and discuss their day, sometimes sharing supper together. These evenings together were an oasis in the chaos of meetings, site inspections, plannings, building, and so much paperwork. Eventually though, agreements were made and treaties signed.

The men were the first to leave. The Master allowed himself to be paid off with what he believed to be a rather large sum and several agreements for trade with the mountain. Thorin was satisfied the contracts were worded carefully enough to ensure the money would make it’s way back into the people’s pockets and not the Master’s. Bard stayed a few extra days to negotiate labor and supplies for the rebuilding of Dale as well as the heirlooms of Dale currently located in Erebor’s treasury. In private Thorin spoke well of the man and his hope for future relations between their two kingdoms.

Talks with the elves took longer. There was too much history on both sides to come to any quick and easy resolutions. Bella’s poor toes were bruised from the many times she’d needed to kick Thorin. She had become quite proficient at recognizing the look in his eyes right before he said something belligerent. Eventually though, with Balin’s hard work, help from Dain’s advisors, and Bella’s prudence, they were able to establish new treaties. Talks were helped greatly when the white jewels were offered as a show of good faith on the part of the dwarrow.

Finally, well into winter, the mountain was free of all but the dwarrow. There had been much work done, prioritizing living space for the company and Dain’s men and preparing for the arrival of Durin’s folk with the warmer weather. There was no market yet. Until the kingdom was more stabilized they were dependent on their neighbors for food and all people, including the king, ate rations which were often served communally. The winter months were times of harsh weather and hard work but dwarrow were rarely malcontent when they had work to do.

Bella had a harder time of it. She could not do stone work nor heavy lifting for clearing rubble. Nor did she have any skill at smithing. For a while she tried to find work in the library but not being able to read khuzdul made that most difficult. Balin was helping her learn the paperwork that came with running a nation but she was not yet confident to do so on her own and even still any that Bella filled out would then have to be transcribed into the dwarrow’s language.

“This’ll all be much easier once you’ve learned the language.” Balin promised her. He and the rest of the company taught her when they were able but everyone was so busy.

It seemed like she spent much of her time dusting books she couldn’t sort and trying to stay out of the way of people doing real work. It was quite disheartening for even alone in the Shire, Bella had things to do around her smial to keep her busy and give her purpose. Here in Erebor, aside from the
evenings spent with Thorin and occasionally the Company, she felt very lost and alone. Bella was
beginning to feel doubts she could make this place her home but was not willing to give it up. After
years of being thought useless by those around her Bella refused to be so.

It was Dori, in the end, who gave her the idea. He had found her, tucked away in a corner of the
library, brooding.

“You look like a true dwarf king with that scowl on your face.”

“Dori!” Bella startled. She had been far too deep in thought to notice his arrival.

“What has you looking so serious, lass?” He asked, coming to sit beside her.

Bella shrugged. Her problem seemed silly compared to the repair of the mountain. She didn’t want to
admit it out loud for fear of seeming foolish.

“It’s nothing. Just concerned about the rebuilding.”

“Aye, that’s serious enough business.” Dori agreed. “But Ori makes that same face when he’s lying
so it’ll be the truth if you please.”

“It’s just… everyone’s working so hard… doing so much to make this place a home and I… I’m
not.” She braced, waiting for the laugh or admonishment. It never came. Instead Dori settled deeper
into his seat and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

“Ah, yes, idleness does not suit a dwarf well.” The understanding in his tone was a balm to Bella. “I
was young when my ma grew ill. I’d only just picked a craft for study and had no notion to care for
anyone. Watching her decline and being powerless to help, to do anything but watch, was the
hardest time in my life.”

“What did you do?”

“What I could. I was no healer but I had other talents. Mostly strong arming Nori into behaving and
looking after Ori. I also knitted ma blankets and shawls and learned to brew tea perfectly. Not great
feats; I wasn’t the one to save her but it helped. Rebuilding is hard work, a lot of it requiring strength,
but not all. More than that, though, it is a lot of work. More than enough to go around. What needs
are there in the mountain?”

“I don’t know!” Bella said with more than a little frustration. “Nothing that I can do! I’m not strong
or can work with stone or write in khuzdul.”

“What are your talents then?”

“Not much it seems. I can bake and grow things.”

“I do remember you had a lovely garden back in the Shire.”

“My tomatoes were prize winners.” She sighed.

“I do like a good tomato. On bread with a bit of toasted cheese. Did you grow other food as well?”

“Some. Peas, cucumbers, pumpkins, a few kinds of lettuce, summer squash, and of course a herb
garden. I did corn one year but it was a hassle to harvest and the time I tried broccoli, worms ate it
all.”

“That’s quite a harvest.” Dori mused, playing with one of his braids. “We’ve all heard Thorin’s rant
about our dependence on the elves for food. Might you know anything about larger crops?”
Bella perked up, quickly following Dori’s thoughts. “Not as much as some but all hobbits have a goodly amount of knowledge when it comes to the planting. We all pitch in and again come harvest. We all eat the food so we all contribute.” She didn’t bother to mention that she had not been allowed to help for several years now for fear that she might curse the crops with her barrenness. “Oh Dori! You’re a genius!.”

“I have my moments.” He chuckled.

The idea quickly took root and she lost herself to thoughts of the best crops to plant for the climate. Dori was more than content to sit and enjoy the silence as she mentally made plans. They sat there together for near a quarter of an hour before they were found.

“Did you give it to her yet?” Ori asked eagerly.

“Give me what?”

“Your family gift.” Nori answered, sitting on the other side of her. “Enough time has passed we can make our claim on ya now.”

“It’s not quite traditional, not many cases of a third family putting forth a bid but…” Ori trailed off with a shrug and Dori pulled out something from his coat. It revealed itself to be a large piece of cloth in Durin blue with the most beautiful embroidery done with silver thread.

“Oooh.” Bella breathed. It was by far the finest fabric she had ever seen.

“Balin helped me find our old quarters this morning.” Dori explained. “There wasn’t much salvageable but our mother kept all her commissions in a special chest and much of her work was preserved. This piece was most likely made for someone in the royal family. Perhaps Princess Feris, Thorin’s mother. I think both she and amad would be happy to see it go to you.”

“So what do you say? You’ll be our sister?” Nori asked, his flippant tone at odds with his hopeful look.

“Of course!” Bella said, throwing her arms around Nori. Ori quickly joined the hug and then Dori. “I am so happy!”

She spent the rest of the day with them. Dori left only to put forth his bid before Thorin. Ori had the contract ready and like her previous two adoptions this one was less formal and the celebrations less grand than in ages past but the participants no less happy for it. All the Company was her’s, it was official now. Six brothers was quite a respectable number for any hobbit to claim. She was so thrilled that for a while she forgot about her feelings of uselessness.

It was a few evenings later, at one of her and Thorin’s nightly beard sessions that she remembered her plan. He had been complaining about the elves (again) and specifically how dependent Erebor was on them for food. It had been so before, in the time of Thror, but they had also counted on Dale and trade from further lands. It would be a long while before either Dale’s crops or the markets were ready once more.

“I could plant.” Bella offered.

“What?” Thorin paused in his current rant on elves and stared up at Bella. He looked adorable with his eyes wide in confusion and his beard fluffed out from her fingers.

“I could do some planting. If you gave me some land on the mountain side and maybe a few dwarrow…” She trailed off.
“I’m sorry love but we have no dwarrow to spare. We must focus on inside the mountain before we look to beautify the out.”

“B-beautify?”

Thorin grabbed her hands and pressed kisses to them. “I know hobbits love your growing things but I fear we must all give up things we love for a time.”

“Oh.” For all that she had just thought of it, it was surprisingly hard to hear her idea shot down so quickly. “I just thought. Well… I wanted…”

“I know Amraline, but surely you can see how it would be self-serving at this time.”

Bella pulled back as if she had been slapped at his light admonishment. “Self-serving? What do you mean self-serving? I can’t help you the dwarf way and now you won’t let me help the hobbit way and you dare to call me selfish?! Am I to be of any use? Or merely your bed warmer?”

“Of course not! You are to be my queen.”

“And do what? Sit beside you prettily and lay beside you at night? Quite frankly, from where I’m standing, I don’t see much different except that as queen I shall be forced to wear some gaudy crown.”

“Are you telling me you don’t want to be my queen?”

“I am telling you that I want to help! If I am to be your equal; if Erebor is to be my home too then I too should contribute to it.”

“And you have. You were part of my company who came to fight the dragon and reclaim our home.”

“I was one of fourteen! You and all the other dwarrow are working and helping to rebuild!”

“Of course. We are dwarrow and this is our home.”

Bella let out a shriek of frustration and stomped her foot. If she had been any less angry she would have been appalled at her behavior.

“And am I not a dwarf too now? Just because I was born a hobbit doesn’t mean I can’t be of help! You are always complaining about Erebor’s dependence on others for food. I can help with that! Insuring rooms are ready for your coming kin is important but so is making sure they have enough to eat when they get here. I can grow crops to lessen our dependence and help ensure we have enough for next winter!”

Thorin stared at her for a moment and Bella could not tell what he was thinking. “You can do that?”

“Of course I can! Why do you think I brought it up in the first place?”

“I thought you wanted to plant a garden like you had in the Shire.”

For a moment Bella saw red. She had only ever slapped one person in her life, when Ranugad Blackhyll had stuck his hand up her skirt but just then she dearly wanted to slap the King Under the Mountain.

“You are an idiot.” She said instead of acting on her violent impulses.
“Aye, I think I might be.” Thorin agreed, looking a little stunned. “Can you really help us with food for next winter?”

“And sooner, if I can get started soon. Does this mean you will not stand against my planting?”

Thorin wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into his lap, burying his face in her hair. “Ask for any gold and dwarrows you might need to help you and you will have it. Oh Bella, I do not deserve you. Just when I think there could not possibly be any more you go and surprise me. Are you sure you wish to marry me? You could do so much better.”

“Better than the King of Erebor?! I think not. But do try to be less ridiculous in the future, won’t you?” Bella tried to pull back to look at her intended but he would not loosen his grip.

“I promise.” He readily agreed and pulled back enough to press his lips against hers.

Bella wondered if she’d ever get used to his kisses as she melted into him. Each time was like the first with sharp sparks racing down her spine and a fierce heat building inside of her.

“Zâyungi zu.” He whispered when they finally came up for air.

“I love you too.” Bella sighed.

True to his word, Thorin sent a half dozen dwarrow to her drawing room the next morning after breakfast.

“Sire,” the leader greeted as they all offered Bella a bow. “We are to assist you in whatever way we can in your planting.”

“Oh! Wonderful!” Her surprise quickly turning to pleasure. “We might need a few more but we can worry about that later. Tell me, do any of you have any experience with surveying?”

Bella quickly learned that surveying was not a common practice for dwarrow. She supposed it made sense as they kept their kingdoms underground. However, all those on her team were intelligent and eager to assist the Uzbadhalkuna. Using her specifications and old maps provided by Balin they started searching for a place suitable to grow several crops. With it being deep into winter there was not much physical work they could do until the worst of the snow had passed. That did not stop them, though, from making plans and drawing up blueprints and rotation schedules. They used the winter months wisely so that when the seasons changed they were ready.

By the time the last of the snow storms passed and the ground was beginning to thaw Bella’s original team of six had grown to six and twenty. Over the winter months she thrived in her leadership role and had earned the respect of her dwarrow. Bella also began overseeing the guild heads for the kitchens and the newly opened market space and worked closely with those in charge of housing. The lonely and timid hobbit from the Shire was gone and it was not just her confidence that changed over the winter. Despite living on rations, the steady meals had allowed some of Bella’s rounded figure to return and her beard, which she had learned to enjoy if only for Thorin’s joy, was now long enough for small beads.

Balin had been the first to gift her with a bead, as was his right as her oldest brother. He was soon followed by Dori, and then Nori, Dwalin, Bofur, Gloin, and Bombur. The rest were not far behind. It did not take long before she had more beads than she could reasonably wear at once.

“I would try but I would look quite ridiculous.” She confided to Thorin one evening.

“They could be weaved in like lattice but some of the beads would clash.” Thorin offered as Bella
brushed his long hair. “You’re brothers and cousins do not expect you to wear their beads every day. They have merely ensured you have options to compliment whatever you choose to wear.”

Bella looked down at her clothes which had come from Lake Town. They had been made for children if she were to guess and were the dull browns and greys that were so common there. Thorin saw her look and laughed.

“Soon enough we will have weavers, tailors, and merchants and you shall dress in the finest of fabrics and laces.”

“I must admit I’m quite ready for something a bit nicer. Something less coarse and brighter colors.”

“Soon.” Thorin promised, grabbing one of her hands and kissing the palm. “Even now the first caravan of dwarrow are making their way here.”

“Only a few more months.”

“Aye, and then our people will be here and-” He paused.

“And what?”

“And there is something I must get. I’ll be back shortly.”

“Thorin, what?” But he was already out the door before she could finish voicing her question. Bella stared after him in bafflement. Strange dwarf. She did not have long to wonder though before Thorin returned, a package in hand.

“It is not well wrapped. I hadn’t… I wasn’t… I’d wanted… here!” Giving up on speaking he thrust the package at Bella.

She took it gently, not sure what to expect. The shape felt familiar underneath the fabric and yet not so that she could name it. In front of her Thorin looked nervous but also pleased with himself. He looked up when her hands didn't move to unwrap it and motioned for her to continue.

“Open it.” He commanded, sounding more like an eager faunt than a king. Looking away from his shy smile, she did and pulled out the most beautiful spoon.

It was made of a light red wood, the grain glowing golden in the firelight. On the top was the key Thorin had used to open the hidden door which then split into two vines twisted together, creating a dwarven knot. Right before the double bowls the vines merged together into a host of flowers that Bella suspected were meant to be tulips in front of Bag End’s round door. It looked very little like the lovespoons she'd seen before. For one thing it was at least twice the normal size and the carvings were far more intricate. As unusual as it was Bella had never seen one lovelier.

“Oh, Thorin.” She breathed, running her fingers along its smooth surface. “It's beautiful. How did you know?”

“Bifur. He told me at Beorn’s and helped me find a suitable piece of wood before we entered Mirkwood.”

“You’ve been working on this since Beorn’s!”

Thorin gave a shrug, still looking adorably shy. “Not consistently. It was hard to find the privacy so you wouldn't know. The one benefit of Thranduil’s dungeon is I had little else to do but I stopped once we neared Erebor and then I had the Arkenstone. It was after the battle and I was trapped in my
sickbed that I took it back up. It is suitable, then? We had to guess on some things.”

“It’s perfect. The spoon is meant to represent our love and the story of our relationship. I couldn't think of anything better.”

“I am glad.” He beamed at her. “Bella, my dear Bella, I wish to marry you as soon as our people arrive to celebrate with us. Tell me you will?”

“You silly dwarf.” Bella giggled, feeling as though she would burst with happiness. “Of course I will.”

A year ago Bella had looked towards the future with a resigned bleakness, certain she would spend the rest of her days alone, a freak and cursed. Now she had not only found a person to love but a people that accepted and loved her in return. As Thorin pulled her into his embrace, smile bright as Bella’s joy, she idly thought to herself that she would soon need to plant celandine in her new garden.

Chapter End Notes

Flowers: definitions from http://www.languageofflowers.com/

Celandine, Lesser: Joys to come
Convolvulus, Pink: Worth sustained by judicious and tender affection

Khuzdul
Marlel: Love of all loves
Amraline: My love
Zabbad: Lords (dwarves nobles in this case)
Uzbadhalkuna: King's Equal
Zayungi zu: I love you- from khuzdul4u.tumblr.com which is no longer live but still a great resource

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