Homesick
by Margo_Kim

Summary

Five years after they've reclaimed Erebor, Thorin is sick of home, Bilbo is just sick, and neither is handling the situation ideally.

Notes

My first foray into posting chaptered WIPs! This'll probably be between 4 to 6 chapters long and about 12k words long, and I have a tentative posting schedule, but I'll be real with you, I just graduated college and do not yet have a job so the days of the week are pretty meaningless to me. Like I think it's Thursday, but honestly where are we in time and space. Whenever we are, you can also find me and my fics at my tumblr.

[[It's a few weeks after I wrote this note, and I'm leaving this initial length estimate up as a testament to man's folly.]]
Chapter 1

Bilbo was still asleep on Thorin’s couch when Thorin came back from the meeting.

Well. Bilbo was asleep on a couch. It seemed wrong to call it Thorin’s couch when he never got to use it. In the five years since Thorin had been officially crowned king under the mountain, he’d slept on his grandfather’s recovered couch a grand total of three times, and those were all in the first months before Bilbo and Thorin’s quarters had shifted from neighboring to adjoining. The day after Thorin finished the door linking their studies, and without a bit of fuss or the slightest by-your-leave, his burglar claimed it. Bilbo may have stayed in his own quarters half the time—an arrangement that suited them as it turned out both hated living with other people—but even when he was gone, the couch remained stubbornly his. “Call it my share of the profits,” Bilbo had said when Thorin complained. He knew that Thorin could never argue with that.

“It went well,” Thorin said loudly as he passed by the hobbit dozing on his stomach, one arm shoved under the pillow under his head, one foot hooked over the back. “The best meeting I’ve ever had.”

“Good,” Bilbo muttered. “Then you didn’t need me there.”

Thorin shrugged off his cloak and tossed it on top of Bilbo’s head. When Bilbo, without opening his eyes, pulled it down and wrapped it around the rest of him, Thorin realized that giving him a blanket might not have been the clever little revenge he thought it was. “You would have liked to see how much we got done. You so often complain that we do nothing but talk. I feel sorry that you could not be there on a day when much was done. The council asked after you. They do miss those scones you used to make. Do you remember them? Scones. What a quaint hobbit food. You know, Erebor’s head cook once tried to make them. She said they weren’t nearly as good as yours. At the next meeting, you should prepare scones.”

Bilbo groaned wordlessly and curled a little tighter.

“Oh, I apologize,” Thorin said innocently. “Did I wake you?”

Bilbo cracked open the eye on the side of his face that wasn’t snuggled into his pillow (well, again, Thorin’s pillow, but if usage had anything to do with ownership, then it was unambiguously Bilbo’s). “If you say your bit about your wonderful meeting, can I go back to sleep?”

Thorin dragged over the footstool and sat facing Bilbo. Then he pushed Bilbo back a little bit and sank his head down on the fresh gap in the cushioning, with Bilbo’s body curling like a C around him. Banging his head against fluff wasn’t as satisfying as banging it against his desk, but if he tried very hard he could maybe smother himself.

“Oh, so it was that wonderful a meeting,” Bilbo said. He rested his hand on the back of Thorin’s head. He was probably trying to comfort him, Thorin thought, but maybe if he could just press down a little bit and help with the smothering, that would be comforting too.

“Stop that,” Bilbo said.

“Stop what.”

“Stop thinking morbid thoughts because you’ve realized that the stubbornness of dwarves is a force stronger than anything else in the world and that it’s not as helpful when it’s aimed against you.”
“You stop,” Thorin said, which even he could admit was not the greatest comeback, but he always got unnerved when Bilbo seemed to read his mind. Thorin turned his head and found Bilbo looking back on him, the hand that had been under his pillow now cupping Thorin’s cheek. The hobbit still did not look entirely awake, and the circles under his eyes were darker than he remembered them. This close Thorin could see the fresh greyness of Bilbo’s skin as well. Thorin would have to make him go outside more. For all hobbits lived underground now and then, they were made for sunshine.

“You should have been there,” Thorin said. “We exchanged pleasant greetings and then spent the next hour quibbling over who owned one particular meter of a loam. As if nothing else in Erebor mattered.”

“I suppose it matters to the person who would own that meter.” Bilbo stretched until his toes almost bumped the other end of the couch and then went back to curling like a cat. “Did you settle it at least?”

“Yes. The dwarf who won then pressed for the meter next to it, and the dwarf who lost is planning to sue.”

Bilbo hummed sympathetically. “That’s a shame.”

“Yes. Yes, it is.”

“You could delegate it.”

“It’s a meter of a loam of mithril.”

“Oh, right, don’t delegate that.” Bilbo frowned. “Then again, you could get Fili deal with it. He is crown prince.”

“Fili’s with Balin in Dale.”

“Is he?”

“You’re the one who recommended he go,” Thorin reminded Bilbo.

Bilbo frowned absently like he didn’t remember that but was willing to take Thorin’s word for the time being. “Kili?”

“Facilitating trade, fostering relations.”

“Are you going to say with whom?” Bilbo yawned.

“We don’t say his name in my quarters,” Thorin said, because he may have given Tauriel his blessing (thought Thorin suspected withholding it wouldn’t have stopped anything) but that didn’t mean he was ready to embrace her king as well.

“It’s good you’re not still bitter.” Bilbo’s eyes were already beginning to droop shut again. “That would be very petty.”

Thorin head-butted his stomach. Gently. “You sleep too much. You’ll be up all night.”

Bilbo kneed Thorin in the back of the head. Sort of gently. “I doubt that,” Bilbo said, his voice already slurred with sleep.

“Can hobbits suffer insomnia?” Thorin asked.
Bilbo replied by snoring.

Thorin snorted and chucked Bilbo under his chin, softly laughing as Bilbo scrunched up his nose and curled his head down against his chest. Thorin stood, cracking his back and groaning. It still wasn’t as strong as it had been before—though to be fair to himself he did get stabbed rather dramatically five years ago. “Sleep then,” Thorin said down to Bilbo, who looked like he planned on sleeping whether Thorin condoned it or not. “I’ll read you the next council’s agenda over dinner.”

Thorin spent the next few hours hunched over his desk (his desk, Thorin felt perfectly comfortable saying, though if Bilbo wanted to steal this instead and give Thorin the couch back, Thorin certainly wouldn’t mind). There were endless papers to write and then endless papers to read and then endless papers to rewrite once he had read the papers he was supposed to read. It wasn’t interesting work, but if you kept at it, you could forget how dull it was and, through sheer repetition of labor, rise above the typical limits of your own mind into a state of bored transcendence, floating free to some better world where none of this was actually happening to you. He was getting work done tonight, at least. That was more than he could always say, when sometimes his mind just kept going up and out of Erebor altogether, curling somewhere in the hollows of the stars or the snowfalls of the north or even the sloping green hills he barely remembered from where he’d plucked his burglar.

This evening, Thorin’s mind was about half a mile away at the forges, pondering whether he was going to set this emerald he’d just imagined plucking out of a particularly rich loam in the hilt of the dagger or to accent the bookshelf, when the clock on his desk chimed the hour.

“Nine in the evening?” Thorin asked aloud entirely for his own benefit as Bilbo was still gently snoring. But it was a good question nonetheless, one that could be broken down a variety of ways ranging from “how did three hours pass so quickly” to “Mahal, was that only three hours” to “if I gave Fili the crown right now and started running, I could get to Dale before anyone caught me and Bard would likely be more than happy to help me desert the throne,” though admittedly that last one was less of a question and more of a recurring fantasy Thorin had these days.

On the one year anniversary of the opening of the secret door, Thorin had stood with an arm around Bilbo and a tankard of mead in hand as Kili and Fili dramatically reenacted their heroic battles in Lake-town, which had only become more impressive with time since there was none who could confirm or deny the truth of them save Bard and his children, and they always straight-facedly agreed with whatever Fili and Kili came up with. So while Fili was helping Kili backflip off a table to decapitate three orcs standing rather conveniently in a circle, Bilbo had tugged one of Thorin’s braids till he dropped his head down, and he whispered drunkenly, and thus also rather wetly, in Thorin’s ear, “Do you ever think about how you’ve done it?”

“I’ve done a great many things,” Thorin had said, and Bilbo elbowed him.

“You’ve reclaimed your home,” Bilbo had continued, in a tone of voice that implied that he’d been trying to have a nice moment before Thorin failed to say the right response. “You’ve cleared out the debris, you’ve rebuilt the core, you’ve started a government. Barring any disasters, your job is done. Now you’ve just got to manage it.”

Then Bilbo had hurriedly slipped away to engage that strange hobbit tradition of knocking on wood while Thorin heard a noise in his head like someone shouting very loudly but very far away, “You are useless to the world now.”

Yes, that was likely the moment Thorin hate started hating the throne.
Hating your work was better than obsessing about it, Thorin supposed, but neither was an attractive option. And at least obsession had some fire to it—too much fire, Thorin quickly amended, thinking of the rooms and rooms of gold he wouldn’t look at, couldn’t walk past. But in the privacy of his own head, where in fact it was most dangerous to think such things, he understood too well the appeal of grasping something and refusing to let go. Obsession was a gaudy, tasteless gem, but it shone bright beside the dull grey rock of trudging obligation.

Thorin could do the work, as pretty and minute and small and necessary as it was, so very necessary to the functioning of Erebor that just thinking about it could set Thorin’s heart pounding like the great hammer and anvils that boomed out in the deep, except instead of great works of priceless treasures, all these hammer and anvils made was an ulcer and a tendency to jerk awake just as he was falling asleep as he remembered there was just one more thing to do.

Because there was always something to do. Worse than that, there was always something to worry about. There was a crack in a pillar in the lower great hall that might splinter sometime this month. Or an Erebor noble promised his child in marriage to the chief miner of the Iron Hills, but his child eloped with a weaver from the Grey Mountains so now Erebor had to pay fifteen percent more per ton than they did last month until someone was appeased. Or a guild of miners wished to dive deeper into the earth when history taught that much deeper risked grave threats, but how long could the guild be dissuaded by words alone? Would Dale’s crops succeed this year or would the rootworm blight from two springs back strike again? Would the rumblings in the north mean war, and would Erebor ever have to pay for the orc blood spilt securing it? When Balin stepped down in five years’ time to rejoin his family in Moria, who could be trusted to step in as royal treasurer when Thorin couldn’t bring himself to look at the treasure himself? If Kili and Tauriel’s forces did not succeed in clearing out the blight of Mirkwood, how could Erebor send its treasures west? And since the blight they were clearing out was, alas, not Thranduil, what beastly taxes would he exact for safe travel through his cursed realm?

On the couch, Bilbo snuffled softly. It sounded almost like, “Stop.” Thorin stopped. He breathed a little

Thorin could do this. Or rather, Thorin could keep doing this, for he’d ruled in Ered Luin for decades, and he’d done right by his people. Six years ago, when he set out on surely the most foolhardy quest this land had ever know, Thorin hadn’t believed that. He’d judged himself a middling replacement for his father and grandfather at best, the last scrap of a once great line whose honor lay in its past. So he’d scraped together a plan and a company and a hobbit, and he’d done the impossible largely thanks to the last of those components and the aid of Dale and Dain, and Erebor was reclaimed, and now he had no doubt that he’d been a good ruler in Ered Luin because he was a fairly terrible ruler in Erebor.

No, you’re not, Bilbo might have said if he was awake. He wouldn’t even have needed Thorin to say anything aloud. Sometimes when they were both pouring over work together, Bilbo would say, without even looking up from his reading, “You’re doing very well, Thorin.” It was as comforting as it should have been unsettling. But after everything they’d gone through together, they hardly needed words to communicate. Thorin could have as good a conversation when Bilbo was asleep as when he was awake.

Though he did generally prefer his conversation partner be conscious.

Thorin wadded up a piece of scrap paper (or possibly a trade treaty—Thorin was reaching the punch-drunk level of bureaucratic work overload, and it was hard to be sure) and lobbed it at Bilbo. When bounced off his forehead, Bilbo made what sounded almost like a honk of disapproval. Thorin was impressed. That was one of Bilbo’s more inexplicable noises. “It’s been three hours.
How are you still asleep?” Thorin asked.

“How are you a king?” Bilbo mumbled after a moment, squinching his eyes even tighter. “You’re a toddler with a beard.”

“All toddlers have beards.”

Bilbo muttered something that sounded like “Dwarves are horrifying,” as he flopped over so his back faced Thorin.

Thorin threw another piece of paper at the back of Bilbo’s head. “Dinner. We’ll have missed the main one already,” he said.

Bilbo said nothing.

Thorin got up, crossed the room, and kicked the couch. “Dinner,” he commanded.

“You go get dinner.”

Bilbo squawked when Thorin scooped him up. “You’d never forgive me if I let you skip a meal,” Thorin said with maybe a bit more amusement in his voice than Bilbo would appreciate.

Bilbo twisted in Thorin’s arms to glare at him. “Put me down. I am not a sack of potatoes.”

“No,” Thorin agreed as he carried Bilbo to the door. “Potatoes have a nicer personality.”

They got to the private dining hall a few minutes later. Bilbo had agreed to walk after they got out of the royal section. Thorin suspected that he didn’t want the other dwarves to think hobbit-carrying was an acceptable behavior. Bilbo at least seemed a little more awake by the time they arrived. Bombur fitted them up with a late feast, and Bofur happily joined them, tinkering with his latest toy between bites. And it was nice. It felt good. Life in Erebor often felt good, even if Thorin was hard-pressed to remember that when he felt bad.

And if Thorin worried at all when Bilbo went right back to the couch and right back to sleep, that was just the old paranoia, the lingering scars from when life had been far, far harder.

“The laziness of hobbits will never fail to astound me,” Thorin said the next morning when he walked out after waking and found Bilbo still asleep on the couch.

“s’off,” was all Thorin caught of Bilbo’s reply, though he heard few more expletives as he pulled Bilbo to his feet. Still, by the time they were both mostly dressed, Bilbo was at least standing upright on his own, though he looked offended by that.

“You look awake at last,” Thorin said, and Bilbo looked offended at that as well as he fumbled with his cravat.

“No one should be up at this hour.”

“Nine in the morning is an unreasonable hour now?” Thorin asked. “I thought we were sleeping in.”

Bilbo’s face fell. “It’s nine? I thought—” But whatever he thought, he didn’t say, nor did he finish
tying his cravat. His hands had paused in midair, and there they remained as if he’d forgotten about them. Thorin went over and finished the knot.

“You’ve slept too much,” Thorin said as he stepped back. “It’s addled your brain.”

Bilbo shook himself and glanced in the mirror. “Is that your official diagnosis?” he said as he redid the knot, and Thorin’s mouth went dry. He didn’t know why. And if he did, he wouldn’t look at it.

“There’s nothing to diagnosis,” Thorin said, in a tone he didn’t recognize. Bilbo looked at him strangely. “Just get to work.”

The day, as it always insisted on doing, began.

Thorin spent four hours in the royal mint that day between Balin and his chief assistant Varda, trying to figure out how he was supposed to evaluate whether the new gold flowing into Dale would massively destabilize the local economy without looking like the thought of gold made his hands start to shake. He needn’t have worried, and he should have known that by now. Gold in concrete form was alluring, tantalizing, entrapping. Gold in the mathematical abstract could put even the sickest mind to sleep.

Bilbo had his own work, though Thorin saw very little of it. His weren’t essential projects—as Bilbo put it, he hated to work on anything important, that was far too much pressure—but they were popular little efforts that made life around Erebor better. Bilbo worked with Ori and the head librarians on curating the new collection, and he worked with the historical society on preserving the more important bits of rubble, and he worked with seemingly every guild organization on their party planning projects. “Proper Shire work,” Bilbo had called it once. It was the kind of genteel community work that his mother and father had enjoyed in Hobbiton and that Bilbo never had. Thorin certainly enjoyed them, these fineries of culture. They made the mountain feel less like a mausoleum and more like a home.

Thorin didn’t, however, enjoy when the planning of the finery of culture interrupted his private lunch. But when Thorin entered the western family dining room at three in the afternoon, he found he had company. Bilbo, dressed in a fine shirt but missing his usual waistcoat and jacket that Thorin had once thought were attached to him, smiled at Thorin as he came in and said to Freya, “Oh, don’t put Bari in charge of decorations again, she’ll only use it as a chance to make your guild pay for her emeralds.”

Freya, head of the gold workers guild and a second cousin of Thorin’s, had stood when Thorin entered. He gestured her down and took a seat himself at the table himself. “Please, don’t let me interrupt you,” Thorin said, with a regal voice he hoped didn’t imply anything sarcastic about how unpleasant interruptions at lunch could be.

Freya nodded her head at him and said to Bilbo, “I’m not opposed to dwarves profiting from their work. She does fine work.”

Thorin made himself a plate of Bombur’s laid out feast as Bilbo replied, “Yes, but so do plenty of other dwarves, and I say we let them profit.” He shook himself and rubbed his eyes. “I haven’t forgotten what she said about Ragni last year, even if everyone else has.”

“We certainly have not, but insults about manners matter less to our kind than yours,” Freya said.

“I—I have gathered.” Bilbo shook his head again like he needed to knock something loose. Freya started discreetly sweeping up the parchment fanned on the table between them.
“I’ll reach out to Goma first then, but we may need to endure working with someone you don’t like,” she said.

“Intolerable,” Bilbo muttered. “Still if you can stand her, that’s what matters. You’ll be in charge now, after all.”

“Alas, I will be.” Freya sighed and stroked her silken beard. “It won’t be the same without your touch, Master Burglar, but I wouldn’t have you working on it if you wanted, peaky as you’ve been looking.”

“You are stepping down?” Thorin asked, his spoon paused halfway to his lips.

The two turned to Thorin, Freya’s face worried and Bilbo’s face—tired. He looked tired and so he looked as he always looked these days. “I thought I ought to give someone else a shot,” Bilbo said with a wan smile. He leaned his chin in his hand, and it almost managed to look like he wasn’t doing it to hold his head up.

“And we’ll be poorer for it, your majesty,” Freya said, standing. With the curt bow of a guild master and followed by the slight nod of a cousin, she gave a last, “At your service,” and had the good sense to duck out.

When the door shut, Thorin said, “I didn’t know you were quitting.”

“Quitting is so harsh,” Bilbo said. “I’m delegating more responsibilities.

Thorin ran his thumb over the handle of his spoon. “Is it—you’ve been tired lately.” Bilbo didn’t reply to that. “It’s good to take a break now and then.”

Bilbo scoffed and reached for the bread basket between them. “That’s rich coming from you, Thorin. When was the last time you took a break?”

“I slept in this morning,” Thorin said, watching the bags under Bilbo’s eyes.

“Ah yes, perfect, you’ll be good for another five years now.” Bilbo shook his head, and perhaps it was in loving exasperation, an expression Bilbo wore well and often. But it looked more as if something had been creeping up towards his head again and he just managed to brush it away a moment longer.

Thorin looked down at his food. It was back, that feeling that the wound in his gut had never healed and some invisible hand now and then stuck itself in Thorin’s stomach and twisted. “I’m glad you’re stepping back if you aren’t feeling perfectly,” he said as he lifted his spoon again, his eyes on Bombur’s stew. “Step back from more if you need.”

Thorin waited for Bilbo to say something about how he didn’t need Thorin’s permission either to work or not to work, and that he’d hardly take lessons on health and time management from the king who’d managed to work three days last week before he remembered to attend a meal, to which Thorin would point out that he was eating now, and Bilbo would say something about how eating now wasn’t going to help Thorin then, and Thorin would ask why he needed to be concerned about Thorin back then because he clearly came through it alright, and Bilbo would say something about how Thorin back then would set precedents for Thorin to come and that he couldn’t go about thinking it was alright to skip meals, and somehow fifteen minutes later they would be talking about the latest news from Dale, or whether or not Bilbo’s tomatoes were going to come in, or about the story that Thorin’s mother had told him before he went to sleep, the one that he barely remembered and he’d leave Bilbo to invent the parts that went into the gaps in his memory.
Or anything. Or everything. Because on the one hand Thorin had shared enough conversations with Bilbo to know the rhythm of them better than his own heartbeat, and on the other hand Bilbo had the slipperiest mind of anyone Thorin had ever met. He surprised you. That was what he did.

“I think I might,” Bilbo said. “I’ve been—well. It’s best I stop pretending that I will do some projects that I evidently will not be able to do.”

“Good,” Thorin said before he could say anything else, before he could think anything else. “You’ll be able to attend council meetings again.”

Bilbo laughed, a startled little sound. “You couldn’t pay me,” he said, and Thorin replied, “True, I’m already paying you too much and you still will not help,” and Bilbo said, “You’re paying me my contractual share of the profits, you royal prick,” and Thorin said, “I thought my couch was your share,” and Bilbo said, “My share is vast, stop hogging the cheese tray,” and Thorin passed over the cheese tray, and he didn’t think about how Bilbo’s hand shook as he took it, he didn’t think about Bilbo’s drooping eyes, he didn’t think about what he didn’t think about as he helped Bilbo stumble back to their quarters after lunch and laid him down sleeping on Bilbo’s damn couch.
Dear Uncle,

Business—Met with King Bard today, he agrees to the extension of the docks provided that Erebor provide 50% of funding. Is not yet ready to say whether Erebor goods off docks subject to Dale taxation. Balin & I think Bard is willing to allow free use of docks in the long run but doesn’t want to cede negotiations yet. Might be holding out until Erebor willing to fund docks entirely. I think it’s a good investment but don’t want to cede negotiations yet either. Balin coming back tomorrow to discuss with you.

With that done—how is Bilbo? Ori writes that he has dropped all his work & rarely leaves quarters this week. He sounds concerned. How concerned should I be, Uncle? I am coming home for a visit at the end of this week (strange having to plan a visit to a home that I can see from my bedroom window!) & is there anything I should bring him from Dale? Herbs, books, etc? Tilda & Sigrid are knitting a blanket for him. They say they should be done soon because it only needs to be a small blanket. The most consistent lesson I have learned from this diplomatic mission: the world of Men is obsessed with comments about height.

Wishing Bilbo the best & a speedy recovery,

Fili

PS—Did you get Kili’s latest letter? Mahal.

Despite everything, Thorin didn’t think Bilbo was sick. He’d seen sickness after all. In those devastating days of the forced migration, the straggling survivors of Erebor had lost as many to disease as to the wilderness. Sickness was a horrible retching, gasping, sweating, leaking, puking, shaking, mewling, bleeding, boiling kind of thing. Bilbo did none of that. In fact, he was less fussy than normal, though in retrospect that should have been Thorin’s first warning sign.

It was just sleeping after all, but that was enough. Bilbo had never been an early riser, but soon he was never out of bed before ten, then eleven, then noon. As he woke up later, he went to sleep earlier. On the nights when he visited Thorin’s chambers, Bilbo would pass out on the couch around the time they used to settle in for late night tea. Thorin started spending his evenings working while Bilbo slept, whatever papers he’d offered to read fanned out over his steadily rising and falling chest. When it was time for Thorin to go to bed, he took Bilbo with him by some unspoken agreement that, as long as he switched locations, it counted as a nap and then bedtime. They didn’t need to acknowledge it as an unbroken fifteen or sixteen hours of sleep each night. Thorin could lift Bilbo up and dump him on the mattress beside him without ever waking the hobbit. In the morning when Thorin woke, Bilbo would be still be in the same position that Thorin had left him.

One morning he’d been so unnervingly still that Thorin had pressed his fingers against Bilbo’s neck. His pulse had pounded there as steady as ever, and Thorin had felt silly for searching it out at
all. But it became part of his morning routine nonetheless. Sometimes Thorin woke with his hand
wrapped around Bilbo’s wrist, his fingers pressed against Bilbo’s pulse.

“You look pale, lad,” Oin said one dinner. “Have you gone outside lately?”

Bilbo sat with what had once been an uncharacteristic elbow on the table, his head propped up as
he ate. “Just the other day,” Bilbo said too easily for Thorin to trust it.

The next day after his afternoon council, Thorin begged off a meeting with Dwalin and coaxed
Bilbo out to the parapets with him. With the expanded reconstruction, they stretched all the way
around the mountain now. Thorin and Bilbo didn’t walk that far. They walked west for a few
minutes until the guards started thinning, and they found a bench. The afternoon sun painted the
little area. Bilbo tilted his head back in the warmth, his eyes shut, the wind teasing out his curls.
Thorin sat beside him, his hands clasped. He was less enamored with the sun than Bilbo (Thorin
had his suspicions that hobbits were at least half plant), but Thorin had grown up under it, as
distasteful as that was to a dwarf. He didn’t miss it, exactly. But it was familiar in a way it should
never have been. And there was something pleasant in the warmth. It was nothing and everything
like gold.

In the sunlight, it was easy to see how much weight Bilbo had lost. In the permanent shadows of
the mountain, baggy shirts and a careless eye could hide plenty. Here in the sunshine, Bilbo had
hollows where he never had before. Thorin reached over and pressed the flat of his hand against
Bilbo’s stomach.

“I’m not expecting, if that’s what you’re wondering,” Bilbo said, his eyes still closed.

“No, I imagine not. That would mean you have a belly, and you have none. We’ll have to ask
Beorn to send us some of his honey for his little bunny.”

Bilbo wrinkled his nose. “We’re very high up on the mountain, you know. Nothing but a thin ledge
keeping us from danger.”

“Are you threatening the king?”

“Yes.”

“Fair enough,” Thorin said. “With our history of parapets.”

They sat in silence a moment.

“If you apologize for the dragon sickness one more time, I’ll be very cross,” Bilbo said.

“I wasn’t going to,” Thorin replied, which they both knew was a lie and so was very easy to say.
Thorin found he only had discomfort lying to Bilbo when he thought Bilbo might actually believe
him. “You are very thin.”

“I’m lean.”

“You’ve never been lean before.”

“You haven’t known me that long. Six years is nothing to a dwarf.”

“You’re a hobbit, and I know you well enough,” Thorin said quietly. This time Bilbo did not
answer.
Bilbo made a noise that sounded like the beginning of an argument. Then he trailed off. Thorin glanced at him, and Bilbo stared out at the sky. “I might be ill,” Bilbo said at last. “Why not admit the possibility? You know I’m not one for pointless stoicism.”

“Or much stoicism at all,” Thorin said.

Bilbo murmured, “Or much stoicism at all, it’s true, it certainly hasn’t done dwarves one bit of good.”

Thorin snorted. “Then you’ll…” He trailed off. He wasn’t sure came next. He wasn’t up to date on the care and maintenance of hobbits. “Talk to Oin?”

Bilbo sighed. “I’ll talk to Oin. And perhaps a doctor from Dale. I doubt either race knows the secrets of hobbit anatomies, but between the two of you, someone ought to be able to figure something out.”

Thorin uttered not a word as Bilbo’s head dipped until it was resting against Thorin’s shoulder. Why shouldn’t Bilbo say he was sick? Why should it be so strange to hear aloud? After all, Bilbo was never mild about expressing discomfort before. Bilbo complained about colds and Bilbo complained about the damp and Bilbo complained about aches and missed meals and hard earth. Bilbo complained incessantly.

But Bilbo had held Thorin’s guts in his hands and pressed them back into him while murmuring, “It’s alright, the eagles are coming,” and afterwards complained only that his trousers had been stained by the blood. In five years, Bilbo had never mentioned Thorin’s shameful illness except to pardon him for it.

Bilbo filled up the air around with minute pettiness and simple joys, and the great triumphs and tragedies of the world he kept to himself. To his private thoughts. To his private writings. And Thorin could not help but think that if this sickness was meaningless, they would have spoken it aloud before.

Dear Uncle,

I know you don’t care, but Tauriel is truly very beautiful when she is killing spiders. And I am grateful for this because we have been killing many spiders. Many, many, many, many, many, many, many spiders. Good news is that now there are many, many, many, many, many, many, many dead spiders.

Uncle, I never imagined I would get bored with hunting and killing bear-sized spiders. How could this happen? Thankfully, Tauriel remains very beautiful. She is as very beautiful as our numerous spiders are very dead. She has taken to braiding her hair in front of her face so that it hangs like a beard. She does it as a joke, but it is very fetching and I’ve included a sketch.

Still working with Radagast. Radagast is a very strange wizard. Even by wizard standards. Strange, strange man. He says that he doesn’t know where Gandalf is, sorry.

I’m including the latest draft of my ballad about Tauriel. Please give feedback. I sent a copy to Fili, but he just send back a parchment with nothing but a little frowning face drawn upon it. I want to perform this for her on the next Durin’s Day feast! It needs to be good! Please tell me your thoughts. Better yet, give it to Bilbo. Actually, just give it to Bilbo right away.
Your loving nephew,

Kili

—Am adding this last part very quickly as just found out and need to dash out on mission—Bilbo is sick? Ori sounds very concerned! Make sure he gets better!! He is family!! Tell him me and Tauriel love him and hope he’s only down with a cold because when he had a cold in Laketown that one night it was very funny because he sounded like a duck crossed with a horn—have to go, raiding party moving out, tell Bilbo that he doesn’t have to edit my poem unless it would make him feel better!!!
When Thorin came back to his chambers that evening, Bilbo’s sleeping face look a little greener than usual as Oin’s empty tonic bottle gently smoked on the bedside table. Thorin sat on the edge of his bed and rested his hand on Bilbo’s stomach, feeling for that steady rise and fall of breath. He shook Bilbo gently. “Wake up,” Thorin said. Bilbo kept sleeping. “Bilbo, wake up.”

After a moment, Bilbo opened one bleary, unseeing eye. His hand found Thorin’s and rested upon it with a dead weight. “Something wrong?” he slurred, the words sliding together into a sludge of sounds.

Thorin didn’t realize how afraid he was that Bilbo wouldn’t stir until he had. “No,” Thorin said. “Go back to sleep.” And Bilbo, as always, did what Thorin asked of him.

My dear, darling, idiot brother,

Ered Luin remains fine. When I said I would be remaining a while longer, I didn’t mean that something was wrong. Just when we thought that we’d depleted the stores of the earth, Barda’s team found another iron deposit. I’m hesitant to leave while there is still good ore in the ground. You know how I feel about leaving a job half done. I plan to stay through the winter to oversee this mine opening, and then in the spring I will return to Erebor to see you and my boys.

In truth, I am not sure if I will stay in Erebor beyond my visit. I have not broached this before with you because of the strengths of your convictions on the matter of our home. However, your most recent letters have hinted at a trepidation that I recognize. This is a conversation to have in person, I think, but I will say this—however vibrant Erebor becomes, it will still seem a tomb to me. Dragons have lingering effects, as does grief. Both change a place tremendously and not for the better.

I am, of course, glad that you got it back for us. Perhaps it is not so much that I wanted to have it as that I wanted Smaug to not. And now he is dead, which is an undeniably happy ending, no matter what else happened. Everything else, let us save for face to face.

I have heard rumors that your hobbit is sick. I am sorry to hear that. Hobbits seem such terrifying fragile creatures, though yours has certainly endured enough to disprove that. Perhaps this brush with illness will encourage you to consider the fragility of life and the importance of celebrating it...? Have a commitment ceremony, dear brother. Whether it is one of marriage or partnership or what have you, I care not which. I would like a large party where I can get very drunk and cry about my big brother’s happy life. We can even invite Kili’s elf, provided he performs no poetry for her. I can forgive falling in love with one of Thranduil’s goons easier than I can forgive my son’s blank verse.

From the king of one mountain to the king of another,

Dis

Thorin reread his sister’s letter, his eyes lingering over tomb. On the couch, Bilbo read some tome of elvish poetry as he reclined, the book rested against his bent legs so he wouldn’t have to hold it up. He was doing better today than he had been for the last couple days, when he’d begged off
even leaving bed. Today, he’d insisted on getting at least as far as the study. “Too much sleep!” he’d said. “Maybe that’s the problem. How am I supposed to wake up if I never get out of bed?” Bilbo had fallen asleep on the couch immediately after he reached there, but Thorin was encouraged by this verve anyway.

Even if Ori seemed to have spent the last few weeks telling the entire line of Durin that Bilbo was wasting away from the plague.

“How is Kili’s poem?” Thorin asked as he got out paper to reply.

“In Khuzdul,” Bilbo replied. “But thankfully Tauriel doesn’t speak it either. How fares your family?”

“Fine,” Thorin said.

Bilbo raised an eyebrow. “You sound glum about that.”

“You told me once I have a glum accent.”

“Did I? That was very clever of me, wasn’t it. Well, your accent is thicker at the moment.”

Words sprung to Thorin’s lips. Then they hit the back of Thorin’s teeth and fell back down because Thorin was getting better at clamping his mouth shut at times like this. Bilbo could not be dangerously ill, no, but it had been two weeks since they sent for Gandalf and Bilbo’s health seemed no better. This wasn’t the time to worry him.

“I’ll be more worried if you don’t tell me what’s worrying you,” Bilbo said.

“Stop doing that,” Thorin said.

Bilbo had the smug look of someone who never intended to stop doing that. “Then tell me what’s wrong.”

Thorin sighed and ran his hands through his hair. It was clean and unadorned tonight. He’d hoped that Bilbo could braid it for him, but Bilbo’s hands still tremored when he held them up too long. That was one of Thorin’s worries, of course. That one, at least, Thorin would not say. At least not until the damn wizard finally wrote back. “Everyone is handling their duties well, outside of Erebor and within. It’s unsettling. I am tired of waiting for the next catastrophe.”

Bilbo leaned his head back against his pillow with a slight frown. “Are you worried that things are going too well?”

“You must concede,” Thorin said, “that this is an abnormal state for me.”

In response to Thorin’s perfectly reasonable point, Bilbo snorted. “Well, I’m sorry, but I refuse to be worried about that.”

“I wasn’t asking you to be,” Thorin protested. He looked down at Dis’s letter spread in front of him, looked down at the curling black ink of the t of tomb. “I am not trying to seek disaster,” he said quietly, still looking down. “But I know it always comes. I cannot spend another day and night hearing how good life is now when I know how trouble will return. We are haunted by it.” He folded Dis’s letter in half, so he wouldn’t read it again, and looked up.

Bilbo sprawled, asleep. And that was the end of Bilbo’s good day.
My dearest, darling, terrible wretch of a sister,

Your wish is my command. Next time we are face-to-face, we shall get drunk and cry about my life. It will be just like our young adulthood.

As you say, we shall talk about a great many things next time we are face-to-face. I have had thoughts that I am not yet ready to commit to words, even words ferried by a raven of Erebor. Although, they have proved more fallible as of late. Even your pet darling cannot track down my wizard, or else someone shot it out of the sky.

Bilbo is

Bilbo

For the last six weeks

I don’t want to think about

I am including Oin’s assessment of Bilbo’s health. If you or your dwarves have any suggestions, we would welcome them.

I can tell Kili to perform nothing, but you and I both know that sometimes leadership means not issuing a command you know will not be obeyed.

From the king of the more important mountain,

Thorin

For the rest of the week, Bilbo was asleep when Thorin left his rooms and asleep when he came back, and Thorin had nothing but the nurses’ assurances that Bilbo had been awake during the day. Bilbo would stir around evening. He could be up for almost an hour before he collapsed again. An hour or less, and then Thorin was left at the bedside, his hands clasped and his eyes closed as he listened to Bilbo breath in the dark.

It put Thorin, to put it mildly, in a bit of a bad mood.

“Perhaps we should speak, your majesty,” Balin said quietly as the mithril workers stormed out of council, perhaps on their way to agitate for secession from tyrannical kings who weren’t sympathetic to yet another argument about property allotment.

Thorin waited until the guards shut the door before he removed his crown. He tossed it on the table and rubbed his aching temples while it clattered. “We do nothing but speak,” he said. “You and I and everyone in this mountain. We could all do with a fair bit less speaking. Though perhaps hot air is all that keeps the mountain from collapsing.”

“That is good to hear,” Balin said, which was not the answer Thorin was expecting. “You should be amenable to what I have to say then. You’ve been distracted as of late.”
Thorin stroked his beard thoughtfully, the kingly substitution for burying your face in your hands and groaning for three hours. “I know.” Distracted was a nice way to say pig-headed, obstinate, belligerent, and a general pain for everyone to work with, but Thorin was fine with letting Balin leave that implied. Whether Balin said it or not, Thorin knew.

“Fili returns to Erebor tonight. Perhaps it is better that he stay here than continue his work in Dale,” Balin said carefully. “We could give him the chance to gain some experience with the throne.”

Thorin sat up a little straighter. “Are you suggesting I abdicate?” he asked softly. He put his hand down, his thumb just brushing his crown.

“Of course not, of course not,” Balin said hurriedly. “I’m suggesting you step back for a few weeks.”

The idea was appealing. It was so appealing that Thorin smashed it down immediately. “So I’m such a poor king that any reprieve from me would be welcome.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Balin said. “You’re a fine king, a great king. But even the greatest kings need holidays.”

Thorin habitually erased the compliment that came before the suggestion and said, “I don’t need a holiday. I need to get my work done.”

Balin raised his eyebrows, an act akin to a mountain range shifting. “How? By snarling at everyone who looks at you crossways?” Thorin felt a rush of heat—a flush of anger and embarrassment mixed together. Balin shook his head. “I worked with your grandfather when he was king, and it wasn’t until the sickness seized him that he refused to stop working.”

“I am not sick,” Thorin protested. Then, after gold flashed through his mind like lightning, he added more quietly, “I am handling my sickness.”

“And you’ve done a fine job,” Balin said. “You’ve done better than great many dwarves before you, and I’ll include your grandfather in that, as grand a king as he was. But lad, you got off your deathbed five years ago and you haven’t stopped working since. Now with Bilbo—”

Thorin flinched. Balin had the courtesy to pretend he didn’t notice. “Bilbo is fine,” Thorin said. “Bilbo has nothing to do with this.”

Balin made a dubious noise somewhere behind the beard. “Bilbo doesn’t weigh on your mind at all?”

If Balin had asked on a different day, maybe Thorin could have lied. But last night had been rough. Thorin had cut a meeting with the weavers guild short so he could hurry home during the hour that Bilbo was usually the most awake. He’d gotten there to find Bilbo still asleep, passed out and tangled in specially ordered Shire-made sheets.

“Bilbo,” Thorin had whispered, shaking his shoulder. Bilbo had given Thorin strict instructions to wake him up in the evenings if he wasn’t up already. Perhaps it was sleep begetting more sleep.

Bilbo had opened his eyes at last. They’d been milky and unseeing as he’d twisted in the sheets. He had rolled over onto his side and curled up, and Thorin had shook him again, almost shouting his name.

“It’s not is no out the way,” Bilbo had said, his jumbled words practically mewed as he curled tighter away from Thorin. That was all he spoke. Dream words. It took Thorin nearly five minutes
to coax Bilbo to a state of wakefulness that included lucidity.

“Come on,” Thorin had said, helping Bilbo sit up. It wasn’t hard. The hobbit was never heavy (at least by dwarf standards, which were the only standards that mattered), but Bilbo was even less so now. He felt like he was made from the same cotton as his sheets.

There was a dwarf once who had studied the weight of the earth and the weight of the stars and the weight of the spaces between the stars, and at the end of her days, she wanted to know how much a life weighed. So when illness pressed at her throat and her eyes could no longer see, she had her lifelong companion carry her to a set of scales and rest her body upon them. And when she died, the dwarf’s companion pushed off her tears long enough to note the shifting scales. That was how all of Durin’s folk knew the light that filled their forms and left in death weighed exactly three point seven grams, which was the kind of comforting precision dwarves appreciated in grief.

Holding Bilbo last night, Thorin had wondered if the body could waste away and leave nothing but the soul behind. Bilbo was growing so light he seemed that soon he would be nothing but the light itself.

Thorin remembered that strange weightlessness now as he sat with Balin. It was a strange feeling of something and nothing in his arms. “He’s not supposed to be sick,” Thorin said. He ran his thumb over the peak of his crown. He thought of Bilbo’s hand uncurling, about the acorn nestled there. About how Bilbo tucked that acorn into Thorin’s hand as Thorin breathed what he thought was his last. “He’s supposed to be the good that endures when the bad comes.”

Thorin did not look at Balin. Balin did not speak. Not right away. Instead he rested his hand on Thorin’s shoulder, just as he had done when Thorin was a child. Perhaps Balin had even done it in this same room while Thorin’s father and grandfather worked. The legacy was so thick in Erebor that Thorin could hardly breathe sometimes. There was so much history here, Thorin thought, this room where Thorin had grown up and worked and fled, this room where they’d found skeletons of dwarves dusted in ash and cleared them out and got back to work. That was why Thorin had come back. To his home. To his heritage. To the inheritance that was his and his people’s. That was what he had fought for. That was what he should care about.

But there was a part of Thorin that envied Bilbo for his illness. It was a small, petty, terrible part buried deep beneath worry and denial, but Thorin was intimately acquainted with the worst of himself. He couldn’t make himself a good person, he knew that, but he could learn the ways he was a bad one and work to avoid them. So Thorin recognized the envy that flared up at him sometimes when he looked down at Bilbo sleeping, sleeping, sleeping, as the world adjusted around him. He let it burn for a moment before he snuffed it out. When Thorin came back to his quarters and saw Bilbo each night, it was harder and harder to not crawl into bed with him. To wait until someone came to wake him and to say that he must have caught whatever Bilbo had. So he better stay here. In bed. Let someone else sit in the throne for a while.

“One week,” Thorin said, as shame and relief battled inside him. “Fili can act as steward for a week.”

Balin squeezed Thorin’s shoulder. “This is a good choice, your majesty. The wisest rulers know they need to rest.”

Thorin glanced at him. It was unsettling to see the relief lighting his face. “Or are you saying the wisest rulers are the ones that listen to your advice?”

Balin’s eyes crinkled. “I wouldn’t disagree.”
That evening, Thorin returned to his rooms later than usual and gave Bilbo’s nurse an extra coin for the overtime. Over a long dinner, Thorin had filled Fili in on his tasks, his upcoming meetings, his likely oncoming crises. Fili had nodded solemnly, taken notes, asked questions. He reminded Thorin so eerily of Frerin these days that Thorin had been almost glad when dinner was over. He loved his nephew, but he was too much surrounded by ghosts.

Thorin could catch up on his reading tonight. He hadn’t read anything fun for about ten years now. Or he could work on a project. He’d promised Bilbo a second armchair ages ago, but then there had been the tunnel collapse off the eastern catacombs, and after that Erebor had been receiving diplomats from the Iron Hills, and so on and so forth, the long litany of excuses that added up to work getting in the way of life and life slipping away. Thorin could finish that armchair this week. A get well present.

Thorin sat on the edge of his bed and brushed his finger against Bilbo’s cheek. “Or maybe I should simply go to sleep,” Thorin said quietly. “What do you think, Bilbo? Should I sleep?”

Bilbo said nothing, of course, but he made a good case for sleeping, stretched out there with his mouth half open and the faint flush of his cheeks. And Thorin might have felt like the rankest failure in the line of Durin as he handed his crown to Fili, but he’d handed over his morning meetings as well. Temptation always won sooner or later, Thorin thought as he slid between the sheets. Perhaps the best he could do was succumb to only the small pleasures.

“You’d be proud of that thought,” Thorin said to Bilbo, and if Bilbo stirred to a response, Thorin didn’t hear it. It was his own turn to fall, at last, into the blackness of a good night’s sleep.

There was a knife in the dark and it shone like fire. It melted as he looked at it, the sharp blade running like candle wax and as the rivulets rolled down, he realized that it was his hand that gripped it, his fist being coated in the molten viscous gold, gold, gold beyond measure, gold beyond sorrow, gold that poured over his hand and up his arm and over his shoulder, the gleam of gold with copper underneath as the heat puckered up the skin and burst out blood that ran down as the gold ran up, over his neck and into his mouth until he was gold, gold, gold inside and out—

Thorin woke and rolled over as he always did, his fingers finding Bilbo’s pulse before Thorin was even fully awake so that his first conscious thought was that, despite appearances, Bilbo was still alive. He could find the pulse and then feel silly about needing to afterwards. Thorin grasped Bilbo’s wrist and waited. It had been a year since he’d last had the nightmare. He was wondering when it would come back. In a way, Thorin liked his nightmares—or no, he didn’t like them, but they reminded him of what had been, they kept him on the right path, and why didn’t he feel a pulse.

Terror kicked off his blankets, sent him scrambling to his knees, straddling Bilbo’s still body, Thorin’s heart pounding as he searching for any sign that Bilbo’s was even beating, his hands that were still damp with his own cold sweat fumbling between wrist and neck and chest. “Bilbo!” Thorin said as he found nothing, nothing, nothing, and Bilbo didn’t move. “Bilbo!” Thorin grabbed him by the shoulders and shook, and Bilbo’s head started lolling limply, so limp that Thorin could snap Bilbo’s neck like this. He dropped Bilbo back to the mattress as Thorin’s hands shook. Bilbo stayed as he fell, his hair matted and his eye closed and his mouth half open. He almost looked surprised.

You are panicking, the cold part of him said. You are useless right now.
Thorin forced stillness upon himself. He paused, just a moment. It felt like an hour. It felt like deliberate cruelty. But he could do it, and he asked himself why. Because Bilbo was warm. No, more than that. Bilbo was hot. Dead bodies didn’t flush with fever.

Thorin kept a mirror on the bedside table to reflect candlelight. He grabbed it and held it just above Bilbo’s nose and mouth. Bilbo’s faint breath fogged the glass.

Thorin leaned down and kissed Bilbo’s forehead. He would have kissed his lips. But the breath was so small. He thought his own might strangle it.

He buried his face in Bilbo’s neck. There was his pulse, faint and buried and slow and weak.

“Bilbo,” Thorin whispered against his ear. But Bilbo would not wake.

And as he vaulted out of bed and ran, the cold part of him spoke again. Look, it said. It’s what you wanted. The waiting is over. The catastrophe is here.

Chapter End Notes

Guys, I was so wrong about how long this was going to be.
Chapter 3

When Fili and Kili were very young—which to Thorin's recollection still seemed like about two weeks ago—Dis had enjoyed finding all manner of new children's stories to read them. This was because Dis was not very good at storytelling on her own. Dis's own stories all tended to have curiously specific titles like “The Little Princeling Who Never Went to Sleep on Time and Was Eaten by an Orc” and “The Tale of How Only Elves Don't Wash Their Hands before Meals and You Don't Want to be an Elf, Do You?” So when Thorin would periodically leave Ered Luin for the piecework labor opportunities that defined his exile, he always tried to bring home some new tale he'd heard along the way. Both Dis and her children gratefully accepted them. Even if that didn't stop Dis from adding her own personal touches.

“And the seven dwarves laid out the princess in a beautiful glass casket,” Dis said, a son balanced on each knee. “And the oldest dwarf said, ‘Amazing, she is even uglier in death than she was in life.’ And his brother said, ‘Yes, it’s truly astonishing.’ But they mourned her anyway because she’d been a good friend—a dwarf in soul if not in face, as we say about those outsider whom she love. She’d been a kind girl who had looked after the dwarves in their exile, just as they’d looked after her, though clearly not as well as they should have since she didn’t know better than to accept fruit from strange women when someone was trying to kill her.”

Thorin, working on a commissioned brooch for a local noblewoman, coughed pointedly.

“But it was sad nonetheless,” Dis added, giving her brother a look over Fili and Kili’s heads that said she’d find it sadder if the princess had been a little smarter. “She lay there like the dead for seven days and seven nights while the dwarves mourned and worked, worked and mourned. On the eighth day, a white horse came galloping through the forest and into the clearing. Its rider was a lost lord of Rohan who had been wandering the woods since the winter moon rose. When he stumbled into the clearing, he gaped in wonder at the woman in the glass casket. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, and he fell in love instantly.”

“Ew,” Fili said.

“Yes, dear, that’s Men for you,” Dis replied. “He opened the casket and pressed his lips to hers.”

“Ew,” Kili said, though that might have been the only things Kili could say at that age was whatever Fili said first.

Dis tweaked his little nose. “Indeed, darling. The princess woke with a shudder. ‘Oh!’ she proclaimed. ‘You must be the stone of my heart!’

“Your heartstone?” the prince replied.

“Oh yes! The person my soul was crafted for, the person who’s soul was crafted for me! Only the stone of my heart could break the curse!” The princess was right, but the princess was also wrong,” Dis said. Her sons stared up, enraptured. “She’d lived so long and so well among our kind that she’d become one of ours. Mahal had granted her the soul of a Khazad. But her love was a Man. His heart was nothing but flesh. The passion that had woken her from the sleep of death frightened her love. He jumped on his horse and rode away without a goodbye back into the forest where he became lost once more and died among the foreign trees. And when the dwarves came home that evening from their work, they found their casket just as they had left it, with the princess lying inside. Now, however, she was dead. She had died of a broken heart, cracked right down the middle.”
Following a brief pause for effect, Dis patted Kili and Fili on their backs. “And now, I think it’s time for bed.”

After they’d tucked her disquieted children in, Thorin said his sister, “I recall that story ending in the princess and the lord living happily ever after when I recounted it to you.”

Dis settled next to him at the workbench and picked up the burin resting next to her etching work. “Yes, well,” she said with the kind of bitterness in her voice that she never let slip in while her children with in the room, “how many have you met in this life that have managed that?”

Few areas of Erebor had windows. Dwarves were naturally suspicious of rooms with holes in them. But Oin had found a room at the top of the medical bay that abutted, as closely as possible, the outside of the mountain, and so Bilbo's hospital room had a skylight. When noon came, the sunlight slanted through and lit his still body as if he were on display, a disquieting statue. *Illness in Repose*, an artist might title it.

"His eyes are still responsive to light," Oin was telling another dwarf healer as he pried open Bilbo's eyelids. "We haven't seen any movement or recognition though."

"Fever?" asked the other dwarf doctor who kept shooting nervous glances Thorin's way.

"Yes, but hobbits naturally run hotter than dwarves."

"Has someone sent a raven to the Shire?" asked a third dwarf who seemed to be trying to actively pretend Thorin wasn't in the room at all.

*Oh,* Thorin realized dimly, they're nervous because I'm king and I might do something terrible if I'm displeased.

Then he thought, *That's fair, I might.*

"I sent four ravens the morning I sent for Gandalf," Oin said. "Two came back with no response, the others came back with nothing helpful. That’s more than I can say for that wizard."

"We could send again," the third dwarf said. "His new state might be easier to diagnose."

"It can't hurt," Oin said. It was a phrase that Oin often used to mean, "It might not help either."

Thorin sat on his chair in the corner. His hands were clasped in front of him. His face was calm. He was not here, he thought. How strange. He was watching this from the skylight, looking down at the room of anxious dwarves scurrying around the hobbit who lay still as—well. As still as death. He could think that because he wasn't really here.

"Your majesty," Oin said quietly. After a moment, Thorin looked at him. Or rather, Thorin's body looked at him and the real Thorin looked at their exchange from about ten feet above and two feet to the left of all that fuss. "Perhaps you should get some food. You've been here for hours."

"Yes," Thorin said. Both statements were true. That didn't mean he was leaving, but they were both certainly true.

Oin looked like he had more to say to that, but there was a gentle knocking on the door that
sounded nothing like a healer’s. Healers, Thorin had learned today, did not knock so much as barge into rooms saying such things as, "Where's this patient—oh Mahal, your majesty, pardon me, I didn't see you there." This knock sounded light and delicate as bells, and so Thorin knew who it was before the door swung open.

"Your majesty," Tauriel said to Thorin as she stepped into the room, her head bowed in respect to both him and the low ceiling by the door.

Kili burst into the room behind her, looking around manically. "Where is he?" Kili asked, which Thorin thought was a silly question considering that Bilbo was laying right there, but on the other hand, Thorin had often enough this morning looked at the body and gone but that isn't him. "Uncle!" Kili said and bounded over to him, clasped their hands and pressed their foreheads together. "I can't believe this, I can't, we were coming home to surprise you and Fili with him finishing his week as steward, well, I mean we were escorting King Thranduil as part of his guard on his diplomatic mission to Dale and then we were coming to visit, but we got here this morning and the guards said—" What the guards said, Thorin didn't learn because Kili cut himself off, shaking his head like he could reject this. His eyes slid over to Bilbo as Tauriel glided over to him, the healers making way.

"But everything is going to be fine," Kili said, watching Tauriel hover her hands over Bilbo's face. "It's going to be fine."

That would make for a change, wouldn't it.

Thorin had learned a long time ago that he could do any task once it was small enough. The journey back to Erebor had started, for example, with finding a specific door in a quiet and green village. The key was plowing ahead without looking up. Once you cast your eyes past the step you were taking, you were lost. That was how Thorin had gotten through life. It would get him through lunch.

Pick up fork.

Pick up knife.

Spear meat.

Cut meat.

Raise meat to mouth.

Open mouth.

Place meat in mouth.

Close mouth.

Additional bites as needed.

"What do we know?" Kili asked as Thorin ate, step by step.

"That he won't wake," Thorin said. He paused as he reminded himself how to eat a piece of bread.
Kili scraped his spoon against the bottom of his bowl, his eyes lowered in thought. "What do you think is happening?"

*That I have brought him into peril after peril in exchange for a life in a tomb.*

Thorin frowned down at his bread.

Kili glanced at him nervously, glanced away, glanced back. "Do you remember that old story that Mum told us when we were little? I mean, the one about the princess of the world of Men who was pretty enough to threaten the crown or something like that, and she ran to the woods, and she ate that apple, and there were all those dwarves made a glass coffin because she was so pretty, even when she was poisoned and everyone thought she was dead? And Mum told us that the point was that Men told this story to each other to convince themselves that dwarves think their women are pretty, which she said anyone with eyes knows is wrong. I think the queen ate something's heart? Do you remember?"

"Yes, Kili," Thorin said, because it was clear that if Thorin didn't respond, Kili was going to keep describing until Thorin did. He put a piece of the bread in his mouth.

"Right. Er. Good." Kili spun the spoon between his fingers. "Well, I was thinking that in that story, the princess, she's sleeping and can't be woke. But then she does. So maybe Bilbo...ate something. Because he was too, er, attractive?"

Thorin swallowed the bread. He'd forgotten the bit about biting first though, so he choked almost immediately. Kili started thumping him on the back immediately. It was helpful until it was not.

"Kili!" Thorin coughed, batting off his nephew. “I’m fine.”

Kili paused, his arm mid-thump. “Are you?” he asked. He gave Thorin a weighty look. “Are you?”

“I’m breathing.”

“That’s not what I mean, Uncle.” Kili lowered his arm. He rested it, with a little hesitation, on Thorin’s shoulder. “I mean, how are you? With—all this. You’ve been very quiet. What are you thinking?”

What Thorin was thinking about was behavior unsuitable for a king. Then he remembered that Fili was still wearing his crown. Well. Thorin still couldn’t do what he was thinking about, he knew that. He couldn’t say it aloud either. Couldn’t even think about it, except in the oblique way you thought about things you couldn’t look at straight on—thoughts like *what if this plan fails* or *what if my grandfather and my father’s line does die out here because of me.* Some things you looked at sideways though a mirror and never named.

But at least Thorin was still not king right now. So he was entitled to at least a little more pettiness than usual. Thorin pushed his chair back and stood. Kili stepped back. “I’m going on a walk,” Thorin said.

“Er,” Kili said with the look of someone for whom his conversation was not going according to the hoped-for script. “Where?”

Thorin answered by leaving.
If you grabbed Thorin by the beard and dangled him off the side of the mountain, he couldn't tell you what exactly what happened that day to save his life. All he had were flashes of images, the connecting thread lost.

Flash—the medical bay where Tauriel pressed her fingers against Bilbo’s temples, her mouth downturned and fraught.

Flash—the halls of his fathers where the dwarves of the city gave him wide berth. Respect, perhaps. Also perhaps a healthy dose of caution. The dwarves of Erebor had a recent memory of the madness in the line of Durin.

Flash—the lower western archery halls where Dwalin stood by his side. “When did you get here?” Thorin asked.

"I've been following you for the last few miles,” Dwalin said. “Making sure you don’t wander off a pathway like a blind goat.”

“Ah. Good,” Thorin said and started walking again.

And if, while you were holding Thorin there in the open air as he swore by his mistreated beard to murder you for this offense, you asked him what he'd thought about that day, he couldn't tell you that either. Dread, sure. He was sure there was dread. There was grief, though for who or what Thorin couldn't keep straight. Grief, Thorin had learned, could not exist in discrete chunks. Each loss entwined with every other. So Thorin was likely thinking about grief. Perhaps there was some hope in there as well. Bilbo brought out hope more frequently than any other emotion, except perhaps exasperation and the niggling sense of inadequacy regarding one's baking abilities. But it was mostly hope Bilbo provided, hope and the good things that grew in hope's fertile soil. So Thorin likely thought that too.

Mostly though whatever Thorin thought was probably along the lines of, it's amazing how unconcerned I am that I am floating above my body looking down. What a strange sensation. What a relief to not be in that meat right now.

Flash—the weaving district. A slight glimmer in the air he didn’t think about. The moment of blind panic when the thread of silver clotheslined him across the throat. The dwarf merchant was quite apologetic, understandably as Dwalin glowered like it had been an assassination attempt, but Thorin coughed two times and thought, Ah well. That’s one way to come back to the meat again.

"Please, the fault was entirely mine," Thorin said the merchant trying very desperately to apologize.

Dwalin looked down at him. He let the merchant go. "Your majesty?" Dwalin asked cautiously, the way he did when company was standing right there. You could hardly start scolding a king when a citizen was watching.

Thorin nodded to the merchant and started walking again.

“Have you come back then?” Dwalin asked gruffly.

Thorin rubbed his throat. "How far are we from the medical bay?"

"Not far at all by cart," Dwalin said. "If your majesty doesn't mind, I've had my fill of walking today."

The cart Dwalin flagged down did not take them to the medical bay. It dropped them off outside
the gate to the royal quarters where Fili waited for them. "Uncle," he said.

Thorin spared a glare for Dwalin who shrugged unapologetically. "Your majesty," Thorin replied. "Unless you no longer wish to claim that title."

“If it's all the same to you,” Fili said, "I can stay acting king a while longer." He gave Thorin a wan smile. “This week is the meeting of three kings, after all. I’d hate to make you have to speak to Thranduil when you didn’t feel up to it.”

Fili looked older than Thorin remembered. Kingship did that to you. It made old men out of children.

"Then keep the crown," Thorin said. "Unless you and my guardsman are using it to send me to bed like a child."

“When Kili was sick, you banned him from the mountain for the sake of his health,” Fili said. “I wouldn’t expect you to hold yourself to lower standards.”

“Are you banning me from the mountain?”

“Uncle.”

It was very strange to hear Dis’s voice come out of her son’s mouth. Thorin could practically hear the unspoken, Don’t be smart.

“You need to sleep,” Fili said.

_Bilbo is doing enough of that for the both of us._ Thorin didn’t say it. He saw the thought pass across Fili’s face, and that was enough. “I’ll sleep,” Thorin lied. “But not here.”

Thorin suspected the head healer had some objection to royalty sleeping on a cot in one of his medical rooms, though Thorin wasn’t sure if that was because he had opinions about the dignity of royalty or opinions about overnight guests in the medical bay.

Either way, Thorin didn’t care. The thing about being the possibly mad member of the royal family is that people certainly did what you asked them too. Particularly when the acting king was standing behind you.

There was a part of Thorin that knew how difficult this behavior would make his life once he had to sit on the throne again. There was a far, far larger part of Thorin that did not care. It made for a novel change from his usual mindset which could be summed up as, as Bilbo would say, caring rather too much.

The head healer left. Fili left. Even Dwalin left, after Thorin promised that he's stay in this room tonight. It was an easy promise to make. He'd spent the day trying to wander away from this room, and that had brought him nothing but a bruise across his neck and aching feet. Leave this room? Thorin slid off his cot and sat on the edge of Bilbo’s bed. Where else could Thorin possibly be?

Bilbo’s hands felt colder than usual when Thorin touched one. It was a shift from the fever heat of the morning. He wrapped his hands around Bilbo's, tried to rub some warmth in. He warmed Bilbo's left hand. He warmed Bilbo's right hand. When he was done with his right hand, his left
hand must have been cold again so Thorin took it.

Do you remember that story, Kili had asked, and yes, Thorin had remembered, and yes, he'd thought about the parallels of the story himself. But Bilbo's death-sleep had been a long time coming. There was no apple found next to him in the bed, no scheming and beautiful dwarf ready to step up and take the credit. If you were going to strike the fairest in the land, you certainly wouldn't have struck Bilbo. Thorin meant in the nicest way possible, there wasn't a face in the world he found more beautiful, but even Thorin could admit that the lack of beard was unsettling. He'd told that to Bilbo enough. And Bilbo had always replied with something like, "Then you can only imagine what the beards must be like for me." They could while away an afternoon like that, when they had a free afternoon to while. If Bilbo was better, Thorin would make more free afternoons.

When, Thorin meant. When Bilbo was better.

Would they be a story someday? A foolish question, they already were. The magnum opus of retellings of the quest, "The Ballad of Thorin Oakenshield and Bilbo Baggins of the Shire," was a 37 part epic song that got trotted out by one bard or another every feast. It was possibly longer since last time he checked—the verses had an unsettling tendency to multiple when Thorin wasn't looking. He'd suspected that Bilbo was writing a few of them, especially the later verses which tended to have lines like, "Thorin the bold was king of the deep/too important was he to get any sleep/too valiant was he for any dates to keep/the hobbit ate his dinner alone."

The bards would get their endings. They always did sooner or later, and the endings were either glorious or tragic. Either one worked. Glory was what you hoped for and tragedy was what you generally got. As long as the tale was passionate, dwarves would love it. The hobbit who withered. The dwarf who withered with him. What a tale for the children.

And with a kiss, the prince woke the sleeping beauty.

Thorin snorted. It was ridiculous.

But, said the thoughts that never shut up, it felt like a next step. And haven't you been starved for a next step?

Without really thinking about it, because thinking would lead to hoping would lead to expecting would lead to disappointment, Thorin lowered his head until it hovered just above Bilbo's. Thorin shut his eyes. He stayed very still. He waited.

There. Just barely. The faintest hint of breath stirring Thorin's beard.

Suddenly, Thorin's mouth went dry. Suddenly, it felt like there was a bird trapped inside his ribcage.

Bilbo wasn't allowed to die. He wasn't. Thorin just had to make that clear to the world.

Thorin brushed his lips against Bilbo's, so lightly that he wondered if Bilbo could have felt it if he was awake. Thorin drew back a hair, licked his lips which felt now too harsh, too rough for anything as delicate as kissing, and he lowered himself again. He put some weight behind the kiss. He thought of a string of love that started down in his feet and threaded its way up through Thorin's entire body, through Thorin's legs and coiling in his stomach, wrapping itself through Thorin's ribs and weaving up through his heart. It circulated in his blood, but it was something thicker. Something stronger, something warmer, something whole. He thought of that, of love like something you could touch and grab and pulled. He grabbed it. He pulled.
Whatever strength I have, Thorin thought as he pressed his mouth to Bilbo's, let it pass to him.

Then Thorin sat back, just far enough to watch Bilbo's face. He cradled Bilbo's head in his hands and he waited. For what? For something. For a stirring. For a breath. Thorin held his own. Bilbo slept on.

And despite Thorin's best efforts, the hope had come as it had always come—unbidden but unshakeable. More painful than any sword through the gut.

What am I supposed to do? Thorin thought as his hands began to shake, as Bilbo's face began to blur. I don’t know. I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know. “Tell me, Bilbo,” Thorin whispered against his cheek. “You’re always so clever. You always find a way out. Please, please. Tell me what to do and I will do it. Anything. Anything.”

The only response was silence. And then the room wasn’t silent anymore.

From the doorway came the sound of soft rustling, the sound of someone who had decided it was time his presence was heard.

“As loathe as I am to interrupt the glorious King under the Mountain,” Thranduil said as Thorin turned to stare, “might I offer my help?”

“When is it you plan to return home?” Thorin asked as casually as he could manage while he carved another rose into the leg of a new, hobbit-sized armchair. It was good wood, sturdy and rich from an oak that had grown on the mountain side. Thorin was getting good at working with wood these days, in what little time he had in this first year of rebuilding a lost kingdom. He’d passed his time when he was laid up in bed whittling and the impulse stuck with him. Perhaps it was a homely craft ill-suited for a dwarven king, but no one had complained so far that Thorin’s artistic direction now excluded gold.

Bilbo, smoking from one of Thorin’s new hand-carved pipes, seemed to take no issue. He sat there puffing as Thorin worked. “I don’t know,” he said lightly. “I suppose I will have to send for my things soon, though I pity the dwarves who’d have to bring them here.”

Thorin’s hand slipped. Which was unfortunate when you were whittling.

“Thorin! Are you alright?”

“What do you mean, ‘send for your things?’” Thorin asked. Then he double-checked his thumb was still attached. It was, but less so than it had been before. He was sure that would become a priority in a few moments.

Bilbo glanced around and grimaced before he squatted down next to Thorin and whipped off his cravat. “Sawdust everywhere,” he muttered as he grabbed Thorin’s hand.

“What did you mean?” Thorin pressed.

Bilbo eyed Thorin’s hand with the quickness of someone who had seen too many wounds lately and pressed his cravat against it. “Keep pressure on that.” He stood and headed back towards Thorin’s washroom. “I’m getting some water so we can wash it. We might need to fetch a healer, it
looked deep.”

“You haven’t answered me,” Thorin called after him.

“Answered what?” Bilbo called back.

“What do you mean you’ll need to send for your things?”

Bilbo hurried back with a jug of water in hand and a cross look on face. “So I can read my books and sleep in my bed! Why did you chop off your thumb?”

“It’s fine.”

“You’re cradling a handful of blood. Give me that. And yes, Thorin, I will need things from Bag End,” Bilbo said as he rinsed Thorin’s cut. “I know you are apparently determined to build my quarters by hand, which I thank you for, but I do still have family heirlooms I would like to have, and I’m sorry, you will have to accept that I would like to own things you didn’t make.”

“But—” Thorin started.

“You’re the king! You’re very busy! I don’t want you spending your free time building furniture for me when you should be relaxing.”

“Building furniture is relaxing,” Thorin said, which wasn’t his main point but still had to be said. “I want you to be comfortable.”

“I am comfortable,” Bilbo said crossly, scowling down at Thorin’s now cleaned hand. He wrapped it in his cravat, tighter this time with a bandage knot that would make Oin proud. “You need stitches.”

“But what about when you go back?”

“Then you will still need stitches? Thorin, what are we talking about?”

“If your belongings are here,” Thorin asked slowly, “what happens when you move back to the Shire?”

Bilbo looked at him in surprise. “I am…not moving back to the Shire?” he said cautiously.

Thorin stared at him. Thorin stared a while longer. Thorin stared until Bilbo’s face had shifted from confusion to alarm.

“Were you—er. I mean to say.” Bilbo was slowly becoming the color of a tomato—a proper tomato, not the strange sickly ones that were all he’d managed in Erebor’s greenhouses so far. “If that’s fine?”

“You are not going home?”

There’s was something like panic in Bilbo’s eyes. Possibly because, as Thorin just realized, a bleeding dwarf had just shouted maniacally in his face. Bilbo cracked a little smile, looking at Thorin with an expression on his face that was a cross between alarm and building amusement. “Well, I rather thought, er, well, that, er.” He let go of Thorin’s hand to spread his own. “This was home now?”

There was a brief lull between them. Then Thorin tackled Bilbo, who squawked in the most delightfully Bilbo way.
“Really!” Bilbo said as Thorin pinned him. “Did you think I was decorating my bedroom because I was bored? Have you been waiting for me to rush out with a treasure chest and a quick goodbye once spring was here?”

Yes was the answer to that, but Thorin felt no need to say that now.

“I’m here to stay, Thorin,” Bilbo said a little softer. “And I’m here to stay as long as you’ll have me. Whether or not you’re crushing my chest in the process. You are, by the way.”

Thorin sat up. Bilbo took—in Thorin’s personal opinion—a few overdramatic breaths and looked up at him. “I am still ordering my books from the Shire,” Bilbo said.

“Along with anything else you could ever need,” Thorin said. “I’ll send out every dwarf in Erebor if that’s what it takes to bring it all back.”

Bilbo grinned. “You overestimate my library. Help me up.”

This shouldn’t have been the happiest moment of his life. It should have been the birth of his nephews or sitting at his grandfather’s side or walking at last back into Erebor. Thorin had the niggling feeling that happiness should have come with the crown they placed back on his head as the once-exiled dwarves of Erebor cheered in the halls of their old home. Those weren’t it though. Those should have been the peak moments of happiness in his life, and happiness had certainly come with those moments. The problem was that so had many other emotions. Duty, for example. Worry. Commitment. Shame.

Thorin helped Bilbo up and felt nothing but joy. Joy as sturdy and deep as the mountain. Joy—he thought in a very un-dwarven way—as big and blue as the open sky.

Thranduil sat on the edge of Bilbo’s bed.

It would have been a bizarre sentence at the best of times. If Bilbo was the utter domestic, the home and hearth and heart, Thranduil was—well. Thorin could call Thranduil many things. Thorin had called Thranduil many things. Thorin was thinking of a few right now. (Tyrant, for example. A bald-faced, wine-drunk elk lover, for another. And so on and so forth. Balin had banned them from sitting next to or directly across from each other at diplomatic meetings for just this reason.) Whatever insults Thorin could hurl Thranduil’s way (pointy-eared idiot, as just another possibility), even a neutral observer could admit that Thranduil belonged nowhere in this tableau, this sickroom, this place of healing in the heart of the greatest of the dwarven kingdoms. (He was too disgustingly tall, for one, though the fair part of Thorin conceded that he hadn’t minded height when it had been Tauriel’s.)

And yet. Here he was, his crown resting on the bedside table so he wouldn’t scratch Bilbo’s skin as he pressed their foreheads together.

“I have come to offer aid,” Thranduil had said as he’d swept into the room. “Before you ask, your nephew let me in and led me here. If you must rage, rage at him and spare me the bluster.”

That had, obviously, not been enough for Thorin. “Get out of here,” he’d snapped, fury drying the tears that were still wet on his cheeks. “Gloat over our misery in your own cursed kingdom.”

“I am not here to gloat, and if I were I would be gloating in Dale this evening while Bard judges
me for it,” Thranduil had said. “And are you so rich in help that you can afford to turn me away?”

Thranduil had at least possessed the decency to take Thorin’s silence as an answer. As soon as Thranduil had asked that, Thorin would have begged his help if that was what it had taken.

So here Thranduil was. Helping. Thorin stood on the other side of the bed, his hand curled around Bilbo’s. He waited.

After several long moments, Thranduil straightened. “He won't wake,” he said.

“Yes,” Thorin said curtly. “We have figured that out.”

Thranduil did not roll his eyes, but only because elves held themselves too good for such petty gestures. He implied eye-rolling instead. “That is not my observation of the present. That is my statement for the future. He will not wake.”

Thorin's hand twitched. If he'd been holding a rock, he would have crushed it into dust. But these were Bilbo's fingers underneath his so he stopped himself. He didn't need to think about it. It was an instinct at this point, keeping Bilbo safe.

Whatever good that instinct did. If it even mattered anymore.

Thranduil studied Thorin's face carefully. “Not in your care.”

“You know a way to make him better?” Thorin asked quietly. He dropped his eyes to Bilbo’s face. In the moonlight, he could be sleeping. In the moonlight, it looked as if Thorin could shake him awake if he needed to.

“Yes.”

“It was cruel of you not to say that immediately.”

Thranduil tilted his head. “You're right,” he said. If Thorin was in a different mood, that would have been the most beautiful phrase in the world to leave Thranduil's lips. “I apologize.”

Thorin looked up sharply. Thranduil looked back with the same expression that he always had, a sort of look that implied that he had seen you naked once from a very unflattering angle and that he was still laughing on the inside at the sight. Thorin couldn't spot any apology lingering on his face.

“What do I have to do?” Thorin asked.

“You?” Thranduil said. “Nothing. You are King under the Mountain, and it is the mountain that is killing him.” Thranduil stood, the full length of him unfurling until he loomed over the bed. He walked over to the small table against the back wall where Balin had hopefully laid out the late dinner Thorin hadn't eaten. Thranduil plucked up a pork roll and lightly grimaced. “Have you heard the tale of journey of Isell? It was my wife's favorite story to tell our son when he was young.”

“I don't have time for bedtime stories.”

“And yet you will listen,” Thranduil cautiously sniffed the roll and dropped it back on the plate. “I myself never shared her fondness for stories. Her tastes ran too maudlin for me. The full saga would take months to tell, so I shall give you the abridged version of the relevant section. Isell was an elf maiden who ran from her home when she was young and had great adventures that amuse young princelings and their wild mothers. Once when she was hunting along the coast, she heard
beautiful singing coming from the sea. She looked out, and there was a beautiful young maiden who looked to be swimming, and singing as she swam. She was a creature of the water, a skin-changer who was neither one nor the other but both at once. Though she had the tail of a fish, she had the beautiful head and torso of a woman, and Isell fell in love immediately.

“This is the abridged version?” Thorin asked.

“What I recounted can take up to a week to tell properly.”

“Just tell me what I have to do.”

“I am telling you.” Thranduil abandoned his survey of dwarf cuisine and poured himself a goblet of warm ale. “Though Isell and the seawoman loved each other, Isell could not live in the sea. The seawoman said, ‘Then I will join you on land.’ She skinchanged her tail into legs and for a time the women were happy. They explored the coast together as only a woman of the land and a woman of the sea could. Soon Isell missed the forests of her home. The seawoman said she would go with her for she had always longed to roam and see the world inland. As they set out however, the seawoman grew weaker and weaker. The further they went from the sea, the paler and thinner she grew. When they reached the heart of the forest, the seawoman fell. She slept and could not be woken, even by the greatest of our healers.”

Thorin tightened his fingers around Bilbo’s. With his other hand, he curled his fingers around Bilbo’s wrist. He waited, as he always did, for a pulse.

Thranduil braced himself before he sipped his ale. “Isell mourned the seawoman until her mother came to her and said, ‘She is not dead but sleeping. Some creatures belong to their land.’ Thus Isell carried her love back home to the sea from whence she had come. She lay the seawoman in the surf. When the foam of the sea hit her, the seawoman’s legs fused together back into a tail. She pushed herself out into the waves and disappeared from Isell without a word, as Isell stayed on the beach and wept for her lost love.”

There. Underneath Thorin’s fingers. One faint beat.

“So you see,” Thranduil said. He took another sip of his ale. “The answer is clear.”

“I roll Bilbo back out to sea,” Thorin said because he could not resist saying it, but his heart was beginning to pound again, hope fluttering its wings once more. He squashed it, as best he could. “A children’s story is not medicine.”

“It is amongst elves,” Thranduil said. “We have long lives and long histories. You do what you can to make the lessons stick in your mind. I should have expected a dwarf to distrust the wisdom of poetry.”

“Then speak to me in prose,” Thorin snapped.

“Erebor is killing your hobbit.”

The words rang in the room like the echo of a dropped hammer.

Thranduil met Thorin’s eyes and drank. “We belong to our land,” he said with a softness Thorin did not associated with the elf king. “Elves cannot survive inside a mountain. We starve without starlight. Dwarves have always fared poorly in the woods. Goblins cannot stand the sun. Men, alone of all creatures, can travel from realm to realm without consequence, but that is because they are never truly at home. The world kills them soon enough.”
“And Bilbo?” Thorin’s mouth was so dry he could scarcely form the words.

“There are adventurers of every race but seldom from the race of hobbits. The ones spoken of in lore rarely wandered too far from home or too long. He is six years from the Shire? A thousand miles away? And he has never once returned? Mr. Baggins has likely been sick longer than you suspect. Perhaps longer than he would suspect. For elves, it begins as mere weariness. Perhaps hobbits are the same. We fade gently but inevitably.” Thranduil drained his glass and poured himself a refill. He was no longer looking at Thorin. Pity, Thorin realized dimly through the muffled fog of his mind. Thranduil was pitying him.

“He must go home then,” Thorin said.

Thranduil paused for the faintest second, the goblet at his lips. “It is a long journey,” he said carefully. “He has been sick for quite some time.”

“But there is no other choice.”

“No,” Thranduil said. “There is not.”

“Then Bilbo must go home. And he must go home as quickly as possible. That is the beginning and the end of the matter.”

Thranduil tilted his head slightly, one of those little elf affectations that made Thorin’s nose itch. “Send your nephew off with him in morning. Kili is a fine warrior and a capable leader of whatever small retinue you assemble.”

Thorin’s mind was in plans, in action, in the next step, but that last comment dragged him back to the present for a moment. “You respect him,” Thorin said, perhaps a bit too incredulously.

Thranduil gave Thorin a cool look, like he was something disgusting that had caught on the hem of Thranduil’s robes. “Your nephew has performed admirably at his tasks in my kingdom, and he is a dwarf with the rare distinction of taste to fall in love with an elf. Why should I not speak highly of him?”

Thorin thought of the Kili he knew and said, with complete honestly, “No reason at all. He makes his people proud each day.”

“Charge him with swiftness and send him with haste to ferry Mr. Baggins home,” Thranduil said, putting his goblet down. He reached inside his robe and pulled out a small folded pouch, the size of Thorin’s palm. “After the battle five years ago, Mr. Baggins gave me the last of his leaf. I had been lax in returning the favor. I ordered this from the Shire to give to him. It may serve as some medicine to him on his way home. He needs neither food nor drink in his death sleep, but perhaps the smoke of a leaf grown in his land’s soil will do him good.” He held out the package. Thorin took it. He even managed a grateful nod while he did so.

“Thank you,” Thorin said. The words hardly even caught in his throat. “You’ve been uncharacteristically decent.”

This time, Thranduil did roll his eyes. Thorin was a little proud of himself. “I do know something of the difficulties when the people you love come in conflict with the land you rule,” Thranduil said. “I know how hard it can be to make the choice that kings must make.”

*But I am not king,* Thorin thought. *Fili wears my crown and wears it well.*

He had known once with an iron certainty he could barely articulate that he needed to return to
Erebor. Then he had returned, and the certainty had gone. It was back again. It curled along the ley lines of his love. Bilbo had followed Thorin across the earth once. Thorin would be the one to take him back. And—here at last he looked straight on at the thought he never let himself consider—he would not come home again. Thorin’s heart didn’t lie in Erebor anymore.

There was no a chance, in this world or the next, that he would let Bilbo pass from his sight. There. That was his plan. There was a story for the damn bards.

But Thorin saw no reason to mention that to Thranduil. Or to anyone else in Erebor tonight. They could find out when he was gone in the morning. “You can take the ale with you if you like,” Thorin said instead. Thorin thought that it was a testament to the strange dread and terrible, inescapable hope of this evening that he was happy that Thranduil did.
Bilbo woke as he always did on Sunday mornings. Reluctantly. Shouldn’t have stayed up drinking with Bofur, he thought to himself. Shouldn’t have stayed up late reading. Shouldn’t have gone for that midnight walk. Whatever I did. Shouldn’t have done it.

He didn’t think this literally, of course. The actual shape of his thoughts were closer akin to if a brain could pull the covers back up over itself. But the meaning was more or less the same.

Sundays were always the hardest mornings to wake on, which was why he tried to wake Sunday afternoon instead. Bilbo burnt down more candles Saturday nights than any other night of the week. That was a night for finishing books and bottles of wine. He liked to stay up until Saturday evening blended into Sunday morning, or maybe it wasn’t so much that he liked doing it as he couldn’t bloody well avoid it. He had a nocturnal bent that night of the week. Living alone for so long will do that to you, it was why (amongst other reasons and causes) he never permanently shared a bedroom. Staggering in at four in the morning was always easier when there was no one waiting up for you. And when he’d wake at last, begrudgingly and only in deference to his stomach that protested vehemently at the meals he’d slept though, he woke with a headache as well, not dissimilar to a hangover. Too much indulgence, whether alcohol or sleep, came back to bite you when the indulging was done.

Pleasantly enough, the only cure Bilbo had ever discovered for too much sleep was a cup of tea and still more sleep, so as Bilbo buried his face in his pillow, gathering his strength for the arduous task of standing up, he consoled himself with the thought that once he’d managed to shuffle himself to the kitchen and put on the kettle, he could grab whatever biscuits lingered from last week’s groceries and collapse for breakfast into his favorite armchair, the one in the library that by now would be from the sunlight streaming in through the window that overlooked the garden. The sunlight would illuminate in soft gold light the books Bilbo might spend his afternoon reading were it not a guarantee that he’d doze back off again the second breakfast was done.

It was such a good chair for napping in, being so thoroughly tattered. Thorin never understood that. Thorin had fetched it for him, or rather he’d done the kingly thing and had someone else do the fetching, and heaven knew that Thorin understood the value of family heirlooms, but Thorin always regarded Bilbo’s armchair like some poor ugly mutt adopted out of charity. Sometimes Thorin would stand next to it and conspicuously talk about his great skill at furniture crafting. Or repair. Or maybe just reupholstering. And Bilbo would smile and say something like, “Isn’t that handy?” and that would be the end of that. It had taken Bilbo twenty years to break in the headrest just so. He doubted even dwarven craft could replicated that determined labor of love.

And anyway, not that he could say this to Thorin, it felt like home.

Except there was something here that Bilbo’s sleep-drunk brain couldn’t quite puzzle out. Something was wrong, he knew that. He knew it must be obvious. But he couldn’t figure out what. (It should be said in Bilbo’s defense that the above narration takes creative liberty with the actual shape of his thoughts as they were occurring at the moment. A more accurate transcription would read something like, “Ugh. Ugh. Ugh. Tea.”)

Something was wrong. What was wrong? Maybe he should sleep on it. No! he thought suddenly, and the ferocity of it jerked him a little closer to awake. Something was wrong, and it was a
something that was something enough that Bilbo couldn’t get back to sleep until he’d unwound it. *Perhaps the library,* he thought, because that was what Bilbo did when he didn’t know what to do, he went to the library and settled into his armchair—but his armchair was in his private quarters now. Thorin had offered to have it placed in Bilbo’s special reading nook in Erebor’s library, but the library was nearly a mile away from Bilbo’s room, and that was too far. He sat in the chair when the homesickness struck, and when the homesickness stuck he preferred to sit alone. Sometimes alone felt like home too.

There was no window in Bilbo’s quarters. There couldn’t be. The rooms were in the heart of a mountain. Sunlight warmed nothing down there. And Bilbo preferred Thorin’s couch these days anyway (well, *Bilbo’s* couch to be honest about it, but Bilbo wasn’t about to admit that aloud where Thorin could hear and sulk about it) because Bilbo’s meager efforts on his armchair were one thing, but generations of Durins had beaten those couch cushions into submission. And maybe he’d walk to the library proper later, because exercise was important, and it was good to stay active and all those things Oin had been telling, and most importantly the kitchen was on the way to the library, and Bombur could always be counted on to leave a plate aside for him, but then again maybe he wouldn’t make it to the library after all, it being so far and all Bilbo managing to have done since waking was rolling over so that his closed eyes faced where he needed to get up and go. But the sunlight was so bright this afternoon that his eyelids went orange as dragon fire. It made a body want to bury their face right back down again until the sun was gone and the window empty. Except. Except there was no window in Bilbo’s quarters.

And the only time his rooms in Erebor smelled like dust and cotton and flowers was when Bilbo dreamt. And Bilbo was awake.

He opened his eyes, and Bag End greeted him.

*I dreamt it,* he thought without a moment’s hesitation or doubt. *I fell asleep with dwarf song in my ears and I dreamt it all.*

Bilbo tore himself to his feet. Then he found himself on the floor, the blanket he’d slept with for decades tangled around him as his legs refused to move as they ought. *I’ve been sick,* he thought, pulling himself forward on the floor to the door, and at the same time thinking, *don’t let them have left without me.* The hallways was empty, and Bilbo propped himself against the wall to stand, his legs shaking underneath him as they had on Ravenhill when Thorin had fallen and Bilbo had thought—but he was here, and the dwarves would have just finished breakfast and he could still catch up if only his legs would move.

In the same hall he had taken his first steps, Bilbo lurched like a toddler past the bedrooms where the dwarves had sprawled, past the pantry they had devastated, and fell sideways into the dining room, tidy as if no one had been there at all. The dwarves wouldn’t wait for him, their wagers and jokes notwithstanding, and Bilbo needed to pack, Bilbo needed to run, Bilbo needed to keep those idiots safe because they sure as hell wouldn’t do it themselves. Bilbo didn’t so much walk into his entry way as crash, and as he was beginning to drag himself to the door (he had dragged himself through worse than this) the door swung open.

“Mister Baggins!” said a female hobbit Bilbo did not know, her arms full of food. “You’re awake!”

By the time she finished that sentence, it was no longer true.
Bilbo woke. This time, he made a better go of it.

In the first minute of consciousness alone, he nearly opened his eyes and everything.

“Come on now, Mister Baggins,” someone said from about ten miles away. The voice belonged to a different world. One Bilbo had no part of. He couldn’t even be sure it existed.

The floppy wet thing that landed on his forehead with a soppy thwack, however, seemed firmly real.

“Up and at ‘em,” said the voice, considerably closer than before. Bilbo cracked open an eye. A trickle of water ran into it. “You nearly made it to the door, you can give me a look at those eyes of yours.”

Bilbo opened his eyes. It was a little like working some window shades where a few of the important strings were broken, and he couldn’t quite manage to get them open at the same time to the same degree, but they were open. After the film cleared from them, he was rewarded with the sight of a young woman peering down at him. “There we are.” She reached over and readjusted the washcloth on his forehead. “Well done, Mister Baggins.”

“Who are you?” Bilbo tried to ask, but the question had to jostle for a place on his tongue with other such pressing queries as “Why are you in my house?” and “Why am I in my house?” and “Why are we both in my house as you scrub my face?” That last one was currently taking precedence.

“Your fever’s broke quick as it came,” the hobbit said, as if she’d heard in Bilbo’s mumblings at least one of the questions he’d been aiming for. “Good news for you, though I’m afeared you’ll sweat yourself to death before you ever get to celebrate. I’ll sponge you down.”

Bilbo appreciated the sentiment, as his increasing awareness of his body informed him that he was drenched, but that was almost never a sentence you wanted to hear from a complete stranger at your bedside. He licked his lips. They were so dry his tongue nearly stuck to them. “Who…” he managed. His voice sounded like a toad being squeezed to death.

“Is he awake?” Another voice, a male one, and filled with more vigor than Bilbo thought he could handle at the moment. Bilbo turned his head to the doorway and saw his father staring back.

Bilbo closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Bungo Baggins had walked forward to the foot of the bed and in the process transformed into a young man. A stranger.

“Calm yourself, Mister Baggins,” the woman said, which seemed an odd statement since whatever Bilbo’s current problem was, he doubted it was too much energy. Then he saw her looking at the man at the end of the bed, the man who looked so much like Bilbo’s own father, and something clunked into place. A Baggins.

“Drogo?” Bilbo croaked. It was a blind guess. Drogo was, after all, the current caretaker and tenant of Bag End. Bilbo had never actually met the young man. He just knew that his mother had been fond of him when she’d gone off to visit the more distant members of her husband’s family, and that Drogo was not Lobelia. When Bilbo had been in Erebor, trying to decided how to handle his property, that had been all the information Bilbo had needed.

“He is awake!” Drogo yanked the hat off his head and held it to his chest with both hands. One hand was already occupied holding a fistful of weeds. “It’s very good to see you awake, sir. We’re chuffed to see you not dead and all like we thought. And, er, it’s very lovely to finally meet you
and thank you and whatnot for, you know, leaving me your house and all your belongings and all.”

“Mister Baggins,” said the female hobbit in a measured tone that fairly screamed nurse, “are those the herbs I sent you for.”

Drogo looked down at the stems he clutched, completed with roots caked in showering dirt. “Yes, er. Yes. I think. Apothecary said they’d never heard of agrimonia before, but Mistress Marrowwell said she had some in her garden I could take as long I help her out with weeding sometime this week. I don’t know if I got enough though, and I’ll be happy to get more, of course, but it’s just that she’s got the biggest garden this side of the Hill, and I don’t know how much weeding I can __”

“Very good,” the woman said briskly. “That’s plenty. It’s a powerful herb.”

Bilbo, who knew exactly what agrimonia was, croaked, “Poisonous.”

The woman dabbed Bilbo’s cheeks with the washcloth. Its cool touch felt blessedly good against his skin. That was how Bilbo figured out that he was flushed. “Yes, it’s that too. But a pinch of it in your tea’s never killed anyone who wasn’t dying already, and it’s the only herb I’ve heard of that’ll touch the heart of what’s ailing you. And you’ve a strange, powerful illness indeed.” She wiped down the back of his neck and then wrung the washcloth out into a basin on the bedside table. His washcloth. His basin. His bedside table. He’d know these objects all his life. When he settled in Erebor, they hadn’t been worth the effort to transport. He’d had to content himself with missing them, every minute of every day.

Bilbo closed his eyes and tried to swallow with a throat that felt as dry as sand. After a moment, he heard a gentle, “Here we are then,” as a cup pressed against his lips. Water, blessed water, poured a dribble at a time into his mouth. He would have cried at the joy of it if he wasn’t so covetous of his moisture right now. Bilbo didn’t dare risk a drop. He drank a glass and then another while the woman alternatively stroked his hair and checked his pulse. She could have gutted him like a fish if she liked so long as she didn’t stop him from drinking.

Towards the end of the second glass, Bilbo gagged. When she took the glass away, Bilbo managed to lift himself up a few inches trying to follow it before he collapsed. “You’ll need to take it easy,” she said. “It’s been a long while since you asked anything of your body, a good long while.”

“Gran always said you only get to cheat death once. Best not to press your luck,” Drogo supplied helpfully, still wringing his hat and herbs like he was strangling someone. If Bilbo’s mouth would just open properly, he’d tell Drogo that his gran sorely underestimated how much you could cheat death. Particular in the company of dwarves who courted it.

The woman held out the water again and cupped his head up as he took another sip. When the glass was done, she let him go and Bilbo flopped back down. Even swallowing was exhausting. But he felt better. The world felt a little sharper than it had before. His mind felt a little clearer. A little faster. His mouth very nearly worked. “How?” Bilbo said. It came out as “ow” which was also an accurate enough statement of his general condition. He swallowed and tried again. “How am I here?”

Drogo and the woman looked at each other. Drogo nearly twisted his hat clean in half. The woman turned back to Bilbo and picked up the washcloth again. “We were rather hoping you could tell us that.”
The woman’s name was Primula Brandybuck. She was seven years shy of majority, though you
wouldn’t know it unless she said. She seemed like the kind of hobbit who’d been born middle-aged
with her hair pulled back into a sensible bun. When her mother fell sick, Primula had nursed her
back to health. When her father fell sick, Primula nursed him onward to death. Both tasks she took
to with such easy aplomb that Missus Brownfoot, midwife for half the Shire (only by dint of the
other half being unfortunately male), took the young Primula under her wing, and there Primula
had stayed for the last decade.

The family had money, of course, there was no need for any daughter of the Brandybucks to hold
something as utilitarian as a job, but nursing suited Primula’s temperament. Primula was a thistle
that had been mistakenly named after a flower. For the sake of family pride, the Brandybucks had
convinced everyone that Primula was simply volunteering her time, a perfectly respectable pastime
for a better-off hobbit lass. It was only gauche if she actually made money. As a result, Primula
had learned how to stand still and smile softly until someone finally fetched her payment. She was
very good at waiting. Her hobbies included knitting and regarding you carefully over the top of her
reading glasses.

Bilbo learned very little of this over his first days of consciousness. At least, he didn’t learn the
explicit words. He managed to feel them nonetheless. It was the way one doesn’t need to open a
sack to get the shape of what’s inside it.

Instead, what Bilbo started to learn, in a story doled out in the moments between sleep and sleep,
was this:

Two weeks ago, Pippa Bracegirdle came into the tavern of the Wooly Foot, knocked back a cup of
ale, and announced to everyone in there (about half a dozen gadders at that time in the early
afternoon) that her poor nerves were jangled near to death from the horrible sight she’d just seen in
her pumpkin patch.

“What’s that then?” the tavern keeper, whose name was Octavio and who would repeat a slightly
more lurid version of this story to every customer he saw that day and until the day he died, asked
lazily.

Pippa would say nothing until she’d had another drink. Her nerves, you see, her poor, poor nerves,
and so on until Octavio slid another glass her way just to shut her up. She drowned with the verve
of a far nervier woman and exclaimed, “I’ve a dead hobbit in my pumpkin patch!”

Octavio and the half dozen miscreants in the tavern that day all agree that Pippa buried the lede.

Within ten minutes, about half the town milled anxiously on the other side of Pippa’s fence as
Constable Robin Lightfoot (nice lad, good family, a bit thick) regretted his choice of profession
and picked up a stick. “Er,” he said to the prone body lying five feet in front of him, its arms folded
across its chest like someone had prepped it for burial but forgot to stick it in the hole. “Can you
hear me then? Sir? Can you hear me?”

The body said nothing. Which seemed like a good argument that it was, in fact, a body. Robin
guessed, at least. He’d had never actually seen one of those before.

Robin looked down at the stick he’d picked up. From the fence behind him, his gaffer shouted, in
the time honored tradition of figuring out the dead from the dead drunk, “Give him a good poke,
lad!”
After the fifth good thump, Robin shouted back to the crowd, “I swear, he’s really dead. Ain’t even twitched.”

“Then either drag him out of the garden or chuck him over towards the watercress where he might do us some good,” Pippa’s sister shouted back from her perch on the fence. “The soil’s rubbish over there.”

“You’re not using a stranger’s dead body to fertilize my garden, Lobelia,” Pippa protested.

“Why not?”

“For one, it’s my bloody garden.”

“No one’s fertilizing their garden,” Robin said, in what he hoped was a very constabulary voice.

“My sister can fertilize her garden if she wants to fertilize her garden,” Lobelia snapped back.

“Bella, I’m not eating any watercress what grew out of a dead hobbit.”

“You don’t have to,” Lobelia said, “but you should be able to if you want.”

“We’re finding out who this is!” Robin shouted desperately. “So we can give him over to his loved ones so they can bury him.”

Lobelia gave Robin a look that made a man maybe, sort of, in his heart of hearts, think about pushing her into a mud puddle with the stick he’d just used to check the vivacity of some bloke in a pumpkin patch. “Then go check the body.”

Robin froze. “Check the—”

“Body,” she finished when Robin could not bring him too.

Robin looked back down at the stick in his hands. Maybe if he gave the body another thwack, something identifiable would pop out. Bit like a piñata, maybe. Seemed better than actually touching the body longer than a few seconds. Having never seen a dead body before, Robin had also never properly felt one before either, and he saw no reason to break that streak.

“Just search him already!” Lobelia heckled.

“You search him!” Robin snapped back.

Which, as it turned out, was a mistake. Lobelia Sackville-Baggins was many things, but she was not squeamish.

“Oi, Robin, did you appoint yourself a new deputy?” someone on the sidelines heckled as Primula shoved the hapless constable aside.

“Shove it,” Robin muttered, but without much conviction, distracted because Lobelia had frozen a foot in front of him. Robin didn’t follow her line of sight. Anything that made a woman like that freeze would probably kill Robin if he looked straight at it. He’d managed to go all this time only looking at the body through the corner of his eyes.

Lobelia brought her hands, still tucked in their neat white gloves, to her face. Robin thought for a moment she might be crying. She took two halting steps forward until the body lay right against the plaits of her feet. The crowd, once raucous behind her, was silent as she knelt. One hand left her mouth and went to rest, haltingly, as if she had rediscovered fear, on the body’s chest, right above
“D’you know him?” Robin asked gently. He watched Lobelia’s shoulders rise and fall. And then she nodded. “I’m sorry.” He didn’t know what else to say. The constabulary training had consisted almost entirely of where he was supposed to hang his truncheon so it didn’t make his trousers fall down and how to get free drinks without looking like you were angling for them. “Are you alright?” he hazarded, which seemed stupid the second it left his mouth.

Lobelia stood, her face perfectly dry. “I’m better than alright,” she said. “I’m the new owner of Bag End.”

“You should have seen your funeral,” Drogo said as Primula came back from the kitchen with a bowl of broth. The smell made Bilbo nauseated and ravenous. “You never saw such a fuss.”

“Flowers, crepe, draperies, music,” Primula said. “It had the makings of a good party, all things considered.”

“I hope my corpse didn’t get in the way of a good time,” Bilbo said dryly. Dryly in a more literal sense than usual. He couldn’t remember ever being this thirsty. He drank till he burst and then he drank some more. Primula said that was good, that meant his body was getting back to something close to how bodies ought to behave. She was right, even if sleeping and endlessly sleeping was infinitely more pleasant than forcing himself to stay awake. Even the minute act of swallowing exhausted him. But he was doing better. It was three days since he met Primula and Drogo, and today was the first day he’d managed to stay awake for more than twenty minutes.

“We were mourning good and proper, don’t you worry,” Drogo said. “It wasn’t until we found out that you weren’t dead that everything started getting improper.”

Bilbo’s eyes followed Primula’s hands as she stirred the broth. Steam rose from it like a shimmering mirage. “You still haven’t told me about how I went from being a corpse to a patient.”

“That’s my fault, I’m glad to say,” Primula said. Bilbo tried to stare at Primula in surprise, but his gaze was still caught in the soup’s gravitational pull. “It’s true. That’s why your cousin hired me to watch over you. Lobelia had you up on a fancy bier—”

“It was a good bier,” Drogo said.

“It was a good bier, and I imagine she’ll use it for many funerals to come.” Primula kept stirring the broth. Bilbo tried very hard not to drool. “So everyone who is supposed to talk talks, we’re crying into our handkerchiefs, it’s all quite affecting, and then afterwards there’s the bit where you walk past the body and have yourself a good look, which is what you came to the funeral for in the first place.”

Bilbo snorted. “Yes, the hobbit way. One last peek at the neighbor while they’re not looking.”

“We die as we live. And I was in line to see you like rest the rest of the Shire because you’d gone off to foreign parts, hadn’t you. I thought you might look terribly exciting.”

Bilbo, with a bit more effort than he was anticipating it would take, raised his perfectly unexciting arms. “Sorry to disappoint.”
Primula smiled, a little smile a bit like a slice of winter sun. “Disappoint? You were the first corpse I’ve ever seen that wrinkled his nose when I paid respects. I called the rector over and said, ‘I think there’s something off about this body.’ We put a little mirror over your mouth, after a moment the mirror fogged up, and long story short, here you are.”

There was, Bilbo would learn when Drogo and Primula thought him sufficiently recovered, a little bit more to the story than that. There was the screaming, for one. Resurrection sounds nice, but even if you wish Grandma was alive again, you don’t generally want to see her climb up out of the grave. And hobbits are a superstitious lot, though to be fair to them their superstitions aren’t unfounded. Bilbo has been from one end of the world to the other, and he can attest that there’s more horrors of more kinds than he’d ever dreamed. You take what luck you can get. Bombur spent the journey yelling at Bilbo for stealing pinches of salt to throw over his shoulder.

Anyway the point was that things had been touch and go for a bit, but Drogo managed to stop anyone at the funeral from torching Bilbo’s body. Quite a few attendees had been keen on a pyre. Bilbo had, after all, been to Foreign Parts and he’d returned under the most mysterious of circumstances. Who knew what horrific diseases they had out there in the big world? Might be anything. You hear about them boys who went off to the woods and came back with a wolf living in their skins? It really happened, me gaffer told me about it himself after he heard it down at the pub. Or maybe he’s been magicked. Left with a wizard, didn’t he? And with a mother like his, what did you expect? And how did he get back anyway? And in Lobelia’s childhood pumpkin patch? You know he never liked her, left his home to a perfect stranger rather than let her have it. Maybe he gets himself infected with some kind of foreign disease, maybe he gets himself all changed up by a wizard, and he thinks to himself, well, I’m going to die, aren’t I? And maybe he thinks to himself, but I never did like Lobelia, did I? That’s what I’d do, isn’t it, if I got myself made dangerous in Foreign Parts and I had someone I didn’t like, and if I would do it then anyone would…

They’d got as far as stacking the wood when Drogo managed to drag them off with convivial good charm and a promise of a round of drinks at the pub to celebrate his cousin’s unexpected recovery. Well. It was more like Drogo and his promise of an ale for everyone who put down the kindling right now, and he meant right now and he was looking at you, Missus Grubb, for shame.

“We got the excitement we wanted,” Primula said wryly, sharing a look with Drogo who inexplicably blushed a little. “I think that was the most lively funeral ‘round here since Farmer Boffin’s widow fist-fought the Diggle lass who gave too sweet a eulogy.”

Bilbo frowned. “I don’t remember that one.”

“It was three years ago. It was a very flattering eulogy for a bloke who was a bit of a miserable bastard. Widow Boffin figured that meant they must have been in love,” Drogo said. “I guess that wasn’t in any of the letters you got from home. Probably more important things to write about, eh?”

As it happened, in the five years that Bilbo had lived at Erebor, he’d received precisely seven letters from the Shire. Four were related to the task of getting all of his belongings from here to there. Two had been from Drogo first accepting his new position of executor of Bilbo’s property and then a follow-up about what exactly it was that Bilbo wanted to do. The last letter was from Lobelia. Bofur had done a dramatic reading of it at dinner, and the table concluded that never had they read such an articulate and impassioned declaration of war.

Bilbo settled back into his pillows. It wasn’t easy. Primula had been clear that he had to start spending more and more time upright to rebuild some of the muscles he’d lost, and so she’d taken
to stacking the pillows behind him with such verve that Bilbo wasn’t so much sitting up as leaning slightly forward as his mother’s throws tried to smother him from behind. “I’m curious. I can understand Lobelia celebrating my death in general,” Bilbo said. “But she of all people should know that she wouldn’t get Bag End if I died.”

“Well, she knew that when you die, all rights to Bag End pass to Mister Baggins.” Primula nodded at Drogo. “The other Mister Baggins.”

“Mister Drogo,” Drogo offered.

“Mister Drogo then. And I imagine she expected she could convince Mister Drogo to sell.”

“I would too,” Drogo said without an ounce of sheepishness. “Lobelia scares the fur of my feet.”

“It’s good I’m not dead then,” Bilbo muttered.

Drogo patted Bilbo on the knee with the cautious reserve of a man who wasn’t used to touching sick people. “We’re glad you’re not dead too. It’s been right pleasant sitting and chatting with you these days, when you’re awake and not lying there like maybe we should have put you in the ground, ‘cept it’s good we didn’t, not wanting to bury you alive and all.”

Bilbo wasn’t quite sure what to say to that except, “Yes. Well. Thank you.”

“I think at last the broth has cooled,” Primula said, lifting the bowl. Bilbo sat up instantly. “Open,” she said. Bilbo’s mouth opened so quick it felt like his jaw was clanking down. The broth hit his tongue like it was the first taste he had ever known. It was euphoric until it was not.

Luckily (depending on your definition of luck) Bilbo had nothing but water in his stomach when he started to gag. Luckier still (see previous notation) Primula was fast with a bucket. She had it under his mouth before the first heave.

“Well, we might have been overambitious trying to put food in you this early,” she said, rubbing Bilbo’s back, “but we’ll get there.”

Bilbo spat in the bucket in response.

When we tell stories, there are two important parts: the bits we put in and the bits we leave out. Take for example the illness.

“What illness?” Bilbo had asked Primula as she tipped her agrimonia tea into his mouth that first day of true consciousness.


Take for example how Bilbo’s new ability to imbibe drink implied a corollary, implied Primula coming over with a bedpan and the grace nurses have when they sense their patient’s shame. “This is good,” she told him. “This is what bodies do. Take in. Let out. This is you getting better.”

That was fine enough for the person bringing the bedpan to say. The person using it always has a different perspective.
Then let’s admit we have elided certain details. But illness leaves the sufferer with little enough privacy, and some details have no place in decent stories. After all, when Bilbo sat down to write the tale of the journey, he had the good sense to tactfully omit the rampant dysentery and pissing on trees. The dwarves might chronicle that bit, if they chose, and they might very well choose to do just that, being a far less squeamish race. But it certainly wasn’t a hobbit detail.

There is no such thing as the whole story. There are only stories and the sense we make of the gaps in between them.

“Thorin,” Bilbo had whispered through lips cracked from fever. “Where are you? Thorin?”

“He’s coming,” Primula lied as she washed his face. She hadn’t the faintest idea who Thorin was or even if that was the word Bilbo was saying, the fever slurring his words together into little more than a moan. But she said, “He’s coming,” nonetheless because from the moment she had opened the door to Bag End to see Bilbo prone on entryway floor, she’d known that he was dying. Illness is like that sometimes, recovery doing little more than to knock someone from a stable plateau to a downwards spiral. “Thorin’s on his way,” Primula said because sometimes all a patient needed was to hold on for one more hour. Bilbo held on one more hour. And then the next. And then the next, as Primula sat up beside him in the night and waited to see if she’d see die the same hobbit she saw come back to life.

“If I’m here, he’s here,” Bilbo kept saying to Primula as she tried to remember what Missus Brownfoot had always advised about the weird illnesses. “He must be here. Where is he? Where —” Bilbo didn’t so much cough as rasp, the desert of his throat surrendering.

They’re the same as the normal ones, 'cept you feel fancier about curing 'em. Don’t lose your common sense, lass. Yes, that was the advice Primula needed to remember. Mister Baggins was recovering from a fever; Primula would start there. “We don’t know,” Primula said, glancing at Drogo who clutched the rest of his freshly picked agrimony. He looked back at her helplessly and like he wished to be elsewhere. But he would stay, if she needed him. He was a good lad. (Primula thought nothing odd whatsoever about describing a man twelve years older than her as a lad. Next to him, she felt quite the marmish matron.)

“Why don’t we tell you what we know,” Primula said calmly, as she took Bilbo’s pulse, his wrist clammy under her fingers, “and we’ll see if it jogs anything for you?”

And as she kept a close eye on him, as she helped him take his baby steps back from death’s door, she started with Drogo’s help telling a story that opened something more or less like, “Two weeks ago, Pippa Bracegirdle came into the tavern of the Wooly Foot, knocked back a cup of ale, and announced to everyone in there (about half a dozen gadders at that time in the early afternoon) that her poor nerves were jangled near to death from the horrible sight she’d just seen in her pumpkin patch.”

“But I need to find Thorin,” Bilbo would protest, and Primula would go, “Shush, we haven’t even told you how Robin started beating you with a stick to see if you were dead.” And she pulled up his shirt. “Look,” Primula said, pointing to a mottled bruise underneath Bilbo’s ribs that he hadn’t noticed. It had blended in among the rest of the general ache.

Even in his delirium, Bilbo had enough to him senses to be offended.

“From what I hear,” Primula added at his indignant spluttering, “a few spectators were very skeptical about you being dead.”

“So what, he beat me until they had an answer either way?”
“Well. Yes.”

By the time they got up to telling the funeral, Primula thought Bilbo might live. It never occurred to Bilbo that he wouldn’t, and it would be quite a long while before Primula told him how close he had come. As he came out of the long days and nights of that first week, he grew further and further from the idea of his own death until it was with great difficulty that he remembered how very long he had been ill.

“Thorin must have done something,” he told Primula to keep his mind off the bowl she stirred. They were trying the broth again, for the fourth time. Bilbo was salivating and dry-heaving already. “I must not have been able to be cured at Erebor so he brought me here.”

“That makes sense,” Primula said.

Bilbo pulled his father’s housecoat tighter around himself. “Then where is he now?”

Primula offered him nothing in response except a spoonful of broth. This time, he kept it down.

How to describe the inescapable drumbeat of Thorin’s name in Bilbo’s head, as constant as the beat of Bilbo’s own heart? Well. That description will do for a start. But Bilbo had never been able to capture the way rhythm of Thorin in his thoughts, the way he took center stage at the strangest of moments, the way he suffused himself through Bilbo that every thought was colored by him. In Bilbo’s mind, Thorin was more a scent than a figure, wafting through even Bilbo’s memories that the actual Thorin had no part of. Bilbo’s childhood on the hills around Bag End seemed to have Thorin sitting in the garden watching him. Bilbo’s sleepless nights after his parents’ deaths seemed to Thorin lying on the other side of the bed.

Bilbo had spent five and a half years trying to write a good love poem for Thorin. Thus far, all he had was, “You’re there. You’re always there.”

Therefore, nine days after Bilbo awoke to find himself returned to his family home, he was relieved but not in the least surprised when Drogo burst into the bedroom as Primula finished up lunch and said excitedly, “There’s a dwarf! In the parlor! He says he’s a king!”

Why would Bilbo be surprised? These days, he lived his life expecting Thorin to be there wherever he turned.

Bilbo sat up in bed, tried not to black out from the sudden movement, and said, “Bring me to him.”

“Perhaps we ought to bring him to you,” Primula said.

Bilbo shook his head and immediately remembered the whole thing about avoiding sudden movement in the name of not fainting. “No. I need to go to him.”

Primula opened her mouth to protest, but Drogo got their first. “I’ll carry you there,” he said and he scooped Bilbo out of the bed and up into his arms.

That hadn’t been exactly what Bilbo was expecting, but Drogo was fleet of feet and strong of arm while Bilbo sometimes couldn’t roll himself over in bed without wanting to throw up on the floor, so Bilbo settled into his second cousin’s arms as Primula said, “By Eru, at least don’t drop him.”
Drogo carried Bilbo down the hallway, muttering, “A king! In my own kinsman’s house. Bless me, I say.” Bilbo patted down his hair and silently thanked Primula for fussing for diligently over his hygiene.

“Put me down here,” Bilbo hissed, as Drogo halted just outside the parlor. Primula was ready at Bilbo’s elbow as he put his feet on the ground. It was the first time he’d been out of bed since he’d woke in that horrible panic. They shook underneath him. Bilbo couldn’t say if it was from weakness or excitement.

“Lean on me,” Primula said as Bilbo’s knees started to buckle. “I’ll help you walk in.”

“Me too.” Drogo hooked his arm through Bilbo’s without waiting for a response.

On his other side, Bilbo took Primula’s proffered arm and nodded appreciatively. He could do little else. Just standing took all his will. But Thorin was in the parlor, Thorin was waiting for him, Thorin would see Bilbo walking in (even if it was on trembling legs, supported by two other hobbits) and he would know that all was well. If that wasn’t worth walking for, nothing was.

He took his first step, Primula and Drogo walking with him, and he took his next, and the next, and then he stood in the entry way to the parlor. A familiar back faced him, the arms clasped together in front. The long black hair was plaited back into the elaborate braids Bilbo had learned symbolized royalty abroad from their kingdom. The clothes were the familiar wear of the road. One item in particular, a long blue tunic battered by the elements that nonetheless spoke of grace, brought tears to Bilbo’s eyes. Nostalgia swept over Bilbo, powerful and potent as that first sip of broth. Thorin had not dressed so since the journey. He’d had no need to, as king.

Bilbo pushed himself free of Primula and Drogo. He felt quite capable of standing on his own now.

*Say something clever. Smile at him and say something clever.* But all he could think was, *you’re always there.*

Bilbo’s mouth was still frozen, half-open, waiting for words, when the dwarf turned.

“My dear Mister Baggins. So good to see you’re feeling better,” said Dis, a gleaming battleax ready in her hand. “Would you kindly tell me where my two-faced oathbreaker of a brother is?”

*It’s the bloody beards,* Bilbo thought. *You can never tell one dwarf from the other with all that mess on their face.*

He might have said something of the sort aloud if he hadn’t been in the process of fainting.

Chapter End Notes

Regarding the gap in time between posting the last chapter and posting this chapter: whoops. Hardcore whoops. If it's any consolation, it's partially because I needed to scrap everything I had and start over because I could not get the characters to work. Also I went on a cross-country roadtrip for a couple months, which was so weirdly inspirational for writing Hobbit fic. And so here we are! With a new narrator, a new voice, and a new setting. I'm also fairly certain that the gap in time between posting chapters is pretty accurate to the time skip in the fic so that's...cool?
Feel free to remind me that I'm supposed to be writing at my tumblr.
Chapter 5

My dear nephews,

I cannot hope for your forgiveness for what I now do, and I have neither the time nor the words to beg it if I did. I cannot even hope for your understanding, but I am selfish and will ask it of you nonetheless. Whatever you think of me, do not think me mad. I leave Erebor in full possession of my senses. My leaving I can blame on no one but myself.

Bilbo will die if he remains here. I cannot allow that to happen, not while I have breath in my body, not while it is my responsibility that he is here at all. He helped me return to my home. It is my turn to return him to his. It is good I go. My use at Erebor has come to its end. I often find myself thinking that perhaps I was meant to die in reclamation rather than linger in aftermath. It is for better minds the work of peace.

Fili—I would leave you the crown in fairer circumstances if I could. You wear it well. Kili, you will help him keep his head up high, as I would have helped Frerin in a better world. Your mother and I never spoke of him to you, to our shame. He would have loved you both. You would have made him proud. My beloved nephews, it is the pride of my life that you surpass me in greatness. I only pray that you keep each other safe. The throne is a millstone that makes dust of us all.

Love,

Thorin

Propped up in bed with half a dozen pillows, Bilbo finished the letter for a third time. It had taken him that many read-throughs to make sense of the words. His head was still fuzzy from the fainting, though apparently Drogo had managed to dive in time to stop Bilbo from hitting the ground. Thank heavens for small mercies, especially when big mercies—amongst other things—were nowhere to be found.

Bilbo pressed his fingers against the black lines of the signature. “That’s certainly Thorin.”

“Where are you hiding him?” Dis said, without turning around. She stood at Bilbo’s bedroom window, empty hands clasped behind her back. Bilbo would learn that Primula had forbade her entrance to the sickroom unless she left her ax outside. Dis had embedded it in Bilbo’s dining room table.

“I told you.” Bilbo ran his eyes down the letter again. “I don’t know where he is.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

Bilbo fell back against the pillows, his head starting to spin again after reading. He’d come to about half an hour ago tucked into his own bed. Primula had wanted him to sleep. Instead the moment he could sit up, Bilbo had called for Dis, and he was not prepared for what he had gotten. “Dis, I know less than you do. I have no idea where he is.”

“You lie. He wouldn’t leave you.”
Bilbo raised his arms. “Do you see him anywhere? Eru knows I’ve been looking around for him every minute I am awake, but maybe my eyes are fail me in my illness.”

Dis gave Bilbo a look that might have had Bilbo shrinking back had he not experience speaking to dragons. “Then he has left you too. Unsurprising, I suppose. He has proved himself adept at leaving those who need him most.”

“I don’t know where Thorin is,” Bilbo snapped. “But I know he has dedicated his life to the need of others. If he has left Erebor—”

“He has. And my children sit on the throne with the weight of a kingdom on their backs with a thousand axes pressed to their throats.”

“I mean, yes, sure, Fili is king right now. But we’ll get Thorin sorted out and send him back and —”

“Thorin abdicated,” Dis said. She cast her eyes out the window of Bilbo’s bedroom. “That’s what it means to leave the kingdom while you are king, to leave the crown behind. Thorin knew what he was doing, and he chose to abdicate. For you.”

Abdicated. Bilbo looked down at the letter in his hands. He still didn’t believe it, still wasn’t convinced someone had forged something, or perhaps Bilbo was still dreaming, or Bofur had engineered truly the most impressive prank in the history of Middle-earth. But Bilbo knew Thorin’s handwriting, and Bilbo knew Thorin. And there was a small part of him that wasn’t entirely as surprised as he ought to be.

It is good I go.

“You say he cares about those who need him.” Dis’s voice was quiet with scorn. “Then where is he?”

“What are you expecting me to say?” Bilbo shoved away concern and met her scorn with his own. “Yes, I have the abdicated king of Erebor staying in my guest bedroom, he’s taken up winetasting and whittling?”

Dis whirled around at Bilbo, her mouth hard as granite. “You are here. And my brother would not leave you.” She jabbed her finger at the letter in Bilbo’s hands. “That’s the damn problem. Ergo, it is not unreasonable to think that after the coward absconded here, he hid himself somewhere in this fetid little hole in the earth at the first sign of family.”

“You will speak better of him in my house.”

“Let him defend himself,” Dis snarled.

“Look at this then!” Drogo said, bursting into the room with the timing of someone who’d been charged with keeping a strange dwarf king from murdering a patient. “Everyone reconnecting, eh? Catching up, eh? That’s lovely. I got scones from Rosamund Sandyman, isn’t that nice. Cheers, Mistress Dwarf, you can’t visit Hobbiton and think you’ll get away without sampling one of Rosamund’s famous scones.”

Dis looked as if there were a great many things she expected she could get away with, up to and including deadly assault with a bakery item. Drogo’s easy smile didn’t not falter. He seemed like the kind of fellow who would have amicably sat down Smaug for a good long chat about maybe giving back all that gold he’d found, eh?
Dis grabbed the window and jerked it open. The wind came cutting in like the slice of a blade. Bilbo had not realized how cold the weather had grown. The last he could remember, it had been the beginning of spring. Dis stuck her hand out, and a fat black raven swooped down to perch on her arm.

“My brother is right,” she said, stroking a finger along the throat of her bird. “I do not understand why he abandoned his kingdom and his family for this edge of the world. But if he is anywhere, he will return here, and hopefully with Dwalin at his side for he stole him too. I’d like him returned as well. He was to be my children’s bodyguard and they have dire need of him, Erebor being in the chaos that it is.” She cast Bilbo a sidelong look, cold as the wind outside. “You won’t begrudge me staying of course. You are my brother-in-law.”

With that, Dis swept past Drogo and slammed the door shut behind her.

And so it was that Dis came to live at Bag End.

She informed Bilbo that while fifty of her men scoured the countryside for her brother and cousin, she would wait right here until he brought himself back. And with this announcement, she moved in to the grand guest room at the end of the hall, the one that had been reserved for Bilbo’s maternal grandfather, patriarch supreme of the wilder side of the Shire. Dis had brought only a small pack bag with her, Primula informed Bilbo. A small pack bag and a large battle ax. The Durins knew how to travel light.

“She’s put in several orders for dinners already,” Primula said, with just enough censure in her voice to make Bilbo wince.

“I’m sorry you’re the one dealing with her,” he said, though he wasn’t quite sorry enough to offer to do it himself.

Primula shrugged. “I’ve handled worse. The hardest part of treating any illness is handling the relatives of the ill. And she is in some pain herself. I’ll let her lash out some, her fearing so for her brother and children, and if she goes too hard, I’ll have words with her on softness.” This she said while finishing folding the washrags that she had spent the afternoon laundering, and so she said it as if such magnanimity of spirit were the most casual thing in the world. Maybe it was, and it only seemed so impressive to Bilbo because he was feeling like such a bitter prick.

“That’s family for you,” Primula concluded, and asked what variation on soup Bilbo wanted for dinner.

Family. Bilbo didn’t know how he felt about that. After all, Primula was right in a sense—Bilbo and Dis were now kin. And in another equally legalistic sense, it was a bit more complicated than that.

It was Drogo who asked. Primula had evidently decided it was none of her business what Bilbo did; Drogo agreed that it wasn’t his either, but like any proper hobbit, he’d still like to know.

“Good news,” Drogo said as they sat in the kitchen the morning after Dis’ arrival, Bilbo reclining in his mother’s old rocking chair, Drogo with his shirt sleeves rolled up as he shucked the last of the autumn corn. “Missus Underhill will die any day now.”
“Hurrah?” Bilbo offered.

“Well no, right, I hear how that might sound. But she’s got that wicker chair with wheels what
them Bree hobbits sent us last year so she could get around after she couldn’t walk. Her daughter
said we’re welcome to it when her mother passes.”

Bilbo thought about being wheeled around in a chair in which an elderly neighbor had spent her
last days and weighed mobility against morbidity. Mobility won. “Good indeed,” Bilbo said. “I just
hope she doesn’t die in the chair itself.”

“Ah some soap and water, and you won’t even notice, will you? And it’s just till you’re fully up on
your feet again.” Drogo kept shucking corn. He’d never looked so much like Bilbo’s father as he
had that first day, Bilbo’s eyes still clouded with fever, but Drogo was too much of a Baggins not to
look like he belonged in the house. He was probably more of a Baggins than Bilbo was. He sat in
Bungo’s chair as if it was his plump frame that had been the one stretching out the chair for the last
decades. He looked more like Bungo’s son than Bilbo did, which was an unsettling thought and so
one Bilbo thrust away vigorously in favor of focusing on the ear of corn he’d been savaging for the
last minute. There was still a strange disconnect between thought and action when it came to the
auxiliary parts of the body, a slight delay where there had never been one before. Breathing,
talking, eating, drinking, he had those down pat by now, likely because the distance between brain
and destination was short that even Thorin could have walked it without getting lost. It was when
he was trying to get orders from his brain to, say, his hands that things got a little muddled. He kept
aiming to pluck the hair of the corn and kept grabbing the whole thing like the hilt to a sword with
a supremely useless blade. Almost as useless as its wielder.

Bilbo was so distracted by the herculean task of pinching the stalk that he didn’t notice that Drogo
had asked something until the air around them got that feeling it gets when the silence has turned

Drogo’s eyes were fixed on his own corn (shucked in five seconds flat, much to Bilbo’s disgust). “I
was just wondering—you and Dis, eh?”

“‘Eh,’ what?” Bilbo asked, a bit snippier than he intended as his hands kept inadvertently
strangling the corn.

Drogo had the look of a man who was trying very hard to be casual. “Well, it’s that she said you
were her brother-in-law.”

Ah, Bilbo thought. “Yes.”

“And she only mentioned having the one brother.”

“That she did.”

“And Eru knows it’s a bit hard to tell which is which, considering all that hair in all the wrong
places, never so much as a wisp of cotton on their toes, and all that battle armor. So any dwarf
could be any dwarf, you know what I mean?”

Bilbo took a second to decipher what Drogo actually did mean, and replied, “We are fairly certain
that her brother is her brother and not, for example, her sister.”

“Good, good,” Drogo said hurriedly. There was a long pause which Bilbo refused to break, and
Drogo said, “It’s just that you’re her brother-in-law.”

Bilbo sighed. “Yes,” he said, giving an answer he didn’t fully believe himself. “Yes, I am.”
“Ah.” Drogo tapped the side of his nose. “Say no more.”

And about a minute later: “It’s just…how exactly does that work then?”

“The usual way,” Dis said from the doorway. Bilbo and Drogo jumped. Or Drogo jumped. Bilbo started to and then got winded.

Dis smiled serenely and plucked an apple from the bowl on the counter. She winked at Bilbo as she took a bite. “Brother dearest,” she said. “You’re not wearing your wedding ring.”

“I believe I lost it somewhere between this end of the world and the other,” Bilbo said. “But as I was unconscious at the time, you’ll have to forgive me for not knowing for sure.”

“Thorin made that ring for you himself,” Dis said.

“I know. When he returns, I’ll ask him for a new one.”

“We had no idea, Mister Bilbo,” Drogo said cheerily. “You ought to have sent an announcement home at least so we could send you blessings. Imagine, the bachelor of Hobbiton married!”

“More or less,” Bilbo said. The situation was a bit more complicated than that, but he barely understood it when he was healthy and certainly didn’t feel like explaining it now. There was rather more advanced law as part of it than he was prepared to grapple at the moment.

“It boggles the mind, doesn’t it,” Dis said. And then to Bilbo, “You never had siblings growing up, no?”

“No,” Bilbo said as he managed to finally yank off the corn husk. “I was a very happy only child.”

“He’s a bit of an anomaly that way, your majesty,” Drogo said, clearly under the impression that someone needed to invite Dis into the culture of the Shire. Bilbo thought that was very decent of him. He disagreed with the instinct, but it was decent. “Most of us have near a dozen of our siblings running around.”

“I’ve gathered,” Dis said. “Your nurse was kind enough to escort me to market today and I saw the vast plentitude of children amassed wherever I walked. Your race is frighteningly fecund. No wonder our arbiters were so concerned Mister Baggins here would rob our heirs of their throne.”

“It does say something for the sad state of dwarven sexual education, doesn’t it?” Bilbo said.

“So your majesty, did you enjoy the market,” Drogo said hurriedly before either Bilbo or Dis could start up again.

Dis ignored Drogo and reached into the pockets of her dress to pull out several envelopes that looked as if they’d once been cream colored before nature happened to them. She tossed them on the table in front of Bilbo where they nearly slid into his lap. “I sent my ravens back to Erebor with word that you are alive. The rest of the situation, I think we shall keep to ourselves for the time being. But these I carried with me from Eren Luin. In the…passion of our reunion yesterday, I forgot to give them to you.”

Bilbo picked up the letters hurriedly and turned them over to see the seal of Erebor upon them with Bilbo’s name written above the wax. “These were sent to Eren Luin?”

“When Thorin and Dwalin absconded with you, we knew they would head towards the Shire. Besides Thorin’s own note, the bastard brat of Mirkwood informed us during the chaos of that
morning what poison he dripped to Thorin of your illness, telling him that the Shire would be the only place you could heal. But when our ravens could not find you here, they turned instead to—"

“Sorry,” Bilbo said, “but did you say that Thranduil was the one who told Thorin that he should take me back to the Shire?”

“Yes, it was on the counsel of that piece of filth.”

“Thranduil.”

“Yes.”

“Thranduil told Thorin what he ought to do and Thorin did it.”

“Astonishingly.”

Bilbo sat back in his chair. “Thorin really does love me.”

“The problem with Thorin’s love has never been our surety of it,” Dis muttered.

Bilbo ran his fingers over the seal. The sight of the crown and raven stamped in red wax made him want to cry. Sitting amongst the kitchen he had longed for all his days and nights at Erebor, Bilbo thought of Erebor and wanted to cry from homesickness.

And then Bilbo said, “Wait, sorry, one moment.” He looked up from the letters, because to read them right now would be to weep in his kitchen and Drogo, bless him, would probably try to comfort him. Which was not something that Bilbo was in the mood to experience, not when he had a far more company-appropriate need that had just came to mind. “What exactly was it I was sick with?”

Let’s take a moment to discuss marriage.

To say that Bilbo was married would be partially a statement of truth but mostly a lie of omission. Also, possibly just the normal type of lie, and it really depended on your definition of marriage. Bilbo was, strictly speaking, married to Thorin. But it wasn’t a union that would get the neighbors to address invitations to Mister and Mister Baggins, though there wasn’t any kind of union that would get his neighbors to do that. In general, the Shire allowed for two acceptable lifestyle choices: happily married and “they keep it to themselves, don’t they, and they’re always so nice when you run into them at market, I mean, you’d never even guess.” Bilbo had belonged to a third category, one of tarnished respectability in the Shire, that of confirmed bachelor (though he’d been shifting towards “neighborhood hermit” as he finished out his forties).

Alone was not exactly an option.

In that regard, in the sentence “Bilbo Baggins disappeared for six years only to return rich, dead, and married to a dwarf king,” that last bit would have been the most understandable to his neighbors. Everyone’s got someone in the family who ran off to marry a weirdo.

But, and this was a fairly large but, Bilbo was not sure he was actually married.
“A proper marriage requires twenty years of courtship,” Thorin had explained apologetically in Bilbo’s seventh month in Erebor.

“Let’s skip that then,” Bilbo had replied, as he privately weighed the idea his twentieth year with Thorin. The thought felt good. Like a walking stick carved specifically for his own hand, like a favorite path through the woods that his own feet had carved.

“There are various other levels of commitment that we might take advantage of,” Thorin said. He spread the paper, the dozens of papers, on the dinner table in front of them. “I have taken the liberty of drawing up a few preliminary contracts to give you some idea of what our union might resemble, and Balin has prepared a list of advocates who will be happy to argue your case before a neutral sitting judge who will be unaffected by the uniqueness of our merging.”

“Uniqueness,” Bilbo repeated dubiously, picking up the paper closest to him. He started at random halfway down the page and read the second partner (hereafter designated the Consort) renders unto the legal, political, and judicial apparati of the state (encompassing the Kingdom of Erebor and all affiliated protectorates [see subsection v.ii. for relevant listings], outposts [see subsection v.iii. for relevant listings], colonies [see subsection v.iv for relevant listings], and all other Areas, Regions, Towns, Mines, Villages, Ports, and unlisted distinct legal entities answerable to the Arkenstone [see subsection v.v for relevant listings] [any places not listed but bound by other contracts to be answerable remain within the kingdom and are under the auspices of this contract]) the rights entitled to the inheritor of the Consort, to be enumerated below.

Bilbo stopped reading.

Romance was one thing to the dwarves, a thing that involved carving and forging and declarations but also more poetry recitation and handholding than Bilbo thought the race capable of. But romance had nothing to do with marriage, that legal institution, and Thorin pored across the wedding contracts like Bilbo was proposing a new tariff on mithril.

“There is no reason this must be so complicated,” Bilbo said one evening as Thorin’s arbiter and Bilbo’s went off to discuss the finer points of the rights due to any biological children of the union. (“As I have stated many times there will not be any biological children of this union,” Bilbo had explained very carefully a few minutes ago.

“As we have an incomplete understanding of your race’s physiology, we must have the provision in place,” Thorin’s arbiter had replied with a tone that sounded like he expected nothing less from the person on the other side of the table to be smuggling a undisclosed womb underneath their waistcoat.

“I have an incomplete understanding of dwarf physiology, but I’m not extending the contract negotiations for another seven days because I want a clause in place in case dwarves secretly excrete acid in their sleep and no one told me,” Bilbo had said, at which point Bilbo’s arbiter had interceded in the name of arbitrating.)

“This is one of the easiest unions I have ever witnessed,” Thorin said. “You’re asking for so little.”

“You’re giving me the land rights to everything outside the mountain until we reach Dale’s holdings.”

“Bilbo,” Thorin said very affectionately, “no one cares about the land outside the mountain.”

Bilbo snorted as Thorin laughed. “See if you’re laughing when I keep all the vegetables I grow to myself. I’ll endow the land away as soon as it’s mine, you know that.”
Thorin looked pained. “You’ve informed me, yes.”

“I can’t be responsible for the entire acreage of Erebor, love. Or half of the treasury, or the ancient treasures of your people, or, or, or anything that you keep trying to get me to take. I don’t want them.”

“I know you don’t want them,” Thorin said, the same way that he might have said I love you. “I would give you a union trade worthy of you.”

“All I want is you,” Bilbo said simply. He took Thorin’s hand. “We don’t need a ninety-seven page contract for that.”

Thorin looked away, his eyes wet. He brought Bilbo’s hand to his lips, kissed the knuckles. Bilbo felt his own eyes begin to well. “The contract will be closer to two hundred pages by the time we’re done.”

“Unacceptable.”

The final contract was one hundred seventy-two pages. Bilbo thought of his mother telling him that marriage was a compromise and signed next to Thorin’s name. The gist of it boiled down to this: At his own request, Bilbo would not be in line for the throne, nor would he assume any political responsibility. Nor would he become a citizen of Erebor, this at the behest of the court traditionalists who said that Bilbo could be as gallant as the tales said (and the tales, having been coauthored by Bilbo, did make him seem at least a little gallant) but Bilbo was not a dwarf. Thorin fought this point; Bilbo did not. Instead Bilbo accepted the position of Favored Guest of Erebor, a tax-free status that allowed for permanent residency in the kingdom even if Bilbo left for years at a time.

(This last clause added by Thorin. “I never want to force you to stay,” he’d said.

“You aren’t forcing me to stay,” Bilbo had replied.

“Would you have stayed if I had died in battle?”

“That’s different.”

“Not to me. I need you to know you can leave.” And Thorin had written it into law.)

The other details took less time to figure out, though not by much. Basic concerns were not so basic when one half of the partnership is king of a nation. Medical decisions, for instance, took weeks to figure out, as the arbiters and their assistants tried to find the proper precedents. Who makes decisions for a king’s health when the king cannot? Is it the same person who makes decisions for the king’s kingdom? Or is it the person who sits by the king’s bed and frets? In the end, Bilbo and Balin, the chief advisor, had to split medical guardianship of Thorin and hoped that if disaster ever came, they could agree on what to do.

Thorin, on the other hand, had sole medical guardianship of Bilbo should the worst happen. As Dis would later point out to Bilbo, one evening far later that winter when they’d progressed enough to spend hours smoking together by the fireplace without too much sniping at each other, Thorin strapping Bilbo to his back and marching him across Middle-earth might not have been wholly medically advisable, but it was unquestionably legal.

“I can’t believe that we wrote that down,” Bilbo would reply, puffing with upon the Shire pipeweed that Dis would stubbornly refuse to admit was the best she had ever known. “I think the marriage contract my parents signed was about two lines long: we promise to love each other,
here’s a house, the kid definitely yours.”

Dis, of course, would find it horrifying.

So Bilbo and Thorin were married, in a ceremony on the scale of romanticism somewhere between “unplanned pregnancy” and “tax purposes”. The matter was put on the agenda for the roundtable discussion at the weekly state of the kingdom meeting, and the vote came back nearly unanimous for allowing the union. (Oin was one member who voted against it, but he hadn’t noticed he’d been holding the paddle backwards; Dain, visiting for the month, was the other, and he just thought it would be funny.) At lunch time, Thorin had found Bilbo in the grand ballroom supervising the decorations for the Solstice Gala, and he’d presented Bilbo with the text of the approved law. Bilbo and Thorin were joined together as a distinct household by the tax code of the ancient and esteemed traditions of Erebor.

“It’s no bower,” Thorin said as Bilbo read over the law scroll. “I know—I know hobbits handle these matters differently.”

“Yes, typically there’s more kissing than contract negotiations,” Bilbo replied. He rose on his toes, tugged Thorin’s braid to get him to drop his head, even as Thorin’s head was dropping, and kissed his cheek right above the beard. “I never did like the Shire ceremonies. Too many relatives.”

Thorin chuckled as his hand found his way to Bilbo’s. “I’m sorry to say you’ve gained a few relatives here. I hope you can handle them.”

“Trust me, Thorin. I can handle your nephews.”

Thorin kissed Bilbo on the crook of his nose. “They are not the relations I was thinking of.”

Bilbo slept. He woke. He slept again. The pattern of his life was so oppressively boring to him that not even knowing the cause mitigated the boredom. He was sick because he was a plant native to the Shire who had been transposed to foreign soil. He was healing because Thorin and Dwalin had repotted him before disappearing. He would heal until he left the Shire at which point he would become sick again.

He was home now. For good. Forever.

After Dis had explained this to him in the kitchen yesterday, Drogo had helped Bilbo back to his bedroom and tucked him in to sleep. Bilbo had shoved the letters from Erebor underneath his pillow and collapsed into uneasy sleep. He was healthy enough for dreams now, and he dreamed of the road that led out of his front door.

Bilbo started keeping a diary once more, though the struggle to hold a quill with the precision needed for words was such that Bilbo could hardly manage a scratch upon the page. But it was a
struggle he didn’t mind. He’d kept one all his life until the quest. Bilbo had run out the door without handkerchiefs, but he’d remembered several notebooks, much to the amusement of Bofur who, when Bilbo was sniffling because of the wet and the cold and the damnedable tendency of nature to make your body start leaking, would ask if Bilbo would like to blow his nose into his journal pages. “There’s an entry for today!” Bofur never tired of telling the same joke twice. Or thrice. Or every night until even Thorin, who at this point in the journey had still existed solely in Bilbo’s head as “that royal ass,” told Bofur to knock it off.

Bofur never did, come to think of it. It would have been a grim day for the quest indeed if Bofur had ever developed a sense of proportion.

So with a writer’s unerring fear of being without something to write on, Bilbo had run out of the house on his grand adventure with notebooks the same way that he ran out on in possession of both his legs: there was simply no question of leaving them behind. But bringing something to write on and actually writing have always been two entirely different tasks, and Bilbo had sat every night by the fire with his quill poised over the page. And then, after a few desultory notes, he’d put both away and watched Ori scribble the events of the day with a fierce determination on his face that wasn’t unlike what his brethren wore as they rode into battle. Ori was a scribe by trade and wrote the way you write when what moves your limbs puppeteer-style was duty, honor, and money. Bilbo was a poet by hobby and found that at the end of the day he was so overwhelmed by what he ought to record that he recorded none of it. He kept his notebooks in his pack and spent the evening hours when the walking, the accursed walking, was done simply watching the stars. He’d never seen them so bright at home.

Then they’d lost the packs and the ponies and the sense of ease that Bilbo realized only in retrospect the company had enjoyed on the western side of the Misty Mountains. In the gardens of Beorn’s house, Bilbo had sat in the shade of the massive trees of a species he had never seen before and would never see again, and he dreamed about what he would write if he had paper and pen. He couldn’t think of the words. Just the ache of his legs and the scratch of the bark against his back through the tattered remains of his finery, the calluses on his hands and the matted hair of his feet. The smell of foreign pipeweed in his bowl. The burn of it going down the back of his throat. He thought of the stars, brighter than he’d ever seen, bright as stars are only ever bright when you have no recourse of home to provide you your light.

And Thorin, who Bilbo thought of first one way and then, so slowly Bilbo did not recognize the shift until he was begging Thorin to stay alive, another. He had no words for that either.

Ori offered to lend Bilbo a spare journal. Bilbo declined. He did not write until the ashes had cooled in Laketown, and the Battle of Five Armies had gained its name. When Thorin lay living, Bilbo started to write again, and he wrote the words that had been gestating inside of him from the moment he sprinted out his door.

He’d left the book in Erebor. Bilbo should have remembered that things from there had a knack for following him home.

The first morning of his second month awake, one week into Dis’ occupation of his family home, and the last day that Bilbo would spend consigned to bed, Primula bustled into Bilbo’s bedroom with a bowl of oatmeal balanced on top of several books. Bilbo’s books, he recognized after a long moment, the first ones he’d finished, published, and then promptly shoved towards the back of some forsaken shelf in the family library so he wouldn’t have to look at them again. Bilbo had a proper writer’s fear of rereads.

“You never said you wrote,” Primula said, resting the books and bowl on the end table.
“Our Bilbo’s a modest word-smith,” Dis said as she entered the bedroom behind Primula. If it had been Drogo, Bilbo would have said that he was following Primula because that was exactly what Drogo did, dogging Primula’s heels with the earnest gangling of a man who very much wants to make himself useful but doesn’t know how. Dis didn’t follow anyone anywhere. She impressed that in the very short procession that had been Primula and Dis’ journey from library to bedroom, Primula was the honor guard and Dis, the main event. Dis bore a small green book and a wicked smile Bilbo seen Fili too often aim at Kili. In his middle age, Bilbo was beginning to understand siblings.

“Dis brought it with her all this way. Wanted to add it to your library,” Primula said as she sat by Bilbo’s side. “Isn’t that lovely.”

“Isn’t it,” Dis said with the same smile. She turned the little book over in her hands. The gold lettering of the title caught the sunlight, and Bilbo, at last recognizing it, groaned with the kind of vital energy he’d so been lacking those days. “Do you like the cover? It’s a new run, press off the press of Eren Luin’s finest booksellers. When I heard of your lamentable state all those months ago, I thought to at least, in the unfortunate event of your inconvenient demise, to offer you that immortality of artists. Remembrance. Preservation. The words living on, et cetera, et cetera.” Dis shrugged. “Posthumous editions of publications always sell well.”

“Sorry my survival put a damper on your business plan,” Bilbo grouched as he pushed himself up in bed. He’d given up on trying to look extra helpless so Primula would help him. She never did these days. He’d evidently entered the exercise portion of recuperation, and he hated it with all his heart, which coincidentally was his only muscle that was not ceaselessly protesting being asked to do anything. Bilbo prided himself that his heart could hate just fine in the face of any obstacle. “There’s only one copy of that, and it’s at Erebor. How did you get it?”

Dis spread her hands. “I am a king, Mister Baggins. I am also a mother, and if one power will not do, the other certainly will.”

Bilbo made a mental note to murder his nephews next time he saw them. If he ever again saw them. At the very least, he was going to stop editing Kili’s poetry.

“You shouldn’t have read it,” Bilbo said. “It’s not edited. It’s barely finished.”

“But it’s very good,” Primula said from her perch on the side of Bilbo’s bed. She looked utterly unashamed when Bilbo glared at her. “It passes the time wonderfully while you sleep.”

“And it was quite popular in Erebor, especially with the romantics,” Dis said. Bilbo had the feeling he was being double-teamed. Dis tossed the book onto the blanket beside him. “You hardly get to publish it and then complain that your readers found it.”

“I like best the bits with the trolls,” Primula said. “Is that really how it happened?”

“Of course,” Bilbo answered without thinking. He’d always been weak for reader questions. And it really was how it happened, more or less anyway. You could quibble over the details (and preserve us all, how the dwarves of the company had quibbled) but Bilbo had written it down largely as he remembered it. He’d left some bits out, for decency of course, and moved a few events around for narrative flow, and not every dwarf got his moment in the spotlight simply because the narrative was too short for the sheer amount of personality that each one had, and Thorin had had a great many things to say about his depiction (the advantage to Bilbo’s argument being that it was very hard for Thorin to protest his portrayal as pigheadedly stubborn without exemplifying that very
personality trait), but on the whole, Bilbo had written it down as it happened. Or rather he’d written it down after it all happened and after he’d had a good long while to think about it, but he’d never outright lied. He may have had a few conflicting memories of the same event and picked the one that served the narrative best, but that wasn’t lying. That was storytelling.

(“You failed to mention just how many times we had to carry your useless arse,” Dwalin had said to Bilbo by way of greeting a few weeks after Dori and Ori had pressed the book.

Bilbo had replied, “I also failed to mention that time at Beorn’s house when you got both fists stuck in two different jars of honey and required an hour and four dwarves’ assistance to get them out.”

Dwalin had offered no further complaints.)

“We could take it to the village library,” Primula said. “Drogo holds seat on the board, he could get a few copies made and put on the shelf. You’d just have to change the title. A Hobbit’s Tale might be hotcakes in dwarf land, but I don’t think it’ll fare next to a load of other tales told by hobbits.”

“I never did like the title,” Bilbo said. “I blame Ori for that one, though in truth I could never think of one better. I thought of one on the journey that would have been perfect, but…”

“But what?” Primula prompted.

Bilbo picked up the copy, grudgingly admired the new cover, and ran his fingers over the embossing. “When we were going to Erebor, I was already planning the story of the journey. I hoped for nothing beyond our success and survival so I thought I would call it There and Back Again. Going there and coming home was the extent of my ambitions. Then I stayed.”

Dis turned and walked to the window, her back to him. Primula waited, with the kind of gentle prodding patience that would eventually coax Bilbo back to walking on his own two feet.

“I suppose that There wouldn’t have been a particularly appealing title.” Bilbo opened the book to the first lines of text. He managed to read the opening bit without wincing. “Up until I finished writing it, I think I expected I would leave. It wasn’t until I came to the ending that I knew I was going to stay.” He looked down at his body and said ruefully, “A foolish choice, in retrospect.”

“You didn’t know,” Primula said.

“Yes, you were doomed by a magical archaic force of the universe that we all considered to be nothing more than a bedtime tale these days, told to children who want to wander too far from home,” said Dis, her back still to them, her voice bitter enough to wilt greenery. “It happens to the best of us. At least you got what you wanted.”

When Primula and Bilbo looked back from Dis to each other, Primula saw something in Bilbo’s face that he wished she hadn’t. Courage, perhaps, mixed with a little confused compassion. Unfortunately, such laudable emotions were blended in equal parts with cowardice and apathy, the usual state in Bilbo’s aforementioned preternaturally bitter heart towards intimate situations with people he did not know very well. And sister or not, Bilbo did not know Dis at all.

But he knew what he ought to at least do, and he could at least be grateful enough to Primula for making it easier. “I’ll get the tea,” she said standing, tightening her apron. “Mister Baggins, when you’re done with your oats, I’ll come back and help you to the kitchen.”

When the door clicked shut behind Prim, Bilbo felt every ounce of the silence in the room.
“Is this the part where you attempt to comfort me?” Dis asked.

“Are you in need of comforting?”

“My brother is lost, his kingdom in chaos, my children too soon thrust into power, and my sole connection to him lies infirm in a pastoral wasteland of quilts and doilies.”

“There, there,” Bilbo said.

Dis snorted, which was an odd noise to make Bilbo’s heart seize, but there you go. She sounded too much like her brother. “There and Back Again,” Dis said. “So you always planned on leaving for home. ‘In a hole in the ground, there lived a hobbit.’ It is a lovelier hole than I imagined, but it is still an unforgiveable downgrade from the splendor of Erebor.”

“Bag End is not trying to be Erebor.” This was his home, his father’s wedding gift to his mother. Bilbo would not stand aspersions upon it. “They are not competing.”

“Your choice was to live either here or there,” Dis said. “Therefore, they are competing. Was our mountain not good enough for you?”

“I lived there for five years.”

“And now you are here.”

“I didn’t have much choice in the matter.”

“Thorin wouldn’t have taken you anywhere you didn’t want to go.”

“I wouldn’t know about that. I was unconscious at the time.” Bilbo glanced down at his hand, where his wedding ring ought to be. It wasn’t the only ring that was missing, though the other he knew exactly where it was, hidden beneath a loose flagstone in Bilbo’s quarters. He never wanted anyone else to touch it so he’d probably never see it again. Two rings lost. Another two items to add to the list.

“Did you tell him that you had always wanted to leave?” Dis asked. “Did you turn him against the mountain?”

“I didn’t always want to leave.”

“But you wanted it once.”

“I wanted many things once. I wanted to kill your brother a couple times early on, it doesn’t mean I’ve been plotting his murder all these years.”

“Thorin told me he was afraid you stayed in Erebor for his sake alone,” Dis said. “He said that he watched you pine for the Shire when you thought no one was looking. He didn’t know what to do.”

“I—” Bilbo was dumbstruck. “I didn’t think he saw.”

“Then you admit it,” Dis said triumphantly, whirling around. “You admit that you hated Erebor.”

“No! Not at all!”

“But you didn’t want to live there.”
“But I lived there! I lived there for five years, the happiest of my life,” Bilbo snapped. “What about you? Where were you, if you care so much about how I felt while I lived there? Why don’t you live at Erebor then?”

Dis looked away, an involuntary flinch. “Because once one’s been a king, one finds it difficult to go back to being a subject.” Dis rested her hands on the sill underneath the window. “Perhaps I liked having my own mountain.”

She regarded the view from the window. Bilbo knew exactly what she would see. It was the same view Bilbo had seen every morning since he’d moved into this bedroom after his father’s death. “Erebor was the home of my father and my father’s father and my father’s father’s father. And though one wouldn’t know it from the family trees, there are a few mothers tossed in there as well. My bloodline has lived in that mountain stretching back though times of greatness, times of suffering, through history and mythology and daily life. When I walk through the halls of Erebor, I walk in the footsteps of my ancestors. You cannot understand that. Yet when I walk through Erebor now, I find it difficult to remember that.”

Her voice was heavy with such sadness that Bilbo had to look away.

Silence settled between them. Dis kept staring out the window. Bilbo shifted, unsure what to say. Over the years, he had learned Thorin like a new favorite book. Dis was a mystery, and not one Bilbo expected to solve in this lifetime.

“My mountain is changed,” Dis said at last. “My city is changed. I do not recognize it. I do not recognize its face. I do not recognize its soul. It has been so hideously wounded. I find I do not have it in me to love its scars.”

She turned her head enough for Bilbo to see her profile, enough for her to shake off her brother’s illusion like a castoff skin. “Did my brother ever say anything of the same to you?”

Bilbo paused, though he didn’t need to think of his answer. He’d considered the question plenty himself since he’d read Thorin’s letter. *It is good I go. My use at Erebor has come to its end.*

“As do I,” Dis said with simple plaintiveness. She clasped her hands behind her back and leaned against the wall, leaned her forehead against the glass of the window. She looked very young.

“There’s no reason that he had to be the one who brought you home, you know. Believe it or not, I’m not that petty. But it forced Thorin to choose between you and everything else he knew. And Thorin chose.”

Once more, Bilbo found he had no words. None at all. Dis stood unmoving. She really did look like Thorin in the right lighting, with the right look on her face, that kind of quiet sadness chiseled from stone. Maybe that was what allowed Bilbo to lean into the silence; Bilbo pretended she was
he, and Bilbo was the world’s foremost expert on sitting back and waiting for Thorin to talk.

“Do you understand?” Dis asked at last. “What it’s like to lose a place? Not because you cannot return to it but because the place you would return to is irreparably changed?”

“No,” Bilbo said truthfully. “I don’t think the Shire’s ever changed.”

“I envy that. I envy it with all my heart.”

_You shouldn’t_, he almost said. He bit his tongue in time.

“It’s not bad,” Bilbo said instead. “You’re welcome to stay and enjoy it for as long as you want.”

Dis raised her eyebrow. “Are you inviting me to stay? I intended to do so anyway.”

“Yes, I am aware, sister,” Bilbo drawled. “I thought you might appreciate the permission nonetheless. Dwarves seem keen on the explicit and specific.”

She shot him an askance glance. “Am I your Favored Guest?”

“A guest, anyway.”

Dis laughed like the sound surprised her, and Bilbo couldn’t help but laugh as well at the sound. “You’re too mean to your poor sister,” Dis said.

“I’m learning what it means to have one,” Bilbo replied. Dis shook her head, still smiling a little, and looked back out the window. “Come now. Drogo’s still holding on to Rosamund’s scones for you, by the way. You might stay and enjoy them.”

“He’s very eager, isn’t he?”

“You’re the only dwarf in the Shire,” Bilbo said. “He believes in being a good host.”

Still looking out the window, Dis opened her mouth to reply. And then she cocked her head. “One of,” she said.

“What’s that?” Bilbo asked.

“You’re right. We dwarves are keen on the specific. You mean that I am _one of_ the only dwarves in the Shire.” Dis looked at Bilbo who’d sat up so quickly in bed that he might have pulled something, and she jerked her chin at the window with just the faintest tremor of excitement. “Tell me, Mister Baggins. Do you think when Dwalin’s done stomping through your garden, he’ll want some scones as well?”
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Please note that this chapter is as long as my original estimate of length for the entire story. How did this happen? I'm a good person, what did I do to deserve this.

Let's take a slight detour before we tell the story that Dwalin himself recounted that day he arrived, after the silence, after Dis going, “Well, damn,” in a tone that implied she was thinking again about grabbing her battle ax, after Bilbo going, “Don’t you know? You were with him, don’t you know?”, after Dwalin asking, once he’d found his way to the front door and embraced Bilbo so hard that Primula had interceded in the name of his delicate health, “Where’s Thorin?”

Let’s rewind back, for a second, to a bird. A very smart bird at that. One of the smartest birds you've ever met. If such a creature doesn't seem very impressive to you, you haven't been speaking to the right birds.

Take ravens, for example. Ravens are wickedly smart creatures, with a strong emphasis on wicked. They aren't evil the way that wargs are evil, the way that creatures that grow from hatred and shadow are evil. Ravens are mischievous, though that can be close enough to evil if you are the focus of their mischief. That is the price of their intelligence. The average animal doesn't have the higher cognitive function required to be a prick.

This particular raven, the one we are interested in and have travelled all the way back to see, was very smart indeed which normally spelled trouble. Still, ravens of Erebor tended to be a better sort than the common bird. There was a bit of class pride there that was, if not admirable, at least made them the dutiful envoys of the royal family for generations for as long as there had been a mountain and a king underneath it. And this raven believed in duty the way it believed in the air underneath its wings. So you can imagine how the raven having to admit to itself that it couldn't deliver its letter had prompted a bit of existential crisis.

(At least, in as much as a bird can have existential crisis. That particular type of despair has nothing to do with intelligence; it's just that birds know exactly where they belong in the world—that is, the best part—and it is for the lower races to face the cosmic dread. A bird, it must be said, would never suffer from any disease that stemmed from being too long in the wrong place.)

The raven rested on a bobbing log in the center of an ocean more vast and blue than even the sky above. It stretched its aching wings. It stretched its talons for good measure as well. It wasn't easy to carry a letter from one end of the earth to the other and then come back around the other side again. If ravens could sigh, this one would have. Thankfully, it had other ways of expressing itself.

“Bloody wizards,” it muttered. “Drown the lot of them.”

The waves slapping against the log offered no comfort in response.

And for the first time in its service, with a letter made heavier by failure and stamped by fate with “return to sender,” the raven began the short flight home, finishing its circumvention of the globe with no small amount of grumbling—at around the same time, it so happens, that Dwalin had finished up his nightly duties in Erebor and decided to visit his best friend, the king.
And that story, at least as told by Dwalin hunched in an armchair meant for a being half his size as Bilbo, Drogo, Primula, and Dis sat around him, continues like this:

The Tale of Dwalin

Ale and meat. That was what Thorin needed right now, in Dwalin's opinion. Another stout of ale. Another stack of meat. Food and drink weren't a cure for Bilbo's mystery illness, but Dwalin couldn't bring Thorin that. Anyway, nothing seemed as dire viewed through full stomach and ale's warm, golden haze. Maybe they weren't what you were supposed to be bringing to a sickroom at three in the morning, but there was no chance in any world that Thorin had gone to sleep like he'd said he would and anyway, it wasn't going to wake Bilbo. And if it did, all the better.

At this point, Dwalin was just trying to keep Thorin from doing anything stupid. (*Well done indeed,* Dis said. Primula shushed her.)

Dwalin rapped his knuckles against the door. "Thorin!" he called. "I've got food."

Dwalin waited for a reply. After a moment, he knocked again. He wasn't sure and didn't care what Thorin and Bilbo did together in bed (*Watch it,* Bilbo warned), but he knew he never wanted to walk in on it, and for some reason Kili had been very enthusiastic about his idea Thorin could kiss Bilbo awake.

(*Dis sighed. "Yes, of course he was."*)

"Let him talk," Primula said as she poured everyone a cup of tea. "Else we'll be here till the crows come home to roost, and our Mister Baggins has only got a few more hours before he'll be asleep again."

*Dwalin looked at Bilbo in shock. "You still sick?"

"Astonishingly," Bilbo replied, at the same time Primula said, "He's healing," and Dis said, "We're still waiting on him to die."

"Ignore Dis," Bilbo said.

"I grew up with her," Dwalin said. "Already do."

*Dis tsked and snapped her napkin at him. "Tell the damn story, Dwalin."* )

Dwalin knocked a third time. "Thorin?"

*Damn,* he thought before he even opened the door. He barely looked into the room to confirm what he already knew. Thorin wasn't there. Neither was Bilbo. A lifetime at Thorin's side had given Dwalin a preternatural sense for when Thorin had gotten a plan. Or no, not a plan because plans had the form and function of something practical, even if Thorin's usually needed a little fine-tuning. Thorin could plan well enough, well as the rest of them, and he could bluff when the plan didn't work. No, Dwalin thought as he ran down the corridors to the royal wing. What was dangerous was when Thorin found a Quest. Something along the lines of "let's go reclaim our
long-lost kingdom." Quests didn't come with plans. Quests came with hope, rain, hunger, elves, orcs, spiders, yet more elves, and a fire-breathing worm waiting for them. For example. When it came to Thorin’s Quests, the plan got figured out along the way.

Thorin's chambers were empty too, but Thorin was the only thing missing from them. Dwalin had a brief flare of hope—maybe he just took Bilbo on a walk? was that a possibility?—before his eyes settled on the mantle. There, halfway underneath Thror's handcrafted clock, was a white sheet of paper folded over. My dear nephews, it began. I cannot hope to make you understand why I must leave. All I can do is assure you that I must, for Bilbo's sake and thus for my own. There were about three more paragraphs. Dwalin scowled and thrust the letter back under the clock. It ticked at him while he thought.

Thorin was running away then. That wasn't like Thorin. Thorin had not run away from Erebor the first time. He had been driven away as they all had. That anyone survived was became he had led them to Ered Luin. Therefore, Thorin must be running to something. The Shire, obviously, for where else would you sneak off to with a hobbit on your back. And if Thorin thought this would save Bilbo, then this would save Bilbo. But why wouldn't Thorin wait till morning? Why wouldn't Thorin ask his company to go with him? When they'd agreed to follow him one last time into battle, they hadn't literally meant One Last Time. Dwalin, in particular, had been following Thorin every day since then.

This must be something Thorin needs to do on his own, Dwalin thought.

Well, he can't do it on his own, Dwalin further thought. Couldn't be easy to cross the world while carrying someone in your arms. Couldn't be easy to cross the world alone either. And with Bilbo the way he was, Thorin'd be doing both.

This is something he needs to do on his own, with me in the background carrying the food supply and a few extra axes, Dwalin concluded.

With that settled, Dwalin started to pack.

There weren't many places you could sneak into Erebor. That meant there weren't many places you could sneak out of Erebor. This might have presented a problem to dwarves who hadn’t had to break into the mountain through a secret door. Though Dwalin wasn't sure how Thorin managed to maneuver Bilbo down these stairs. It was a good thing the hobbit was asleep for the sake of his ever sensitive pride. Dwalin'd thrown Bilbo over his shoulders more than once as they'd traversed the rockier parts of their journey, and Bilbo had never been that grateful for the trouble Dwalin had gone to.

(“This is unnecessary editorializing,” Bilbo protested. Primula shushed him.)

When Dwalin had started his way down, he'd fixed his eyes on the little figure creeping through the night so far and distant that Dwalin could disappear it with a thumb. You wouldn't have seen it unless you were looking. Dwalin was looking. So was Thorin. Dwalin could spot the exact moment Thorin spotted him, probably looking back to make sure no one was following. The little dot froze. Then it started moving a lot faster.

But Thorin was encumbered. So was Dwalin with food and bedrolls and a spare pot and a respectable amount of axes, but Dwalin could take a lot more encumbering than Thorin before he started slowing down. By the time they were both on the flat slope of the foot of the mountain, Dwalin was close enough that he could make out Thorin's travel arrangements. Bilbo was lashed to
Thorin’s back like Dis had carried her children when they were young enough to indulge that sort of thing. Dwalin laughed and hoped the noise carried across the open plains. Bilbo wouldn’t like that comparison.

(“How right you are,” Bilbo said dryly while Dis laughed. Primula shushed both of them, but with a little smile on her face, her horrible traitor.)

Something black swooped past Dwalin’s head, and Dwalin picked up the pace to close the space between them as the raven fluttered to land on Thorin’s shoulder, the one that Bilbo’s head wasn’t resting on. If that was a raven from Erebor, then someone must have found Thorin’s note already. They’d need to move. The rest of Erebor might not be as understanding about the once (and, if Dwalin had anything to say about it, future) king absconding in the night. They’d be worried at least. People who were worried about you tended not to let you run off into the wilderness with your soulmate on your back.

The raven had shifted to Thorin’s arm by the time Dwalin arrived. Thorin gave it a curt nod as Dwalin slowed. The raven cocked its head in response. It had the strange look that Erebor ravens had, too much intelligence in its black eyes for Dwalin to be comfortable around them. This was one of Dis’ prized ravens, he could tell by the faint white crest on its chest, like a puff of cloud in an otherwise pitch-black sky. (“Greta!” Dis said proudly. “One of my best.”) Dwalin hated that bird. It was too smart for its own good, same as the bird’s owner. After a moment where Thorin and the raven regarded each other, the raven cawed and beat its wings. Dwalin had never seen a bird take off so reluctantly. He watched it fly off into the predawn light. Much like Thorin, it was going in the opposite direction of Erebor.

“It was the raven we sent to Gandalf,” Thorin said without looking at Dwalin, his eyes still fixed on the disappearing bird. “Before Bilbo got worse. It couldn’t find him.”

Dwalin grunted. “Wizards.”

Thorin snorted. His arms were crossed, his hands tucked under the bindings that held Bilbo to his back. He still didn’t look at Dwalin. “I’ve not gone mad.”

“Course not.”

“The mountain is killing him.”

“I read your note.”

“So you understand.”

“Why you couldn’t wait till morning?” Dwalin asked. “Why you crept away from your own home like a thief in the night? Why you trusted none of your friends to come with you?”

Thorin’s shoulders squared. His chin rose. But his eyes dropped, and Dwalin wondered how Thorin had lasted so long in this world without figuring out how to mask his hurt. “I will not ask my friends and family to put their lives on hold for another one of my mad quests.”

“Bilbo ain’t a mad quest,” Dwalin said. “Neither was reclaiming our homeland. You know that.”

Thorin didn’t reply. Dwalin did what he always did when his communicative skills fell flat. He thought about what Balin would say and tried to say warmly, “Chin up, lad. You’ll feel better in the morning.”

Thorin’s brow wrinkled.
“Shut up,” Dwalin said.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You were thinking.”

Thorin laughed, a little, and then he looked at him, almost. His face was pointed at Dwalin. His eyes were somewhere else. The past, maybe. Or Erebor. Or wherever it was Thorin went inside that damn head of his. “If I wait till morning,” Thorin said quietly, “I’ll never leave.”

Bilbo’s arms were looped around Thorin’s neck. He didn’t hold Bilbo’s hand exactly. He sort of pinched the sleeve of Bilbo’s shirt, rubbed the fabric between his fingers. Dwalin looked away. It would have been less intimate if he’d just grabbed Bilbo’s hand. It said a lot about what had to happen, a gesture like that.

(No one looked at Bilbo, not even Dwalin as he spoke, and in the privacy of his friends’ discretion, Bilbo touched the place on his finger where his ring—his wedding ring—ought to be.)


Thorin started, like he’d come back to himself. “I wasn’t asking you to come.”

Dwalin dropped the pack that he’d slung over his back onto the ground. Thorin’s eyes darted down to where it hit with a thump. “Did you bring supplies? Food? Tent?”

Thorin pointed a thumb over his shoulder. “I brought a hobbit.”

“I’m coming with you.”

Thorin met Dwalin’s eyes. Dwalin could see the no waiting behind Thorin’s teeth. There were a thousand and one things to say. Thorin didn’t say them. Wasn’t much need to. Thorin had Bilbo for his heart-to-hearts. The two dwarves never had to say much. A hammer and anvil worked together fine without much need for words.

“Fair point,” Thorin said. “I suppose you are.”

On the outskirts of Mirkwood, two days’ ride of a commandeered boat down from Laketown, Dwalin remembered why Thorin had felt he was being generous by denying his company the chance to travel with him. It was because the world was terrible.

Not all of it, Dwalin conceded as he stabbed last night’s fire, trying to see if he could get away with not having to fetch any new wood. Oin had been adamant about the power of positive thinking on the journey to Erebor. Dwalin suspected that was because Oin hadn’t had any real medicine. But that family had gotten through the journey easier than the rest of them, to everyone else’s eternal annoyance. Gloin had his kids and Oin had a selective awareness of the world, so of course they’d take to optimism easier. But fine. The fire was going, wasn’t that lovely. That bit of sky over there was nice. The bit back in the direction of Erebor. This little glowing coal was a beautiful sight. Look! How wonderfully this sausage fits on the end of this stick.

Thorin still slept, half-curled around Bilbo. Went without saying that Bilbo was still sleeping as well. If Bilbo would wake himself up, they could skip the forest altogether. Head back to Erebor. Maybe set a brushfire to Mirkwood before they left.
Dwalin pinched the sausage and decided he could eat it cold.

Dwalin was about halfway through with breakfast with he heard a squawk, followed by a quick grunt from Thorin. Dwalin whirled around, axe in one hand, sausage in the other, to find Thorin blinking at a raven hopping on his nose. Thorin saw Dwalin and quickly waved the bird away, sitting up. "Fine, we're fine, it's fine," he said as the raven fluttered over to Bilbo's chest. It started pecking Bilbo's pockets before Thorin swiped at it again. "Give it some bread," Thorin told Dwalin. "Or it might eat us alive."

Dwalin tossed the raven a pinch of sausage. "From Erebor?" he asked.

Thorin shook his head as he got to his feet, dusting off the sand from the back of his head and then dusting off that same sand from Bilbo as he muttered a quick apology. Dwalin didn't point out that Bilbo couldn't mind. "No. A different task." Thorin staggered over to the fire and held out his hand. Dwalin handed him a roasting stick. "Although maybe I should send it back to Erebor. I'm worried that we haven't heard from them. Perhaps they didn't find my note."

"If they didn't find your note, they'd be combing the countryside for you," Dwalin said.

"They might still be combing the countryside," Thorin said. "Just not the countryside where we are."

"Then we'll send them a note when we've put the forest between us and them," Dwalin said, while Thorin toasted his breakfast. "Who's the raven for?"

The bird in question had finished its bit of sausage and hopped up onto Thorin’s knee. It opened its mouth and released the most god-awful shriek. Sounded like a knife on glass. Thorin didn't even wince.

"Very well," he said, apparently to the bird. "Then what?"

And the bird screeched again.

Thorin nodded sagely. Dwalin reconsidered the madness argument.

("He was speaking Westron," Dis said crossly, as if personally offended on behalf of the ravens. "My birds all do. They're very smart, Dwalin."

"It was squawking," Dwalin maintained.

"Speaking with an accent."

"The accent being a squawk."

"You couldn't understand anything?" Bilbo asked.

Dwalin looked pained. "Not a word."

"Does it matter?" Drogo asked, perched on the chair of the sofa beside Primula.

Dwalin looked considerable more pained. "Er," he said. "Probably mattered a bit.")

Thorin raised his left hand and pulled off the only ring he wore these days. "This," he told the raven with a gravity that would have befit the throne hall, "is the ring forged by my grandmother, gifted to my grandfather. Around its band reads their first declaration of love. When Thror succumbed to our family’s disease, he cast this ring aside in favor of greater wealth. I kept it for
him until his death, and I have carried it ever since. It is a constant reminder to me of what we ought to value in this world. It is irreplaceable.”

Thorin pinched the ring between his fingers and held it out. (“No,” breathed Dis.) The raven cocked his head and snatched it in its beak. (“No!” said Bilbo.) With a beat of its black wings, the bird was gone.

“How, Thorin,” Dwalin rasped. “What the (In Bag End, Dwalin glanced at Primula, perched on the couch and watching eagerly, and seemed to change his mind) blazes are you doing?”

Thorin looked at him Dwalin levelly. “I am getting Bilbo home as quickly as I can. Are you helping or not?”

Dwalin didn’t have time to answer for at that moment they were set upon by bandits.

(“By bandits?” Bilbo asked incredulously, for even the sunken feeling in his stomach and the empty space on his finger wasn’t enough to make that sentence unsurprising. “Outside Mirkwood?”

“A dozen and a half,” Dwalin said, his hands wringing in a distinct un-Dwalin gesture.

“But there aren’t any bandits around Mirkwood,” Bilbo said.

“Why not?” Drogo asked.

“Because there’s giant bloody spiders! You can have one or the other, but natural selection tends to draw the line at both.”

“Bandits!” Dwalin snapped. “And are you going to let me finish or not?”

“Grandfather’s ring?” Dis asked quietly. Dwalin looked at her, didn’t quite meet her eyes, nodded. Dis sat back in her armchair. She pressed on hand to her mouth. “My dear Miss Brandybuck,” she said without looking at Primula. “I would at this moment appreciate another cup of tea. Feel free to put a splash of anything extra into it.”)

As Dwalin was saying—bandits. Sixteen at least, a hungry and lean camp who’d never learned not to steal from dwarves. They ambushed Dwalin and Thorin, swords out, hollering like madmen. Dwalin shoved Thorin away, told him to take Bilbo and run, he’d hold them off. Thorin was already running, scooping Bilbo up as he went. Dwalin drew his battleax. The fight was quick.

But quick or not, by the time Dwalin was done fighting, Thorin had disappeared. And there was only one place on that bank where someone could disappear. Thorin had run into Mirkwood. And after a moment, Dwalin did too.

“But I lost him,” Dwalin said. Primula’d poured Dis another mug, and now the two women sat next to each other on the couch, Primula resting her hand on Dis’s knee. Dis, for her part, was letting her do so, which seemed incredible as if the two women were embracing and openly weeping. “Somewhere in the woods. Damn woods. I had to start off the path, cut my way in. Spent weeks wandering around. Finally made it out on the other side. Knew he’d be heading here so I headed.
here myself. Thought I’d catch him on the way. Didn’t. Thought I’d find him here.”

“Didn’t.” Dis looked up from her mug at Dwalin. “How did you know he wasn’t dead in the forest?”

“Met a couple of leaf-eaters on the way,” Dwalin said, still studying the tilework of the floor. “Nearly killed me before they said anything, nasty pieces of work. But they knew your son, Prince Kili, they’d worked with him. They gave me a hand out of the forest and told me what they knew.”

“Which was?” Bilbo asked.

“That they’d seen a dwarf with a hobbit lashed to his back in the fields west of Mirkwood.” Dwalin shook his head. “He must have gotten through the woods in a day, maybe two. Mahal knows how.”

“Fairy roads,” Drogo said softly. “Or elf roads you might call them. You hear about them sometimes. Paths through the woods where you walk ten miles to go a hundred.” Bilbo’d heard about them as well—sometimes in old forests you stayed on the paths because all around you the trees were moving and the map was folding and there was no way of knowing where you’d come out if you waded into the thick of it. They were dangerous. Everyone knew Mirkwood had paths you couldn’t trust.

“But we know he got through alright,” Primula said. She gestured at Bilbo, who at the moment was not feeling like proof of any kind of alrightness.

“So you walked here alone from halfway across the world?” Drogo asked.

Dwalin shrugged with a dispassion that conveyed exactly nothing about how much of a miserable slog that must have been.

"You lost my brother two days journey from Erebor," Dis said slowly, as if with each word she was giving Dwalin the chance to jump in, to say, "Fooled you!" and to pull Thorin from inside his travelling cloak.

Instead, Dwalin sat there, his hands clasped together, his head bent. Bilbo had never seen Dwalin try to make himself look small before, and the sight was profoundly disturbing.

Dis opened her mouth again. Dwalin braced himself for the words sure to come out. And if Bilbo hadn't been watching them carefully, he wouldn't have noticed the way Primula, without looking up from her tea, subtly but firmly pressed her foot on top of Dis's. Dis glanced at her, the smallest look. Then she stood, drained her tea with a quaff that would have made a drinking hall proud, and put the tea cup back on the table with a deliberate delicacy that made Bilbo suspect she'd rather be throwing it against the wall. Without a word, she turned and left the room.

The front door slammed and a moment later everyone heard the distinct thuds of someone chopping firewood like they were overseeing an execution.

Dwalin, his head still bowed, closed his eyes.

"Well then, Mister Dwalin," Primula said, standing. "I imagine you're ready for Mister Drogo to show you to your rooms."

Dwalin and Drogo both looked blankly at her. "Right," said Drogo. "Yes. Right. More dwarves in the guest rooms. Not a problem. We'll just have to air the back ones out. Dis got the best and biggest one, unfortunately for you because otherwise it would be yours, and Bilbo's in the main bedroom, and I'm in Bilbo's old bedroom, and Primula is in the west bedroom, just across the hall
from the main bedroom, so we'll have to air out the old, old guest room, which is, er, very much underground. So I imagine that will suit you. Knowing what I know about dwarves."

"Fine," murmured Dwalin with the look of a dwarf who thought to go wadding and then was washed over by a tsunami. Dis had worn that look plenty when she talked to Drogo. Bilbo had worn it himself, now and then. Living amongst dwarves didn’t prepare you for chattering.

“Are you staying?” asked Bilbo.

“He must!” Drogo burst in. “He’s come all this way, I mean, from across the whole world! And we won’t have him put up in an inn, not when we’ve got the space, and don’t let me thinking aloud about where we’re fitting you make you think we don’t want you here, Mister Dwalin.”

“No, no, he’s certainly welcome,” Bilbo said, with his eyes on Dwalin. Dwalin looked away. “But I thought you’d want to be looking for Thorin.”


There was a silence. “Then?” Bilbo prompted.

“He brought you here. He wanted you kept safe. He’d never forgive me if anything happened to you. He’d want me here with you instead of looking for him.”

“So what? You’re planning to be my bodyguard?” Bilbo raised his arms. “Here? In the Shire? This isn’t Erebor, Dwalin, no one’s trying to kill anyone.”

Primula said something under her breath that sound like Lobelia, though whether that meant Lobelia would be doing the killing or getting killed was ambiguous. Both options seemed equally likely.

“I’m keeping you safe,” said Dwalin so firmly you could have built a house on the words. And Bilbo believed him. Why shouldn’t he? Dwalin said his pledge with exactly the kind of conviction the end of his tale had been lacking. Dwalin had never been a very good liar.

In the middle of the night, Bilbo woke to a creak where there ought to have been silence. His hand reached for the sword that wasn’t there, that was resting on his bedside table in Erebor, when Dwalin said, “It’s me.”

Bilbo squinted into the dark. Dwalin took a step forward from the shadows by the door. “What’s wrong?” Bilbo asked.

“Didn’t mean to wake you,” Dwalin replied.

Bilbo sat up, fumbling for his matches. “Dwalin, what—”

“Don’t light anything. I’m leaving. Didn’t think I could wake you.”

Bilbo paused. “I wake easily enough these days.”

Dwalin’s silence was his answer. “I was checking in,” Dwalin said eventually. “You still look like
“Thanks.”

“You sleeping alright?”

I was, Bilbo almost said, but he’d never been close enough with Dwalin to feel wholly comfortable teasing him, and he certainly didn’t feel comfortable now. “Well, I’m sleeping less. So yes.”

“And eating?”

Bilbo smiled a little. “I’m in the Shire, Dwalin. I couldn’t avoid eating if I tried.”

Dwalin nodded. “These hobbits, Dis—they weren’t there when you were sick.”

No, they weren’t. And Bilbo supposed there had to be a hell of a difference between seeing the death and seeing the resurrection. “Thank you for checking, Dwalin,” Bilbo said.

“Thorin was right, I guess,” Dwalin said. “Erebor was killing you. Didn’t think a place could do that to you.”

The floorboards creaked again, Dwalin turned to leave, and Bilbo said, “I am glad you’re here. I don’t know if I mentioned that, and I should have.”

The bedroom door swung open. Faintly from down the hallway, Bilbo could hear Dis snoring. Dwalin half-turned in the shadows. “I know I’m not the dwarf you hoped for.”

Before Bilbo could think of the right thing to say, the floorboards creaked again and door closed silently.

The afternoon after Dwalin arrived, Missus Underhill died. The next day, Drogo stopped by her daughter’s house to pay his respects and a couple shillings, and he came into Bilbo’s bedroom rolling a wicker chair with very nearly circular wheels. He presented it with such beaming pride that Bilbo couldn’t help but share his joy. And really, why wouldn’t he? Dwalin did have a point in his story. Bilbo truly hated being carried.

Dwalin came in from repairing the garden fence, took one look at the chair, and said, “That’s rubbish.”

“That’s the finest construction in the Shire,” Drogo said hotly. “That gave Missus Underhill her mobility back when she couldn’t stand for shaking.”

Dwalin pointed at the wheels. “Mobility’s grand, but those don’t turn.”

“They very much do,” said Drogo, demonstrating by rolling the chair over to Bilbo.

“Not well.”

“It’s lovely,” said Bilbo, who was starting to miss the days when he’d lived in Bag End alone.
Drogo and Dwalin helped Bilbo into the chair, which indeed didn’t roll as easily as Bilbo might like. He didn’t bother to mention it aloud. It’d only spoil Drogo’s good mood, and Dwalin already had the look in his eye of a dwarf that was going to engineer something, whether or not anyone wanted him to.

“Metal wheels would work better,” Dwalin said. “Easier for Bilbo to push. Where’s the forge?”

“We’ve got a blacksmith in market,” said Drogo, who was always willing to put in a good word for hobbit construction but smart enough to know that dwarf construction was a hell of a lot better. “We can all go down together now we’ve got the chair. It’s been a while since Bilbo left the house, eh?”

Bilbo, wheeling himself around the room with a great deal of effort, froze.

Drogo was hobbit enough to pick up on Bilbo’s thoughts instantly. “You’ll have to face the neighbors sooner or later.”

“No, I don’t,” said Bilbo. “You all could have buried me alive and saved me quite a lot of trouble on that front.” But he made the mistake of looking out the window, at the Shire in the full flames of autumn when all the world was preparing for its long sleep. Bilbo had come out of hibernation just as everyone else was getting ready to go under, and it was the days right before winter when frost outlined the scarlet leaves still hanging on the trees, when the air smelled like copper and distant snow. This time last year in Erebor, the thought of the Shire in the full fade of autumn made his heart ache so much that he almost went running home half a dozen times. It wasn’t the same in Erebor, in Dale, in the East. It wasn’t quite home.

Bilbo sighed. “Let’s at least all dress up nice.”

The market was just as Bilbo remembered it being, although he experienced it from a slightly lower vantage than usual. It felt like being a child again, being wheeled around by Dwalin because the chair was too hard to move on his own. Bilbo almost looked around for his parents before he remembered and didn’t and swallowed the lump that rose that hadn’t been there for a few years. The last time he’d cried over his parents had been the night he and Thorin had married, as Bilbo sat on his bed and touched the ring that Thorin had given him. Then he’d dried his face on Thorin’s shoulder. “Sorry,” he’d said. “It’s just that I never thought I’d get married so when they died, it didn’t occur to me to be sad they would never meet my spouse.”

And Thorin had pressed his lips against Bilbo’s forehead, his own face damp, and said—something. Bilbo didn’t have a photographic memory of everything Thorin ever said to him, didn’t need to honestly because once you know someone well enough, you can fill in the dialogue in your memory as needed. And then you could argue about who was right when the stories came up, and the later years of your life together could be an ongoing debate about what exactly had happened in the earlier years. This was marriage.

Bilbo did remember Thorin showing his grandfather’s ring. Now on his marriage finger. When Bilbo and Thorin entwined their hands, their rings clacked together.

“Are you alright?” Drogo asked, leaning down to murmur so the gawkers at the market wouldn’t hear.

Bilbo shook his head, wrung his hands. “Fine, fine. Just tired.” It was a great catchall excuse.

“I’ll expect you’re tired,” said Lily Twofoot loudly, having always had hearing that was too sharp for anyone’s good. She came out from behind her flower stall, wiping her hands on her apron and
walking between the crowds of hobbits split between those pretending not to notice their prodigal neighbor and those openly staring. “Anyone’d be tired after managing a resurrection the likes of which you’ve pulled off. Good to see you out and about. We thought one or the other of the dwarves what moved in with you might have finished the job.”

“Happy to say I’m still alive, Missus Twofoot,” Bilbo said, pulling himself to shake the hand she extended. “And the dwarves have treated very well, I promise.”

“Ay, have they?” She squinted skeptically at Dwalin, who couldn’t help but loom in the center of a crowd full of hobbits. “Well, you ain’t delicate. You’re your mother’s son, well enough, running off like you did.” Lily Twofoot would know. She’d been one of Belladonna’s closest friends the last years of her life, and she’d cackled with Belladonna in the living room over stories that they swore they’d never tell anyone. Bilbo should have expected that it would have been one of Belladonna’s wild women who welcomed him back into the Shire proper.

Lily smiled at him, the sort of maternal grin you get when the person smiling at you used to change your diaper when your mother was busy. You didn’t get smiles like that in Erebor. At least, Bilbo didn’t. “And your father’s son too, coming back like you have,” she said. “Happy to be back?”

“Yes,” Bilbo said before he could think about it. “I suppose I am.”

After a few more minutes of conversation, Lily walked them to the forge where they left Dwalin to his work. Then Drogo wheeled him home along the scenic route, not an easy task in a chair that struggled to go in a straight line on solid wood flooring let alone the dirt path that sloped up along the outskirts of Hobbiton, to the hills that overlooked the village and the fields like squares in a quilt. The land had been emerald and sapphire when Bilbo had run from it; it was ruby and amber now. Drogo parked him at the highest swell of the land where you could sit and see roads that pointed towards the wilderness start to wind their ways home. Bilbo traced the one he’d ran away on right back to the door of Bag End.

“I expect it doesn’t compare to the bigger world,” said Drogo quietly.

“It doesn’t,” Bilbo replied. “What in the bigger world is half as wonderful as this?”

They stayed up there long enough that Primula, bundled up for the cold, spotted them up on the hill as she came back from checking on Bilbo’s elderly neighbors. She waved at them, shouted something that sounded like, “You’ll catch your death!” But she ran up the hill to join them anyway, and it turned out that she had a couple loaves leftover from her rounds, and Drogo’d been using the back of Bilbo’s wheelchair to store a spare blanket and some good red wine, and as Drogo took a swig from the bottle (having neglected to pack cups as well), Primula laughed and said, “Mister Baggins, why don’t you tell us about winter in dwarf land?”

“Erebor,” Bilbo said. “There’s a great deal of dwarf land all around the world, and the only bit of it I’m familiar with is Erebor.”

“Erebor then,” Primula said, taking the bottle that Drogo offered.

Bilbo overlooked Hobbiton, the miniature forms of the people he’d known all his life ambling along the paths to their homes, the chimneys already puffing up. There were fireplaces in Erebor so necessarily there were chimneys too (Bilbo explained), though Bilbo would be damned if he’d ever known where they came out. One winter, his second in Erebor maybe, he’d stayed overnight with Bard’s family and spent his time in Dale searching to see where the smoke came out of the Lonely Mountain. Sigrid had knitted Bilbo a sweater with a lovely little tree design, and Tilda had knitted
him a pair of socks (Primula and Drogo both shuddered at the thought), which she presented with such earnestness that Bilbo couldn’t even take offense. Anyway, they fit Thorin perfectly, and next year Tilda gave Bilbo a particularly fluffy hat which he truly loved. That was one of the things he’d have to send for. You don’t leave a hat as warm as that where you can’t wear it.

And there were banquets in the winter, down in the mountain where the seasons never seemed to reach. The temperature and light inside Erebor was the same year round once you got in deep enough, but every dwarf seemed to possess an intimate feel for the passing of the year, and more than once as Bilbo had gotten ready to go on some excursion outside, one of his friends who hadn’t left the mountain for months would tell him to bring an umbrella, on account of the rain. And there would be rain. Up in Bilbo’s study, the one Thorin had gifted him when Bilbo was working on his latest book of poetry, the room was close enough to the outside of the mountain that during the worst storms, you could hear the faintest patter of rain against the rock. The sound got louder over the years that Bilbo worked there, and it didn’t take long for Bilbo to figure out that Thorin was hiring contractors to make the room a little noisier. By the end of Bilbo’s stay in Erebor, other dwarves wouldn’t go near it. They said they couldn’t hear themselves think in there, those dwarves who were all partially deafened from the endless sound of hammer on anvil. And Bilbo wouldn’t go near the forges or even within miles of them, the headaches weren’t worth it and the sound never stopped and the wet light of molten gold always made him feel sick.

But the banquets, those were grand, especially as the years went off the events lost the sense of mourning that pervaded that first year back. Bilbo spent his first year feeling like a date brought to a family funeral, trying to decide if it’d be more appropriate if he cried or if he didn’t. Dain had stayed off and on through the first year, pledged his army to the rebuilding of Erebor and did just that, and at his farewell banquet, the room roared for him with such vigor that Bilbo’s ears were still ringing a day later. Then there were the games, the wrestling and racing and ax throwing but also the games of craftsmanship, judged blind by Thorin and the Guild Masters for hours as the contestants sweated and the onlookers heckled, praised, laughed. Bofur always won in the miniatures division, always, with such regularity that people would have called foul if the results were not so self-evident. Fili was working his way up the clockwork division. Over the four years he’d competed, he’d gone from placing twenty-seventh to fourth.

“Although I suppose he won’t work himself any higher,” Bilbo said. “The king can’t participate in the events he judges.”

Primula knocked the bottle of wine against Bilbo’s knee, which Bilbo took. She and Drogo were seated on the ground next to each other. Drogo’d given Primula the blanket when she’d arrived, a misplaced chivalry since the average hobbit lass in cold weather wore enough layers to clothe a half dozen hobbit lads, and after Drogo had spent a few minutes trying very hard not to look like he was shivering, Primula had offered to share. And so now they were wrapped together in the blanket, their faces red from more than the wine, Bilbo suspected.

Dear God, I’ve been married long enough to be nostalgic for young love, Bilbo thought and drank.

And speaking of nostalgia he never expected—all the long nights of the quest, Bilbo had shivered and swore that he’d never step foot outside his door again unless the weather was balmy enough to roll up his sleeves. And here he was, shivering once more and beaming from it, despite everything. He felt like he could have sprinted back to Erebor if he could have just found the strength to stand up.

The view was helping. It did a soul good to stand (or sit) at the highest point around and look out for a while. That was half the idea of the Lonely Mountain, wasn’t it? And this was a good hill, a proper hill. You could see the world from atop this hill. Or at least, you could anyone coming
towards Bag End for a good mile or so. That had been the extent of Bilbo’s world for years, so many years, so many wasted years. He never climbed up this hill when he lived here before. What would he need to see? What in the world could interest him? And now Bilbo could see himself sitting here as winter came, as it lingered, as it melted to spring and then spring to summer and summer to autumn, and he’d still be sitting here, keeping his eye on the road, looking for someone walking up it, coming home, coming to a home they’d only been to once before.

“Look!” said Drogo so suddenly that Bilbo allowed himself for a second to hope—but no. Drogo pointed at Dis, winding her way east from whatever it was she did in town when she decided she was done with the lot in Bag End. And rolling two perfectly round wheels came Dwalin from the west. “They’ll both be back in time for dinner.” Bilbo had no doubt that Drogo was genuinely pleased by this fact. He’d taken over most of the cooking lately, once Primula had made clear that her culinary range consisted of foods that were good for you and wouldn’t taste too bad if you had to throw them up. And just about the only thing that made Drogo snippy was if he went to the effort of making a good meal but not everyone showed up to eat it (by which he meant that Dis hadn’t shown up to eat it, though Drogo would never say that to her directly because that kind of bluntness that Bilbo had spent some years getting passably fluent in was the most shocking rudeness in the Shire). Bilbo could practically hear Drogo mentally mapping out the table settings.

Dis’ road met Dwalin’s. Bilbo saw the moment they spotted each other. They both froze, the way deer do when they see a hunter, or maybe it was more like the way a hunter freezes when they see a deer. Primula unwrapped herself from the blanket and stood. “Have they spoken alone yet?” she asked Bilbo, who had realized at the same moment that no, no they had not.

Several hills away, Dis and Dwalin were still staring at each other. Dis took one step further. Then another. Then another, as Dwalin stood ramrod still.

If they spoke, Bilbo was too far away to see or hear. All he saw was Dis raise her hands, empty palms up. And then Dwalin slowly, slowly shook his head. Bilbo saw Dis curl her hands into fists. Then she dropped them to her side. And the dwarves walked home to Bag End, never looking at each other as they did.

There was a myth amongst dwarves that Bilbo had learned one day or another in Erebor’s library. Like most dwarven myths, it involved construction. One day in the ancient times that once were, the sky started to wobble a bit. Dwarf Something-Something-Big-Beard-the-Third (Bilbo had always been terrible with dwarven names, and it wasn’t like here in the Shire he could go to the library, grab the relevant book, and check) was the only one who noticed it, and like any good dwarf, she set out to investigate the problem. A short inspection of the world later, and our dwarf found that one of the pillars that held up the sky had a crack running straight through the center of it. The gods of the world hadn’t noticed yet, paying more attention to disasters and miracles than basic infrastructure, and our dwarf saw no reason to the bother them when she could fix it well enough herself.

And so she set about her repair job, and all the while back where she came from the dwarves of her homeland looked around for their missing kin and then, when years and years and years had passed, ceased their looking. And still our dwarf worked, meticulously plastering up the crack in the world with such skill that you’d never know that it was there, even if you looked. And so when she was done, years and years and years later when her beard had turned pure white and her hands
shook when she raised her tools, there was no sign of her work at all. The measure of her craft was that the world took no notice of it. The measure of her craft were myths we didn’t have to write about the way the world ended.

She came back to her homeland, told her story, and quietly died to be buried in a grave seldom visited.

Without being a popular myth, Ori had explained, it was an important one and one necessary to know to understand half the conversations that were happening as the dwarves went about the process of rebuilding Erebor. There are the dwarves of the golden statues and there are the dwarves of plastered sky. Put in other words, as the subtext of so many of the discussion that were happening went, the dwarves you needed to reclaim Erebor are not necessarily the ones you need to rebuild it. Thorin was universally considered a dwarf of the golden statues, not least of which because of that one incident with the golden statue, and Bilbo was astonished to discover how much of establishing his kingship had been Thorin trying to noticeably but not ostentatiously prove he could manage the small tasks of the everyday that no one would ever applaud. Bilbo’d learned about kings from poetry; he’d expected more parades.

“Who’s a plaster sky dwarf then?” Bilbo had asked.

“Balin and Dwalin,” Ori said instantly. “Chief of Staff and Chief of Guards—you can’t get more important invisible labor than that. Their job descriptions are pretty much if they did things right, you’ll never know.”

Bilbo thought about that at dinner, which was a quiet affair around a table more crowded than Bag End had seen Bungo’s death. Everyone agreed that the meat stew and rolls were stupendous, which set Drogo so pleased that by the time he laid out dessert he was positively vibrating with happiness. Dwalin looked at everyone and everything besides Bilbo and Dis. Dis looked at nothing except Dwalin, which gave the unsettling impression that she’d poisoned the food and was waiting for it to take effect.

Dwalin had been in charge of Thorin’s safety in Erebor. And Dwalin had lost Thorin. Not just lost Thorin but had helped Thorin lose himself, had escorted him out of Erebor’s territory and had helped him avoid any who would want to bring Thorin back. Bilbo wasn’t sure which part dwarves would consider a worse dereliction of duty. He was still mulling over how he felt himself.

After dinner, Dwalin showed everyone the new and improved wheelchair, which glided across the floor with half the effort Bilbo’d been using before. The end result was Bilbo accidentally crashing himself into a few walls on his first test drive around the parlor, but considering that Bilbo hadn’t been moving fast enough for weeks to crash into anything, the whole experience left Bilbo giddy, beaming like an idiot as he wheeled himself from room to room.

“That’s a fine sight, Mister Dwalin,” said Primula when Drogo managed to corral Bilbo back into the parlor for tea. “How much do you charge?”

“Naught,” Dwalin said, affronted. “It’s a gift.”

Primula pointed at Bilbo. “For him, yes, but there’s a score of other hobbits I know who’d gladly buy one of those. The average wheelchair around here ain’t much better than sitting in a wheelbarrow and trying to push yourself.”

Dwalin scratched his chin, considering. “I reckon I could do a few for—”

“Dwarf-made products are of the highest value and are exceedingly regulated trade goods that
cannot be exchanged without a commerce treaty between the two regions,” said Dis, sitting up in her armchair with a bright look in her eyes. She fixed Dwalin with the same sharp look in her eyes she’d worn all dinner. Dwalin shut his mouth. “How lucky it is that I’m here and able to negotiate fair compensation for both of us.”

“Lucky indeed,” Primula said dryly, crossing her arms. “And glad to hear you mention fairness in that compensation of yours, since I’d hate to think that you’d be trying to turn a profit from the elderly and infirm.”

“Not a profit, no,” Dis said. “But we must cover materials and labor.” Then Dis glanced at Primula and sighed, settled back into her seat with the air of someone who had just metaphorically taken off a crown, and said, “But our Dwalin is free of course to provide prototypes and samples of his labor as we work out the details with your mayor.”

“Please don’t destabilize the local economy of the Shire because you think you’ve just found a new export market,” Bilbo said.

“Firstly, my dear Bilbo, the Shire is so disgustingly stable I doubt an earthquake could budge it so much as an inch to the left,” Dis said, “and secondly, it is egregious that the homeland of Erebor’s favorite adopted son has no access to dwarven advancements in technology.”

“Thirdly, none of that particularly matters to either of you,” said Primula, “because I was asking Mister Dwalin.”

“You certainly were,” Dis said, lounging back. “We all have much we’d like to ask of Mister Dwalin.”

It was amazing how quickly a room could get tense. Dis was rather an expert at it. She sipped her tea with the quiet punctuation of someone who is content to the other people deal with the uncomfortable silence.

“We certainly do,” Drogo said cheerfully, his hosting skills going toe-to-toe with Dis’ natural flair for hostility. “We never did inquire how your travels went. Were the roads fair?”

“If you’ve something to say, Dis—” Dwalin started.

“No,” said Drogo firmly. The dwarves stared at him. “It was bad enough when Bilbo and Her Majesty couldn’t sit down at the same table without trying to stab each other with every other noun. I’ll not have the same play out with a new guest. We’ll talk civilly or we won’t talk at all.”

“Are you lecturing him or me?” Dis asked, sounding too incredulous to be offended.

“Well, your Majesty, if you need lecturing,” Drogo said. “No offense meant to either of you, but however you do things back where you came from aren’t the ways we do them here. This is the Shire and we don’t spend our tea times insulting each other to our faces.”

“Quite right,” said Primula. “We wait until their backs are turned, like proper hobbits.”

Drogo glared at her for good measure too. “So are we all going to behave like adults?” he asked the room.

Dis and Dwalin glanced at each other. Dwalin’s eyes fell to the floor, and he shrugged. “Let me just ask,” Dis said, “in the most civil way I can—” She paused, her lips pressed together and her eyes suddenly sadder. “Did you do your best? To get him—” And here she glanced at Bilbo. “Home? Whatever it is we’ve decided that means.”
Dwalin straightened up in his chair, an armchair meant for someone about a foot shorter with far less sturdy thighs. He met Dis’ eyes. “No,” he said simply.

Dis’ lips tightened. “Well,” she said quietly. “Then I’m afraid to say I cannot talk civilly at all.”

“Then we’ll talk without you, Dis,” said Bilbo. Dis didn’t even look at him, so Bilbo rolled forward until he was in her line of sight.

“Do you even care about what Dwalin is hiding?” Dis snapped. And yes, the answer was yes, that Bilbo cared so much about what Dwalin wasn’t telling them that it was difficult even to look at him without a thousand fears running through his mind—that Thorin was secretly dead, that Thorin really had gone mad, that Thorin had abandoned Bilbo here not because of accident or danger but because Thorin was washing his hands of him.

But it was hard to imagine a world where if anything bad had happened to Thorin it would be Dwalin’s fault.

“Do whatever you like, dear sister. I’m getting some air,” Bilbo said, rolling his chair back (managing only to knock the table, couch, and wall once). “Dwalin?” Dwalin looked like he was bracing for a blow. Bilbo gestured vaguely at the outdoors. “Come on. I require protection.”

There was no ramp down from Bag End to the road yet so Dwalin carried Bilbo one more time. “I can walk, you know,” Bilbo grumbled from his place over Dwalin’s shoulder.

“For about three steps, Miss Primula tells me,” Dwalin said, his voice such a low rumble that Bilbo could feel it shaking up through his body. On the other side of the stairs, Dwalin put down the chair and placed Bilbo into it with more diligence than skill. Dwalin’s physical forte was more brutal than medicinal. But Bilbo got sat well enough, and only had to spend a few minutes retying his scarf just so.

“You know that no one can see you in the dark, right?” Dwalin asked, but that was because Dwalin didn’t understand style.

Bilbo tucked his hands into the blanket he’d folded over his lap and said, “Head west, please. Where the land starts to slope.”

The wheelchair made barely a sound as it went over the dirt path, and Bilbo barely felt a jostle as Dwalin pushed him. The silence was easier here, while you were moving, while you didn’t have to look at each other, and with the darkness save for the stars bright as beacons. Tauriel would have a great deal to say about the stars tonight, could tell Bilbo exactly what fate hung over them as they walked and if the stars were any different here than they’d been at home. Or rather, at Erebor. But Tauriel was half a world away at Erebor. Or rather, at home.

Bilbo sighed, and the cold made his displeasure visible.

“But the Shire is beautiful,” Bilbo murmured half to himself.

So he was surprised when Dwalin said, “Yeah. It is. Thought so the first time around.”
They went in silence another minute longer, down the empty main thoroughfare as on either side of them passed houses lit golden from inside with the late evening fires. The faint sound of song floated out of many of them, the songs no one had known in Erebor. Dwalin listened to the music too, and perhaps he found it as hauntingly strange as Bilbo had found dwarf song, which Dwalin would have found as achingly familiar as Bilbo found hobbit song, for Dwalin said, “S’nothing like the mountains.”

“No,” Bilbo agreed.

He could feel Dwalin’s hands shifting on the back of the chair. Bilbo waited.

“So you think he’ll be happy here then?” Dwalin asked. “It being so different from home? If he gets here. Mahal, Bilbo, I’d tell you where he was if I could. I’d be by his side if I could. I’m the worst idiot, the worst guard, the worst friend, but I promise you, I’d have brought him here if I could have. But I could have. That’s the thing. Dis knows. Dis always knows, bloody spymaster, she always knows. But he’s alright. I know he’s alright because I’d feel it if he wasn’t. I’d feel it right in my heart. I felt it when he was stabbed, you know. Felt it like the sword was in me, and me half a battlefield away. I know he’s alive. And I know if he’s alive…”

Dwalin trailed off, sounding as if he’d used up all the words he’d got.

“Dis blames me for him leaving,” Bilbo said. “Or used to blame me, I don’t know. It’s hard to tell with her. We were talking about it when you arrived, and then you arrived. Maybe she’s switched entirely to blaming you.”

Dwalin said nothing in response, which was roughly how Bilbo remembered most of his conversations with Dwalin going.

“Durins,” Bilbo said, and he patted himself down for his pipe.

“She’s right,” Dwalin said, his voice low enough to rumble down through his hands, through the chair, to Bilbo’s chest. “She should blame me.”

In an outer pocket, Bilbo found a pipe that he didn’t remember putting there but knew he could count of having because there was no outfit that he could assemble from his wardrobe that wouldn’t have the necessary components for a good smoke. “And why should she?” Bilbo said, tamping the pipeweed.

Bilbo could practically hear Dwalin scowling behind him. “Because I lost him.”

“To be fair,” Bilbo said, “so did all of Erebor.”

“No, it’s not—” Dwalin bit off the words. Suddenly Bilbo stopped moving forward, and he heard feet stomping away, and when he turned the chair around, the pipe clenched in his teeth, Dwalin was standing at the edge of the road, his back to Bilbo, his arms crossed. They’d wound their way up out of Bagshot and onto Mulberry which became Porter Pass halfway up Hallows Hill, at which point the walking path diverged left through Oathkeeper’s Overlook, and that was where Dwalin had stomped a few feet away onto, where the land managed through a great deal of effort to raise itself just high enough and grow just enough trees to be one of the more secluded scenic views in the Shire. Which Dwalin had probably noticed but clearly hadn’t regarded. Bilbo could just faintly make out the sight of a couple scurrying off in the darkness, grabbing their clothes as they went.

Bilbo steeled and wheeled himself over to Dwalin’s side. “Thorin’s not here,” Bilbo said simply. “And Dis is always one bad conversation away from declaring war. So if you’re looking for
forgiveness of any kind…” Bilbo shrugged and lit his pipe. “I’m your best shot.”

There was a long, long silence. And then Dwalin leaned back against a tree. Arms still crossed, eyes still elsewhere. “I blamed you too,” Dwalin said.

Bilbo lowered his pipe and replied, “Oh.”

“Yeah.” Dwalin scratched his beard.

“Well,” Bilbo said after a moment. “No one’s technically wrong about that. I was very much the inciting incident of his leaving.”

Then there was another long, long silence, so long that Bilbo finished his pipe and watched fireplaces around the village go out. Dwarves live so much longer than hobbits. Bilbo had learned what that meant, living amongst them for six years. It meant hobbits lived faster. It meant Bilbo had learned to get better at waiting.

And after the long, long silence part two, Dwalin said, “Maybe there weren’t bandits. Maybe there was something else.”

The something else went like this:

The Tale of Dwalin

The Appendices

(And here is an author’s note where Bilbo must confess some artistic license in his transcription. More so than usual. For Dwalin said all this and more, but not with half so many words. Dwalin was a dwarf who, even by the standards of dwarves, talked with actions far more than words. But Bilbo was a hobbit who talked with words far more than actions, and if he ever did otherwise he blamed it on the corrupting influence of the dwarves, and so Dwalin stooped to Bilbo’s level to say aloud the kind of things that were never supposed to actually come out your mouth. And he said it aloud one halting sentence at a time, in the way you talk about things you don’t want to talk about, when half the nouns are missing and the ellipses become audible. But Dwalin talked, and Bilbo understood as well as anyone understands anyone in this world of ours, and here is what was said translated for the rest of us.)

As Dwalin chased down Thorin as Thorin fled from Erebor, as Dwalin saw Bilbo lashed to Thorin’s back, Dwalin did think about how they’d carried the princes as lads, he really did. But the set up reminded him of something else, something Dwalin couldn’t figure out as he huffed after his oldest friend, carrying his newest friend (Bilbo still possessed that title even after six years, Dwalin making friends at the rate of about one per two decades). Dwalin couldn’t remember. Then he did. It was the way that Dwalin had carried Frerin after the battle, when Frerin couldn’t walk anymore. Dwalin’d felt Frerin’s blood pooling against Dwalin’s back. Had felt Frerin’s breath hot against Dwalin’s neck. Had felt the blood and the breath stop. Had carried Frerin a while farther and said nothing to anyone, those stragglers of the battle trudging on, because when there was nothing anyone could do, five less minutes of grief was all the service Dwalin could offer.

If he hadn’t thought of Frerin, Dwalin probably could have done what it was he should have come
out to do. He could have grabbed Thorin by the beard and grabbed him home. But you get stroppy, thinking about those you didn’t save. You get weak. So Dwalin forgot his good sense, and he and Thorin went west.

(“But you packed,” Bilbo said. “Didn’t you?”

Dwalin shrugged. “Suppose.”

“Why would you pack for a journey if you thought you were might just go out to bring Thorin back home?”

“Knew he’d convince me to follow him. After all this time, seemed wrong asking him to follow me.”)

And so Dwalin had followed Thorin. Two days journey away from Erebor in silence, not the comfortable kind that Dwalin was used to sharing with Thorin, the one that had filled the air between them for over a century and a half. The silence wasn’t shared with Dwalin at all. It was a silence between Thorin and Bilbo. And Dwalin was there to carry the bags.

(As direct a transcription as Bilbo’s memory can manage: “It’s not…you, the way you are,” Dwalin said. “I…never wanted…you know, rings and all, that wasn’t me. Or him. We never. Never wanted to. Still don’t. Probably never will. Thought he never would too. If we hadn’t…by our ages…when everyone else. You start thinking. About relationships. Getting older. You do want…not romance…marriage…anything like that. But there’s…” Dwalin held up one finger. “Yeah? When you’re old, planning your life. Thinking…not expecting…there’s kinship and there’s your job there too…but you’re looking for…”

The ellipses, by the way for any seeking to do any linguistic analysis of dwarf language and seeking annotation methods for both their raucous din and melancholic reserve, indicate not the silence of no words but the silence of thinking for the next, two very different sounding silences. And as such those last ellipses might be better written as

……………………………………………………………………………

which Bilbo endured with what he hoped was an aura of quiet patience as he nonchalantly wrapped the blanket tighter around himself and quietly froze to death.

Dwalin dropped his coat on top of Bilbo. It helped with the freezing.

“My person,” Dwalin said finally. “Your person who thinks you’re his person too. That’s not too much to ask.”)

It wasn't that Dwalin didn't understand romance or didn’t feel love. He'd wooed a dwarf or two in his time, though it turned out courtship didn’t suit him. He'd loved too. He'd loved with all of himself and all his weapons too. For Thorin's sake, he’d crossed the world half a dozen times for half a dozen reasons, all because that was where Thorin needed him to go. If that wasn't love, Dwalin didn't know what was.

But that didn't mean he liked looking at it straight on. It was blinding for one. Like looking into the great forge when it was burning. And for another, though Mahal knew you couldn't say this to Thorin, it was embarrassing too. Sweet, of course. But Dwalin always cringed a little on the inside when warriors started falling in love. It was a bit like watching a fine blade go dull. When Bilbo was around, Thorin practically cooed. And Dwalin was happy for his friend, never doubt that he was happy for his friend. But still. Thorin could wait to coo until he and Bilbo were behind closed doors. At least the cooing wasn't the bickering. Mahal, Dwalin didn't know which one was more uncomfortably intimate to watch.
It wasn't Thorin's fault. Love had tempered the flames of every dwarf Dwalin'd ever met who'd managed to climb in love. (Dwalin disliked the phrase fall in love. You fell down the stairs because you were thick enough not to watch where you were going. Every love story Dwalin'd heard worth telling had a little more fighting and planning than that. You could passively love, but it seemed like staring at a hammer and waiting for it to do something.) And Mahal knew you were supposed to temper flames, couldn’t have them blazing like a wildfire for ages.

But. There used to be a time when Thorin’s silences were Dwalin’s.

(“You ever learn the myth of Havali?” Dwalin asked.

Bilbo, as he did whenever he was presented with just a dwarf name and no context, made a noncommittal noise, the aural equivalent of a shrug since the gesture itself would have been lost somewhere underneath the piles of fur currently engulfing him.


“Right, yes, plastering the sky up and dying and the value of unglamorous labor to maintain infrastructure,” Bilbo said.

“Don’t know anyone else who’d put it that way, but guess so.” Dwalin whittled while he talked. He put aside his fifth wood sculpture and reached for another branch. “I like that myth. Always have. That’s…us. Thorin and me. That’s our myth.”)

The first time Dwalin saw the hobbit, he didn't look down far enough. Wasn't the lad's fault he was tiny. Wasn't the lad's blessing either, though Dwalin supposed he had a warrior’s perspective. Small size probably served burglars well enough. Then Dwalin saw the food, and the hobbit disappeared from his mind.

Mister Baggins did cook a mean fish.

Gandalf said he was a burglar, and Thorin accepted it. That was enough for Dwalin. But Thorin only barely accepted it, and Dwalin remembered that too.

Nowadays there were love songs by the dozen about the first meeting of the exile and his thief. They clapped eyes on each other and there was lightning. They touched hands in greeting and the earth shook. If there was lightning and earthquakes that first night, Dwalin can tell you that was nothing but weather. The two of them regarded each other with the eyes of strangers. Dwalin not sure they touched at all. When Bilbo fainted, Dwalin saw Thorin shut his eyes. A brief prayer for patience likely. Whether it was aimed at the burglar or Bofur, who'd apologized sheepishly for scaring the little fellow and dragged him off to the parlor to recover, Dwalin couldn't tell you. He knew that when Thorin opened his eyes again, he met Dwalin's, and Dwalin recognized the look. It was the sort of face he'd worn when the wagons managed to ford a river just to break down on the other side. Or when they'd just made camp for evening's rest when someone started screaming because their water broke. Dwalin joined Thorin at the fireplace while he stoked it from glowing to roaring. "It seems even our good fortune always comes with a little bad," Thorin said.

"If a fainting burglar's the worst fortune we got to deal with," Dwalin said, "I welcome him. Let him faint."

The fire had flared up. Thorin had snorted. "At least he's light enough to carry."

And then it was Thorin and Bilbo. Bilbo and Thorin. King and lionheart, and Dwalin standing over at the side wondering when he’d stopped being the lionheart.
“I understand,” Bilbo said. “You’re the pillar. Thorin’s the sky. And what’s the pillar when the sky is gone?”

Dwalin looked at Bilbo like he was being an idiot. “I’m the sky. Thorin’s the pillar. Then he bugged off to be best friends with some hobbit he met a blink ago.”

Do you know what Dwalin’s second journey through Mirkwood was like? Dwalin pressing forward, pressing blindly forward, shouting Thorin’s name till his throat was raw, and killing anything attracted to the sound? Do you know what it is to be alive and alone in the malevolent dark?

When he’d been young and living in Erebor the first time around, Dwalin had ventured once into the undercity. That was what the guards called the deep mines, the closed ones. The official story, the one no one believed, was that they were some of the first shafts opened and so the first shafts emptied. Nothing left down there. Unprofitable venture. The unofficial story, the one that old guards told new guards while their novice knees knocked in their uncle’s hand-me-down armor, was the better one. The tunnels had been there before the city had been. Maybe before the mountain, however that worked. No one knew who made them, and no one knew what was down there. They just knew not to go down there. Meant everyone did, of course, especially new guards with something to prove while the old guards stood a few yards back and heckled. Most dwarves made it about a hundred feet before turning back. Dwalin’d been told about a private who’d gone down nearly a thousand, and when he’d come back up they made him captain right on the spot.

Dwalin had made it about six hundred before something in the dark breathing on him. Or looking back now—hindsight being what it is and all that—maybe Dwalin just breathed on his damn self. Either way, he set a land record for speed getting back up to the light. What passed for light in dwarf tunnels anyway. The old guard had laughed at him, slapped him on the back, gave him an ale, and said his face must be paler than his arse right now.

You aren’t scared of the dark, they’d asked, and Dwalin had blustered, scoffed, lied. They laughed at him all the harder for it. But it was alright. That was a lesson that you had to learn as a guard if you were going to be any good to anyone: there’s the dark you know and then there’s the dark you fear.

Mirkwood was a darkness that knew how to breathe down your neck. It knew how to hang on your back like a corpse. And Dwalin pressed deeper into it. He pressed and he pressed and he pressed until he couldn’t tell you if he was blind or if the trees had blotted out even the memory of sun. He walked so deep into the heart of Mirkwood that if he’d gone as far down when he’d been a guard, they would have made him king of Erebor when he reemerged. He tracked Thorin as best he could, and when he could track no further, he made himself a target that Thorin might find him, and all the while the darkness pressed against him and breathed.

(“I tried to find him,” Dwalin said. “For him. For you too. Doesn’t sound like it, I know. But I… we all were worried about you.”

“Dwalin,” Bilbo said, “what aren’t you saying?”)

On the beach by Mirkwood, Thorin raised his left hand and offered his grandfather’s ring. The raven cocked his head and took it. With a beat of its black wings, the bird was gone.

“Thorin,” Dwalin rasped. “What the shitting hell are you doing?”

Thorin looked at him Dwalin like he wasn’t anything, like they hadn’t been brothers in arms so long they might as well have had the same blood to make it official. “I am getting Bilbo home as
quickly as I can. Are you helping or not?”

“That was Thror’s ring,” Dwalin said. “What are you thinking?”

“That I have a plan.”

“To give away a treasure you held to all your life?”

“Everything has a cost.” Thorin crouched by Bilbo’s side, rested his hand against Bilbo’s cheek. “Let’s move.”

Sometimes you can feel shame before it’s become shame, you can live the moment and stand outside it at the same time because part of you needs to study everything that happens so you can replay forever. “You have gone mad,” Dwalin said. And he regretted it the moment he had. But Thorin stiffened nonetheless, and the words were said, and there was something sticking in Dwalin’s chest like a burr that was stopping him from apologizing.

“Giving away my treasures,” Thorin said lowly, “has never been my madness.”

“I remember your father,” Dwalin said, “telling us no dwarf would ever cast pearls before swine. What’s this, a new variation on that? Heirlooms before crows?”

It would have been alright if Thorin had stood. Then he and Dwalin could have had it out, push each other around a bit, maybe one would land a good punch on the nose of the other, and after a few minutes, they’d be laughing as the blood dripped down their chins. Then they could get to work.

But Thorin didn’t stand. Thorin reached for Bilbo’s hand instead, while Bilbo slept there between them. “I didn’t ask you to come,” Thorin said.

“But you knew I would,” Dwalin said. “You don’t care that I came, but you knew I would.”

“I didn’t want you here! You followed me!”

“That’s what I do, Thorin,” Dwalin barked. “And I should have dragged you back the second I caught up. Let a proper caravan of dwarves take Bilbo back to the Shire.”

Thorin shook his head. “No.”

“They’d get him there faster—”

“A large group will be noticed, our riders can’t leave the boundaries of our land without getting set upon—”

“If you just took a little bit longer to think about this—”

“I have thought for years. That’s enough thinking.”

“You can visit Bilbo when he’s better—”

“I will not!” Thorin’s words echoed off the trees. He’d jumped to his feet. Bilbo laid on the ground before like an offering. “I will not visit him,” Thorin said, his voice quieter in the way voices sound when someone is trying their best not to yell. “I will live with him. There. In the Shire. I will take Bilbo home, and I will stay with him.”

after all we did to get Erebor back. To get you back to the throne.”

“I was never meant for it,” Thorin said. “I’m a dwarf of the golden statues. I should have died in reclamation.”

“Thorin—”

“There’s nothing for me in Erebor.”

Thorin said it so easily. Or no. With the benefit of hindsight, Dwalin could see exactly how hard it was for Thorin to say that, how many years it would have taken for Thorin to ever whisper the idea aloud, and Dwalin would remember the stupid way Thorin thought he had to spare people by hurting them.

“Kili can’t be moved,” Thorin had worried to Dwalin the night before they were to set out from Laketown to Erebor. “He’s too wounded.”

“Oin says the lad can barely walk,” Dwalin had agreed. “You’ll have to be harsh with him. If he thinks there’s an inch of leeway, he’ll wiggle his way back into danger.”

And in Laketown, Thorin had nodded.

And on the beach, Thorin picked up Bilbo and slung him over his back.

“Nothing,” Dwalin said quietly.

Thorin met his eyes and said nothing.

“Then I’ll give you nothing of me,” said Dwalin, “as you so clearly want.”

As he stalked away—not towards anything, just away from Thorin—Dwalin waited for Thorin to call after him. Dwalin walked and walked, waiting for that call, and with each step he got madder until the rage bittered, and Dwalin wanted nothing more than for Thorin to cry out so that Dwalin could ignore him.

Then Dwalin followed a bend in the river, and Erebor rose up proud before him.

And Dwalin said, after a moment, “Aw, shit,” and turned around, and sprinted back the way he came.

And Thorin was gone.

Two minutes. Dwalin couldn’t have been gone for more than two minutes, maybe three. And Thorin was gone. Disappeared into Mirkwood. And if Dwalin had some small redemption in this, if he had one thing that that didn’t cast a shadow of shame, it was that Dwalin didn’t hesitate for a second before he plunged into the forest behind him.

“Didn’t catch up. Couldn’t find him. Don’t understand why,” Dwalin said quietly. It had to be nearly midnight by now, the air half-frozen around them. The first frost of winter was busy painting the windows of Hobbiton. Over the course of his story, Dwalin had whittled a village.
“Elf roads,” Bilbo said quietly. “Drogo’s likely right about that. There’s probably plenty of those in Mirkwood. And Kili was working on a map of the forest, the first map Erebor ever had of Mirkwood. Maybe there were some routes on the map that Thorin remembered.”

Dwalin grunted. “Maybe.” And after another pause, less long than a great many Dwalin and Bilbo had shared this evening, he added, “But it’s not like Thorin can find his way on the mundane sort of roads.”

Bilbo snorted. “Oh Eru, you’re right, if Thorin found a magical path it was only because he stumbled off the one he was trying to follow.”

“Or if someone helped him,” Dwalin said, and Bilbo thought about that raven flying off with its offering.

“Or if someone helped him,” Bilbo quietly agreed.

Dwalin finished up his little wooden sculpture of the mayor’s house.

“If you think,” Bilbo said at last, “that I haven’t stormed away from Thorin because I couldn’t argue with him a moment longer—”

“It’s not the same.”

“People fight, Dwalin.”

“We never did. Only during, you know. His sickness. That’s how I knew he was sick.” Dwalin pocketed his carving knife and ran his hands over his face. “I could’ve asked him why the ring, why he gave it away. If I hadn’t called him mad first.”

There was another long, long silence now. It was Bilbo’s silence this time. Now Dwalin waited for him. “What’s done is done,” Bilbo said at last.

“That’s all you’ve got to say?” Dwalin asked.

“It is what it is.”

“I hate that phrase.”

“That’s the way life goes.”

“Stop it.”

“That’s how the cookie crumbles.”

“Bilbo!” Dwalin said in a tone that he’d hate to be described as peevish. “I lost him.”

“You didn’t,” Bilbo said. “I tried right there. I tried very hard to be mad at you because I do think Dis has the right idea about things, it is easier to worry when you can be properly furious at someone right in front of you. But as we’ve established, Thorin is very good at getting himself lost. He didn’t your help. And you tried to find him.”

After a moment, Bilbo added, “Of course, you could go looking for him again.”

“I abandoned you as well,” Dwalin said promptly. “And you needed me just as much as him. Maybe more.”
“I’m fine,” Bilbo said. “Find him.”

But Dwalin shook his head. “Dis has her battalions combing the countryside for him, but she’s here in the Shire. We know where Thorin is going to be.”

There was another long, long silence. But this one had something different at the edges of it. Something almost companionate. At the very least, it was a silence shared rather than mutually endured. If one was feeling bold, they might go as far as to say the silence was even comfortable.

“Well,” Bilbo said at last, “wouldn’t be the first time you refused to leave my house.”

The entire way home, the question that had popped up repeatedly in Bilbo’s head during the entire evening was still there popping up, kicking him a bit in the frontal lobe and hissing, *it’s now or never.* And so about half a mile from Bag End, Bilbo asked Dwalin, with a fake nonchalance that sounded every bit as fake as it was, “Were you ever…” And then a discreet cough. “Were you upset we married?”

Behind Bilbo, pushing the chair, Dwalin snorted. “Never cared about that bit.”

“Not at all?”

“Mahal, someone had to marry him sooner or later.” Dwalin chuckled. “You poor bastard.”

That answered that well enough.

Dis sat on the porch, reading by candlelight. Or rather, a book was open in her. She stood up too quickly when Bilbo and Dwalin came in, stood up the same way that Bilbo had so often stood up from reading when Thorin was due back from a meeting but was running late, and Bilbo would sit with a book on his lap and brood until Thorin came home. Book as camouflage. No one needed to know you waited up for them.

“Long walk,” Dis said as they drew close.

“Lots to say,” Bilbo replied as Dwalin lifted him, chair and all, to carry him up the stairs

“Began to think you’d found trouble out there.”

“I looked for trouble in the Shire for a good portion of my childhood. There’s none to be found.”

Dis’ mouth twitched. “Yet you seem adept at making it.” Her eyes darted to Dwalin as he lowered Bilbo and chair to the porch. And then her eyes dropped to the ground. “But it’s good Dwalin was there. Did you know we grew up together? I think he mentioned it. I watched all the ways Thorin got him in trouble. And all the ways Dwalin got him out.” Dis reached down, picked up the book she’d knocked over in standing. It was one of Bilbo’s poetry anthologies. "Thorin’s a crafty idiot,”
Dis said, without looking at either of them, tucking her book underneath her arm. "I’m sure you did what you could.

Dwalin took a step forward. “Dis—”

She raised her hand, palm facing him. “I have a limited amount of magnanimity. Don’t tell me anything I’ll have to forgive.” Dis looked at Bilbo and shrugged with an exaggerated regality. “It’s simply that I cannot endure another lecture from the Brandybucks and Bagginses about my manners.”

Dwalin paused. Nodded. Dis nodded at him too. That’s dwarves for you. Half the time they make such a din you can’t hear yourself think. The other half, they’re so stoic that trying to get a hello from them is like squeezing a rock for water. Mahal only knew which one you’d get, and if you could ask him, he’d probably just respond by stroking his beard thoughtfully.

“I wanted him to be happy,” Dwalin said suddenly, and Dis became very, very still. “After everything. Thought he was happy.” Dwalin shook his head. And Dis stayed very, very still. “Just got so mad at myself that he wasn’t.”

Dis looked to Dwalin, her chin raised. Dwalin met her eyes and held them. After a moment, she smiled. Just a little. And sadly. “We put the leftovers from tea on the counter, if you’re hungry,” she said. “Kindly eat the scones. The other Mister Baggins will have our head if you don’t. You know, you can’t visit Hobbiton and think you’ll get away without sampling one of Miss Rosemond Sandyman’s famous scones.”

“Dis—”

“I get it,” she said. “Truly, Dwalin, I understand. But if you want to talk about feelings, that’s what the hobbits are for.”

Then she held the door open for them, and waited until Dwalin wheeled Bilbo inside.

Bilbo said he would put himself to bed, thank you. He could walk a few steps without collapsing, and with bed, the end goal was collapse. So when Bilbo pulled shut the door to his bedroom, he was alone. After everything that had happened this evening, he could have fallen asleep in his chair right then and there. He thought about it for long enough that the idea must have been tempting indeed, but it didn’t take him long to realize that if he didn’t actually make it to bed, he was due for a renewal of Primula coming to tucking him in, which is not a goodnight that a hobbit of fifty-something particularly appreciates. Besides, it was too cold to sleep in here right now. He’d have to close the window first. Someone, forgetting that it was nearly winter and time to batten the hatches until the warmth returned, must have left it open. It might have been the elf who was currently swinging her way through it.

It’s a testament to how tired Bilbo was that it took him a few seconds of blinking at the sight before he once again reached for a sword that was not there. The elf, perching on the windowsill, pressed a finger to her lips.

“I am sorry about sneaking in,” Tauriel said. “But Dis is sitting on the front porch. Considering the kind of relationship she and I have shared thus far, I thought it’d be best if she wasn’t the first
person I spoke to. I’m very glad to see you doing so well. When Kili wrote that you were healed, I
could not have been more ecstatic. And I was not surprised. Home is the best curative we ever
have.”


And then Tauriel reached into her pocket and placed on Bilbo’s windowsill the short-lost ring of
Thror, the once young dwarf in love under the mountain.

It was a while longer before Bilbo got to sleep that night.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

First things first, over on tumblr, procrusher made an amazing fanart of the last chapter.

And that amazing fanart reminded me that I forgot to tell you guys about another wonderful fanart made for chapter 2 of this fic, by dumbleday.

Please check them both out, they're so gorgeous.

Also my continual apologies for being the slowest updating author ever of the slowest paced fic ever. Thank you all so much for sticking around, reading, and commenting! You guys are the best.

The second meeting of the Hobbiton Local Poetry and Prose Book Club was to meet in Bilbo’s parlor, which was a bit of a shock to both Bilbo and the women meeting there. It was a shock to Bilbo because Dis had neglected to tell him that she had aims on the parlor this late morning, perhaps because she’d neglected to tell Bilbo that she’d founded a book club at all. What Dis did in her time outside of Bag End was a mystery to everyone currently staying inside of it, and when you asked Dis pointblank what she’d been doing all day, she tended to just smile mysteriously at you. And it was a shock to the ladies because dwarves were one thing—though unbeknownst to Bilbo at the time, but utterly unsurprisingly once he learned, the Shire was at that moment and for the last month or so engaged in a passionate debate as to whether dwarves were outsiders that needed to be kicked out, just as soon as they could find out which hobbit was to do the kicking, or if dwarves were just particularly ugly hobbits, in which case kicking them out of the Shire would set a bad precedent for a great many hobbits—but elves were quite a different matter altogether. They were taller, for one. Hobbits will put up with a great deal of difference (by hobbit estimations at least, which means by anyone else’s standards the most you could say was that hobbits’ rampant xenophobia is mostly benign) but height puts them off instantly.

And Tauriel was very, very tall.

“Oh,” said Dis upon seeing her son’s true love. “It’s you.”

“Hello, Dis,” replied Tauriel, in the exact tone Bilbo had heard Belladonna level so often at her own mother-in-law—the vocal equivalent of a weary raising of the fists.

“Good heavens,” said Missus Burrow-ways, who was standing at Dis’ elbow, a pair of reading glasses looped around her neck. “You are tall.”

“Who are these people?” Bilbo said, gesturing to the small hoard standing in his entry way.

“My book club,” said Dis. “I founded a book club. This village is very boring. What are you doing here, Tauriel?” It wasn’t quite an accusation. It was just this side of curious. Dis glanced at Bilbo, and there was a flutter of an emotion Bilbo couldn’t quite name across her face. Hope or fear, one of the two. The emotions were nearly the same damn thing anyway.
“I am looking for Thorin,” Tauriel said.

Dis snorted, whatever delicate emotion that had glanced its way across her face now firmly squelched. “Welcome to the club. I founded that one as well.” Then, with a nod to Bilbo, she added, “Co-founded, at least.” She eyed Tauriel. So did the eight hobbits behind her, who were not quite sure what was going on, but were very glad to be overhearing it. “You saw him?”

“Yes,” Tauriel said. “A while ago. I got him through the forests of Mirkwood.”

“Dwalin thought that Thorin might have had help,” Dis replied.

“He did,” said Tauriel. “He had me. Is Dwalin here as well?”

“At the forge, at the moment,” said Dis. “Thinking quiet thoughts to himself under the cover of pounding metal.”

“Good. We were worried about him as well.”

“We?”

“Your sons and Balin and Erebor and I.”

“So you still don’t consider yourself part of Erebor then.”

“Do you consider your son part of the Woodland Realm?”

“Ooh,” said Miss Grub, elbowing her way to the front of the mass of hobbits. “This seems much more interesting than the book we read.”

“That’s my book you’re holding,” Bilbo said, who had just noticed that in fact they were all carrying a copy of his first collection of poetry. Some of the copies appeared mysteriously unopened.

Miss Grub, in the time-honored Hobbiton tradition of uninvited guests, sat herself on the couch before anyone could tell her not to. “So what’s this story then?” she asked, looking back and forth between Dis and Tauriel with an open eagerness on her face. The other hobbits, perhaps feeling slightly less rude, shifted and glanced at each other, and then, momentary politeness passed, delicately scrambled into the parlor’s seats. Tauriel, now sandwiched between Missus Queen and Missus Flynn, stared at Bilbo in utter bafflement. Dis, now a couple months accustomed to the ways of hobbits, perhaps feeling more interested than the book we read.”

“That’s my book you’re holding,” Bilbo said, who had just noticed that in fact they were all carrying a copy of his first collection of poetry. Some of the copies appeared mysteriously unopened.

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“It is good to see you up and about, Mister Baggins,” Miss Grub was saying. “Our Dis has been telling us the most horrible stories about your health.”

“Your Dis?” Bilbo couldn’t imagine anyone wanting to claim her. It seemed as unnatural as someone in Laketown talking about our Smaug.

“Where did you see my brother?” their Dis asked Tauriel, shooting Bilbo a look as she did that said a hobbit in his delicate health ought to watch his tone.

“On the bank outside the Woodland Realm, after Dwalin abandoned him,” said Tauriel.
Dis pressed her mouth together in a tight line, and Bilbo realized that he had not told Tauriel that they were keeping the exact details of that incident from Dis. But all Dis said in reply was, “Don’t phrase it like that to Dwalin,” and she gestured at Bilbo. “You’re mobile now, and Prim was very clear that you were to get exercise. Why don’t you fetch us another pot of tea and some biscuits?”

“And jam,” said Missus Flynn.

“And sandwiches if you have them,” added Missus Queen.

“And a little red wine,” said the dowager Root, and the group murmured in fervent agreement.

“And really quickly, just to catch up with everything,” said Miss Grub, “who is Thorin?”

“What a good question,” said Dis. “Thorin is my brother, and like the protagonist of any proper tale, he has made a series of bad decisions.”

Bilbo, who had more experience than most at a large group of unexpected guests bursting into his house and demanding food, said simply, “Dis. Is this really how you want to hear her story?”

Dis looked at Bilbo and swept a hand towards Tauriel, who was contriving to take up as little room on the couch as possible while the hobbits on either side of her contrived to take up as much as they could. “When she arrived, you weren’t in a hurry to fetch me. So there’s no urgent news. She doesn’t have my brother under her travel cloak. And I’m guessing she doesn’t know where to find him.”

Bilbo and Tauriel looked at each other, her mouth pulled down in a delicate frown. Their silence was answer enough.

Dis leaned back. “Then it doesn’t really matter how she tells me her story, does it? I’ll take some red wine as well.”

The Tale of Tauriel,
As Recounted to Dis and the Ladies of the Hobbiton Local Poetry and Prose Book Club

“Go find my uncle,” said Kili, son of Vali and Dis, and the battle-ax of the new king under the mountain. “Make sure he is well.”

And Tauriel said, “I’ll find him, my love, and bring him home.”

And Tauriel left the mountain to follow in the king’s footsteps. He fled with love on his back, and that would slow him down.

At the lake, said the princess of Dale, “We saw the king under the mountain sail past on a boat. Where heads he?”

And Tauriel replied, “To a different land, to be king no more. Pledge your friendship to the new king under the mountain, and point me in the direction of the old.”

The princess of Dale pointed Tauriel up the lake, to the river winding by the forests of the
Greenwood, and there Tauriel went. Thorin with his burden and Dwalin as his strength went by the water. Tauriel travelled by the green, and so cut vicious lines through the map. Two days lead had Thorin, but Tauriel found him lost in the forest. The trail had curved since last he took it, and the road deceived his feet. His husband slept on his back, and could offer no comfort.

“Come you alone to these shores?” asked Tauriel.

The once king raised his head. “No,” he said. “I came with Bilbo. I will press on with him. Do you mean to stop me?”

“I mean to take you home,” said Tauriel, “where those who love you may return you to your senses.”

“I am with my senses,” said Thorin. “Your own king told me what I must do.”

“You are bewitched indeed,” said Tauriel. “To seek and take the aid of Thranduil.”

And Thorin said, “Bilbo will die if he remains in Erebor. You know this.”

And Tauriel was silent.

“Take me through the forest,” said Thorin. “Or I will go on my own.”

And Tauriel replied, “I will take you through the forest. I will take you as the elves travel, by the roads of Valar in the secret passageways of the world.”

And Thorin said, “Then let us make haste into the forest of darkness.”

(And here let’s interrupt her telling for a moment, not for half an hour that it was interrupted in reality as Tauriel tried to explain quantum travel to eight hobbits who’d never been outside their village and a dwarf who took too much pleasure in saying, “I still don’t understand, Tauriel. Will you please explain it to us again?” For you see, elven lore had never been nearly as popular in the Shire as it ought to be, largely because the Shire distrusted and disliked both outsiders and tall folk. And Tauriel, being unavoidably an elf, albeit a deeply unconventional one, found it difficult to translate what for her was the irrefutable facts of the world, just as a hobbit would have a great deal of difficulty explaining that the sky was generally blue. Surely, they couldn’t help but think, you should understand that by this point.

And so for readers unfamiliar with the elven history of the world as they know it, here is the necessary background information:

The world was made with singing the melody of the world, a perfect symphony of creation with just enough minor chords to keep everything interesting. Every part of the song was perfect, which is not the same as ideal or well-liked or particularly pleasing to the listeners. But when times of strife and sadness come, you can at least take comfort in the fact that those are still more or less built into the sound’s melody at the beginning of everything. The thought wasn’t always comforting, Tauriel knew that, but it beat true randomness.

When Tauriel was young, when she sat beside Legolas as he learned from his father, the great king of the woodland realm told her this. Every part of the world was, without necessarily being good, perfect. The world was perfect because the song was perfect because the singing was perfect. The Ainur, evidently, were a very fine chorus. That was what the histories told anyway.

But the thing about histories, Tauriel learned early in life, was that they did gloss over a few of the creative difficulties. Like, for example, when you got to the oldest, densest parts of the world—the
forests that had been waiting when the elves arrived, the rock underneath that sloped up to become mountains and down to form dark tunnels that lead places no living creature could walk, the depths of the oceans underneath the cities and villages of the sea where lived minds as vast as the sea itself—they all tended to have quite a lot of freeform improvisational jazz in their composition.

The composer and conductor of the greatest choir any gathering had ever seen cast his eye over the vast, dense foundational work, looked at how much writing he already had to do just to get photosynthesis to work, and said more or less, “Just make sure whatever you do is in key,” and let his chorus create some of the more obscure bits of the world into existence by humming whatever popped into their head.

This is, of course, a horrendously inaccurate and profane paraphrase of the elaborate Sindarin tale Tauriel wove when one of the hobbits asked for clarification. But elves were an oral culture in one way, i.e. the perfect recall word for word of anything they ever heard and a cultural commitment to recount those words as accurately as they could, and hobbits were a different oral culture all together, i.e. “I heard from Daisy who heard from Myrtle who has a brother in the constabulary, you know him, nice but he’s got that squint, and he heard tell from his captain that one of his other officers a few nights ago got called to a cottage on Berkshire Way, and I bet that means that Geffrey is drinking again, but you didn’t hear it from me.”

And in defense of hobbits, that did usually mean that Geffrey was drinking again.

“There’s parts of the world that are a little fuzzier than others,” Bilbo offered. And Tauriel sighed.

“I suppose that’s one way to put it.”

“I don’t remember this anywhere in the poetry,” the slightly addlepated Missus Queen whispered to Missus Burrow-ways as they flipped through their books.


“Who is singing?” asked Miss Grub for the third time.

“They traveled by fairy roads through the forest to get through quicker,” said Primula from the doorway, with a basket of shopping for tonight’s dinner in her arms. Throughout the room went up the little ‘oh’ of understand, followed by murmuring about why the elf didn’t just say that in the first place.

Bilbo started. “When did you get here?”

Primula pointed at Tauriel. “When did she get here?”

Apparently,” said Dis, scooting over in her chair, “it was a very eventful night.”

“Are you Primula?” asked Tauriel. “Bilbo has already said so much about you. How do you do?”

Primula bowed her head and looked Tauriel up and down. “You’re very tall.”

“I’ve been told.”

The Dowager Root thumped her cane on the ground. “Finish the damn story!”

Primula sat on the arm of Dis’ chair, and the damn story continued.)

Tauriel walked Thorin out of two weeks’ worth of forest one day after they’d entered which was
very impressive and a rather complicated skill, not that anyone cares, and Tauriel said, “I will go with you as I can, but I cannot tarry. I am needed in Erebor, at my love’s side.”

“As I am needed at mine,” said Thorin, and at that moment fluttered down a raven to land on Thorin’s shoulder. It carried in its beak a ring.

(“A ring?” asked Dis, sitting up in her chair for the first time.

Bilbo pulled Thror’s ring out of his waistcoat pocket and held it out to Dis.)

The raven dropped the ring into Thorin’s hand. “My offering was too paltry?” asked Thorin Oakenshield.

The raven replied in the tongue of birds.

Thorin nodded. “Then I will offer something else,” and unclasped a bead from his hair.

(“One moment.” Dis looked up from the ring in her palm, sounding as if she were finally, against her will, interested in the story. “What did the raven say?”

Tauriel unclasped her hands and spread them wide.

“You mean to tell me,” said Dis slowly, for maximum scorn, “that an elf—an elf—cannot even the language of beasts.”

“Beasts, yes. Birds, no.”

Dis opened her mouth. And Primula said, “And then what happened, Tauriel?”)

“This is the marriage bead of my mother,” Thorin said to the raven. (“What.”) “It was carved from mithril with the promise of love, and it was all of her that the dragonfire did not claim.” (“He did what?”) He held it out in his hand, and the raven snatched it up. With a beat of wings, it was gone.

(Dis made the kind of noise in her throat that meant that no one, not even the most curious of hobbits, was going to glance her way.)

Tauriel walked with Thorin to the edges of the Greenwood’s holdings, the imperceptible place in the plains that became no-man’s-land, and there Thorin pressed his ring into her hand. “Go back, Tauriel. Give this to my nephews. Tell them I am well and sorry. This task is mine to finish.”

And Tauriel kissed her friend upon his forehead, and wished Thorin speed. And from there, to Erebor she returned.

(“Then after some time, as the mountain settled, Kili asked me to attend to his uncles,” said Tauriel. “On the road, I received word from Erebor that though Bilbo arrived in the Shire, Thorin did not. I am sorry I did not accompany him all the way to his goal.”

“Do not be,” said Dis, her hand over her eyes. “I’m sure Thorin would have come up with new ways to barter away everything our family values even if you had been there. Anyway, I hope you ladies enjoyed that brief interlude.” The ladies likely had. They’d enjoy it more if someone would burst into tears or at least some shouting, but Dis put her hand down, gently patted the hand Primula had rested on her shoulder, and said, “I suppose we might as well discuss the works of Mister Baggins, if Mister Baggins would be so kind as to leave the room as we do it. Does anyone want refills on their wine?”)
As the room raised their glasses in affirmation, Bilbo said to Dis, “You’re handling this better than I expected.”

“Yes, well,” said Dis, with a voice dryer than the cheap wine. “It turns out once you’ve hit rock bottom on disappointment, there truly is nowhere to go but up.”

Let’s back up for a brief moment. It may surprise Dis, but stories do start before she arrives. The night before, fresh from his talk with Dwalin that had so utterly drained the both of them, Bilbo entered his room and found an elf waiting for him. She waited for him with Thorin’s ring.

“Do you have the dwarf that goes with this?” Bilbo asked quietly, the household asleep or nearly so, and the ring heavy in the palm of Bilbo’s hand. It was too big to fit on any of Bilbo’s fingers, and the band was so wide that if Bilbo could have securely worn it, he wouldn’t have been able to bend the finger it adorned. So he held it, his thumb circling the band of strangely cool silver. It reminded his of his own ring that he missed so tremendously, and Bilbo couldn’t remember right away if he meant his wedding ring or his magic one. Tauriel had pulled Thorin's ring from her breast pocket and still it was as cold as if no flesh had touched it. Elves did not heat the world as the other races did. Maybe the loss of body heat was too terribly inefficient for immortals.

“No,” Tauriel said, some measure of gentleness in her voice. The answer didn’t surprise Bilbo. If Thorin was here, he’d be here. If Tauriel knew where Thorin was, she would have told Bilbo straight away. If she had any news at all, she wouldn’t be still perched in the window sill, looking at Bilbo so expectantly. Still. Bilbo was a much like Dis—perfectly capable of being disappointed without being surprised. At this point in his tale, the real trick would be managing the opposite.

“If Thorin had been so damn concerned about Bilbo’s health, he thought bitterly, than he should have considered the wear on Bilbo’s heart to get every visitor in Middle-earth except him.

“Well then,” said Bilbo, slipping Thorin’s ring onto his thumb and curling his hand into a fist around it so it would slip off. “You’d better come in and shut the window behind you. I’ve a nurse that will scold you to death if I catch a chill.”

So Tauriel told Bilbo what she knew. And Bilbo told Tauriel what he knew. And they both spent a good long while trying to figure out what they still didn’t know, until Bilbo yawned, and Tauriel said, “Rest. The mystery will still be waiting for you in the morning.”

“I wish it wouldn’t,” Bilbo had said. “I very much wish Thorin would just turn up and spoil the ending.”

“Did he truly not leave you anything?” Tauriel had asked.

“You mean did he jot off a note, ‘Went off to do something stupid, sorry about that, hope you enjoy Lobelia’s pumpkin patch?’” Bilbo’d shook his head. “No. He did not.”

“That is worrying.”

It was such a staggering obvious statement that Bilbo felt like saying something scathing for a moment there. But he’d sighed instead. “Yes. Yes, it is.”
At the start of her tale, Tauriel had asked Bilbo if he wanted her to light a candle, and Bilbo said, no, he could see perfectly well by the moonlight. And Tauriel said, “It is beautiful tonight, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Bilbo replied.

“Did you miss it?” Tauriel asked.

“Tremendously.” Because he knew what she was asking and what she meant. There were few windows in Erebor. It might be more accurate to say there were none. Just holes in the mountain the dwarves had tolerated for ventilation, for architecture, for some pragmatic reason or another, but not the most pragmatic reason of all which was simply that it did a body good to see the sky. The hobbit body, at least. And the elf one as well. The dwarf body, Bilbo found out, sealed itself off from the open sky and immediately felt safer than it ever had in the wide world.

You could leave Erebor if you needed to, of course, and when Bilbo had been healthy, he’d stepped outside Erebor frequently, out of the parapets or down at the rocky plains at the foot of the mountain, or over to Dale on a visit. But Bilbo’s life, his work and love, they lived inside the mountain. The sky was a detour that Bilbo needed to remember to take, and he didn’t get around to it nearly as often as he should have.

Bilbo got outside the most when Tauriel came to visit. She couldn’t live in Erebor, of course not, which meant that Kili didn’t live in Erebor either. But Kili couldn’t live in Mirkwood, absolutely no way, and so they took turns suffering in the other’s home in between patrol missions, a voluntary exile somewhere between the two homelands. Tauriel was the Woodland Realm’s first consistent envoy in centuries. Kili had mapped more of the outside world than any dwarf of Erebor ever had. And when each job outside the forest and mountain were over, they stayed in the same place together, one returning home and one heading into enemy lands—though not, at least, the land of their enemy. Mirkwood and Erebor had arguably never had better diplomatic relations, a set up partially the result of Tauriel and Kili’s aggressive peacemaking efforts and partially the mellowing of the kings of each realm following the Battle of Five Armies. Bilbo had seen how Thorin and Thranduil had been humbled by their actions that day. They might still vault over the negotiating table to fistfight each other (Bard in this scenario presumably giving up and letting them go at it, perhaps after doing the arithmetic of how much easier life would be without them), but they wouldn’t bring their armies into it. They had reduced their hate to a personal level, which everyone agreed was the most you could reasonably hope for.

“The problem isn’t the elves,” Kili had complained to Bilbo one time after returning for a month-long stay in Mirkwood. “The elves are fine. A bit flouncy, a bit flowy, but what are you going to do? Besides—” Kili winked at Tauriel. “I like a little flounce and flow.”

Tauriel had given Kili a smile in response that made Bilbo feel very much that facial expressions like that ought to be done in the privacy of a bedroom.

“Then what don’t you like about Mirkwood?” Bilbo had asked before Kili could smirk in response. Kili’s smirks were public indecency.

Kili scowled instead. “All of Mirkwood, basically.” He shook his head at Tauriel. “Too many spiders. Too many trees. And it’s so dark in there! A dwarf starts to feel so hemmed in.”

“Yes, unlike the total freedom that is a narrow tunnel that runs underneath millions of pounds of rock,” Tauriel had replied. She slowly straightened and pointedly hit her forehead against the ceiling of the little reception room they’d been talking in.
“At least you can reach everything!” Kili said. He took Tauriel’s hand and kissed it as he tugged her back down to sitting beside him. “I can’t get a glass of water in your home without needing to mount an expedition up the counters. If I want to get a jug from one of your shelves, I need to establish a base camp halfway up.”

“Poor little man,” Tauriel replied, with that smile again. “I’ll fetch whatever you like.”

“Will you?” Kili replied, and smirked, and it was about then that Bilbo pointedly excused himself.

The moonlight was the thing. The moonlight that came so naturally in the Shire. It didn’t need to be sought. Half the times, you had to shut the blinds just to get away from it. Tauriel stood at Bilbo’s window, and she understood what Bilbo meant. Even in Bilbo’s underground home, here was a window. Here was the sky. They weren’t in Erebor anymore.

The truth was, Thorin in hand or not (though obviously Bilbo had his preference), Bilbo was glad that Tauriel was here. She loved someone the same way that Bilbo loved Thorin. Not as family. Not as old friends. She loved Kili as something utterly unknown to her, an interruption in the stasis of her life, a realization that the world as she knew it was a fraction of the world that was. She loved Kili as a foreigner speaking a different tongue, in a different land. If Erebor was ever home to Tauriel, it was because Kili lived there and thought of it as home. And Bilbo understood that. Bilbo very much understood that.

The Tale of Tauriel
As Recounted to Bilbo Baggins in the Night

“Give my assurance to the new king,” Thranduil told Tauriel in the privacy of their reception room, right off the throne room where the throne was suddenly a matter of fervent and impassioned debate, “that this course of action was not what I intended.”

“Your majesty,” said Tauriel, still trying to digest the information she’d just heard. “What?”

Thranduil did not roll his eyes because elves did not do that, particular not sovereign lords of the elves who if they desired to stoop to convey the sentiment of rolling eyes could hire someone to do it for them. And while Thranduil was perfectly capable of conveying that level of scorn without ever moving his face, this particular morning he didn’t even give off the impression that he had heard Tauriel. He seemed too utterly self-absorbed in this moment (“More so than usual?” drawled the Legolas that lived in Tauriel’s head) to pay her any thought at all.

“I will never understand the follies of dwarves,” Thranduil said. “They will sweep away reason without a moment’s hesitation because it occurs to them that they might commit a gesture. They are Romance without thought. Dramatics, emotions, but nothing underneath. They’d rather tear their beards and rend their clothes than give a situation a moment’s thought.”

This was, in Tauriel’s humble opinion, astonishingly rich coming from her king, whom she loved and honored and respected, and who was currently draping his cloak over himself as he soliloquized. Tauriel had not been born yet when Thranduil’s wife had died, but she’d heard the
stories whispered of his grief.

“King Thorin kidnapped Bilbo,” Tauriel said, “and abdicated?”

“Kidnap?” Thranduil looked thoughtful. “I suppose he did. He hardly could ask the hobbit’s permission.”

“Your majesty—” Tauriel stared at him, still trying to process that last bit. “Why?”

“Do you know what a peaceweaver is, Tauriel?” Thranduil said. “It’s a term I learned from the world of Men, their hearts not being crafted near as tender as our own. A peaceweaver is a woman married to her father’s enemy, to turn two feuding families into one.” Thranduil slipped into lecture easily around her. It was the right of kings to hold court, and more so, Tauriel had sat by his son’s side through their childhood. They’d learned together, and Thranduil had been their teacher. And always, so easily, she slipped into feeling as a child around him, a slippage he helped seeing as he rarely ceased treating her or Legolas like one.

He looked her squarely in the eyes as he fastened his cloak around his neck, and Tauriel realized that, no, this was one of those moments where it behooved him to think of her as full grown. “You have become our peaceweaver, Tauriel. Your intentions with this union were never so cynical. Mine are. We need you to act today and for the next days as the best of our realm. The dwarves of Erebor are in chaos, and the dwarves of foreign mountains may see an opportunity for themselves in the upheaval.”

“What do you wish of me?” Tauriel asked.

“That you convey to Erebor no grand conspiracy on the part of the Greenwood to displace the king. That we are now and will remain their allies.” This, Thranduil said gravely. Then he sniffed. “It’s hardly our fault Thorin Oakenshield is melodramatic in love.”

“We’ve no qualm with Mirkwood,” Kili told Tauriel in his chambers as a dozen dwarves helped dress him. “Even if Thranduil had directly chucked Thorin out the door, we haven’t got time at the moment to have qualm with anyone. We’ll start qualming when the coronation is done.”

“Thorin has not been gone twelve hours. Is it not too soon to transfer power?” Tauriel said, over the heads of the dwarves making Kili the hastiest armor the line of Durin had ever seen. Kili was to stand beside his brother as the crown lowered onto Fili’s head, and until Fili had children, Kili was the new heir apparent. He needed to look regal.

“Twelve hours is a long time without a king,” Kili said grimly. “He abdicated, Tauriel. Whether on the advice of Mirkwood or not, he made his choice.”

“I could track him down.” Tauriel snapped her fingers. “Bring him home like that.”

“Like Dwalin went to bring him home?” Kili drawled. “It wouldn’t change anything, except that now we’d have the old king hanging around while we crowned Fili. Thorin left the mountain, left his crown behind, and stated that he was no longer king in his letter. That’s all it takes.”

“Just like that?” Tauriel said.

“Just like that.” Kili tried to tug his beard, his new stress tick now that he’d manage to grow facial hair longer than an inch, but the glover working on his hand held tight and glared.
“But how do you know—” Tauriel hesitated at the mass of dwarves in the room, dwarves that were pointedly ignoring their conversation while also certainly listening. “He left in the night with nothing but his husband and his bodyguard, leaving nothing but a letter behind,” she said in Sindarin. “Will those who oppose your brother’s ascension not raise the question of foul play?”

“Dwarves are not elves,” Kili replied, or rather “Dwarves elves no be,” to directly transcribe his ongoing attempt to learn Sindarin. His vocabulary was lacking, his syntax downright nonsensical, but Tauriel had to admit his accent still made her swoon.

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“We don’t kin slay.”

“It’s not an ongoing habit of my kind either,” Tauriel said, a little cross. “And it will not matter what actually happened. It will only matter what your enemies will say happened.” Or perhaps what had happened, thought Tauriel. You didn't become captain of the guard without some cynicism about the world. Kings were vulnerable at the best of time, and Thorin had been distracted as of late.

Kili was silent a moment in thought. “Find my uncle. Confirm his story. If you can, bring him back. If not—” His eyes darted around the crowded room, the milling crowds of dwarves preparing for a hasty coronation. There’d be another one later, a grander one than this quick affair, but the transition needed to happen, and it needed to happen now. They were fortunate that Fili had been acting king this last week. It made something about this entire fiasco look purposeful.

“Leave us,” he announced to the room. And with the weight of his role, the room left. Alone together, his suit of armor half made and hanging about him, Kili reached for Tauriel’s hands. “Fili wanted to send out the entire army to look for Uncle. I told him not to.”

“You’re right. It will be easier if he is not here,” Tauriel said quietly.

Kili chewed the inside of his cheek. “It’s not just that. We still don’t know what we’re going to tell the public. If we send out the army, it looks like—well, like he did exactly what he did. Like he left and we don’t know why and we didn’t know he was going to do it.” Kili closed his eyes, his head lolling back. “Mahal. I don’t know what we’re going to say.”

“The truth may be your best bet.”

“It doesn’t sound great though, does it?” Kili looked up at her with bright eyes. “That Thorin looked Bilbo more than Erebor.”

“No,” Tauriel said firmly. “No more than you love Erebor more than me. His heart belongs to his husband and his people. His husband needs him. His people do not.” As Kili waivered, Tauriel pressed her forehead against Kili’s. “He would not leave Erebor if he did not trust his nephews to care for it. That is not Thorin.”

“I know,” said Kili quietly. “But I wish—” He faltered. Tauriel wrapped her hand around the back of his neck, and he sighed against her. “Just find my uncle. Tell him—to do what he needs to do.”

Tauriel did not go to the coronation. Kili invited her, and Tauriel demurred, and he didn’t ask again. It was a dwarf ceremony, they both knew that. Bilbo had gone to Thorin’s coronation, but this ceremony would have to be different, not the least of which because of Bilbo’s presence at the last one. Tauriel heard reports that Balin crowned Fili. Kili had knelt beside his brother. At the
reception, Tauriel stayed by Thranduil’s side as he paid homage to the new king under the
mountain. And when Thranduil left her to join King Bard’s delegation, Tauriel stalked through a
crowd that came up only to her chest until she could see Kili again, seated next to his brother high
on the dais. She pressed her fingers to her lips. He did the same. Then, with some relief, Tauriel
slipped out into the night.

It took her no short time to catch up with Thorin. He’d run off into the Greenwood (Mirkwood, she
could reluctantly concede on days when the plants were as hostile as they were now) and gotten
himself lost in a moment. Dwalin was nowhere to be found, which didn’t surprise her. The forest
had a way of separating travelers. Thorin might have lost Bilbo too, if he wasn’t lashed to his back.

“Good,” Thorin said as way of greeting, when she landed on the forest floor in front of him. “I
need a point in the right direction.”

“Erebor is to your east,” Tauriel said.

Thorin looked away. “Do not scold me like child. I know what I do.”

“That doesn’t make the action wise.”

“It is the only action I can take.” Thorin said this with such conviction that the words might have
been made from stone.

“From the advice of my king?”

“Desperate times.”

She looked around. “Where is Dwalin? Have you lost him in the forest?”

Thorin flinched as if she had stabbed him. “Dwalin—Dwalin does what he thinks is right. He went
back to the mountain from the banks of the river. He was spared Mirkwood again.”

Tauriel was staggered. She’d thought Dwalin Thorin’s fifth limb. From the look on Thorin’s face,
the severing was painful.

“You’re alone?”

Thorin raised his head. “No. I came with Bilbo. I will press on with him. I will take him home and
watch him heal and build a home with him, in the land where he came from. Do you mean to stop
me?”

“No,” said Tauriel after a moment. “I know better than to tell a son of Durin what he should
presume to do. Any son of Durin.”

Thorin looked surprised a moment, the fight still in his face. Then he nodded. “Thank you. Are—
are my nephews…”

“One is king sooner than expected, and so the other stays by his side,” Tauriel said when Thorin
could not finish. “But is that not the way of mortal princes? They train all their lives because kings
die suddenly, and you are not dead. He is ready for this and is spared from the usual grief.”

“Is that what you counseled Kili?” Thorin asked.

“That is what Kili counseled Fili. As well as his Council, my king, and the King of Dale.”

Thorin nodded, a ragged jerk of the head where he did not try to meet her eyes. “And they—”
“Accepted him as king under the mountain. They all have worked with your nephews and have found them of the highest quality.” Tauriel clasped her hands behind her back and looked away into the perpetual dusk of the forest. The Greenwood was so beautiful, even at its ugliest. Who could ever find happiness anywhere else on the earth? “The kings understood what you did better than anyone else, I think.” And they had, Thranduil and Bard officially offering to the Durins a graciousness that Tauriel knew had left Fili stunned. “They are both widowers as well.”

“I am not a widower.” The words were a whip crack and for a moment, the background chatter of the forest startled into silence. Then the buzzing of insects began again, the distant calls of birds, and Thorin suddenly looked too tired to press on. “I never will be.”

“No,” Tauriel said quietly. “Not if we can help it. Before I report back to your nephews, I can take you through the forest faster than you’ll ever find on your own.” This was almost certainly true, if only because Thorin had such an unremittingly terrible sense of direction that he couldn’t manage to follow a marked path.

Thorin nodded again. “Then let us lose no time.”

(“You haven’t mentioned me,” Bilbo said, his voice quiet. Bilbo and Tauriel huddled in his room, like two children at a sleepover. The household was asleep. Dwalin snoring across the hall, Primula and Drogo settled in as well. Even Dis had finally come in, about an hour ago, and Bilbo and Tauriel had listened in silence to the tired footsteps that came down the hall and shut a bedroom door behind them.

“Egotist,” Tauriel said lightly.

“Unashamedly. But I am presumably there the entire time you were speaking to him.”

“Yes. Strapped on his back. Though as we travelled I carried you sometimes as well.”

“And how did I look?”

Tauriel’s eyes studied him as only elf eyes could. From a height, for one. And with a searchlight that came from within them. They carried starlight and sunshine in their body, the echoes of the great song reverberating in their chests. Thorin could tell a good gem cut from a bad with a glance, not even a magnified one, and he could see the fire’s temperature by minute hue, and he could see something in Bilbo that Bilbo had never been able to see in himself. Different eyes saw different things. That’s what he’d learned, going abroad from the land of eyes he’d known his whole life. Tauriel looked at him and said, “You looked unwell.”

And Bilbo knew that was why Tauriel had so quickly abandoned the hope of bringing Thorin back to Erebor.)
say, “It’s something you must do for yourself.”

Tauriel thought they were great fun. Thorin, throwing up at the first sign of sunshine onto the trunk of a tree, thought them less so. She gave him a moment, and took care of Bilbo.

He was ashen. He’d always had a faint complexion, especially next to the ruddy dwarves, though enough time in the sun tinted him gold. He had no gold now, just grey, like a cleaning rag too thoroughly used to ever get its color back. He was skinnier, and the loss of weight made him look older, skin hanging and wrinkling the way elf skin didn’t. Tauriel touched the back of her finger to his cheek. The skin was smooth and dry as leather worn all the way through. He felt threadbare.

“He looks better,” Thorin said. “Ever since I got him out of the mountain.”

And Thorin was right.

“I can go with you,” Tauriel said. “We can make more haste with two.”

Thorin shook his head. “You are needed back at Erebor. My nephew needs you, and Fili needs Kili. I know—” He looked away. “I know I have wronged them terribly. That I have left a wretched mess, and left it to them to clean up.”

“You live such short lives,” said Tauriel. “Get what happiness you can find.”

And then the raven came, and gave back Thorin his ring. And Thorin gave the raven his mother’s marriage bead. Tauriel looked on without understanding any of it, save that there are few deals in this world that may be done without payment.

(“What is he trying to pay for?” Bilbo asked.

“If I knew,” said Tauriel, “I would tell you.”

“Did you ask him?”

“I did. “

“And he said?”

“That it was nothing more than a desperate, wild hope.”)

It was another day’s walk to the edges of the Woodland Realm’s protectorate. Tauriel felt the break as clearly as if she’d left the ground and tried to walk into the sea. They made camp there under the stars, in this last stretch of peaceful land before the wilderness began. “You’ll need help from here on more than ever,” Tauriel said.

“Go to my nephews,” Thorin replied. “I have help.”

Tauriel raised an eyebrow. “Your mysterious friend on the other side of the raven?”

Thorin smiled and reached over to hold Bilbo’s hand. “My best good luck charm.” His smile turned wry. “Though he works better when he’s awake.”

In the dawn, Tauriel kissed Bilbo’s forehead and gave what strength she could to him. It was a strange seed planted in thorny soil, but he looked a little brighter when she drew back. She helped Thorin fasten Bilbo to his back, and when they were done, Thorin clasped Tauriel’s hand. When she drew it back, the ring the raven had given her was in her palm.
“Tell them I am sorry,” Thorin said.

“I’ll tell them that,” Tauriel replied, “and also that you are doing what you must do.”

Thorin looked more grateful for the words than he’d been for the crown when they lowered it onto his head. Tauriel knew this, for she had been at his coronation too. Kili had held her hand as they watched Thorin rise as king. And they had watched Bilbo, standing a little bit to Thorin's left, so proud on Thorin's behalf that he had glowed like a sun in the dark of the mountain.

Tauriel went back to the mountain. She bowed into the darkness and before the new king. She waited to kiss the new heir until they were in the privacy of his new chambers. What they thought and said was theirs to keep. Kili was her love. Fili was her friend. She kept their confidences and buried their words inside her. In the end, they said that they were happy for their uncle and their uncle by marriage. Kili, at least, knew a thing or two about doing stupid things for love.

And she slept there, under the mountain, where she couldn’t see or hear or breathe or think, where the rocks smothered the sky and those who ought to be sleeping underneath it, and always the pounding of the forges in the deep, always the deafening noise echoing forever in the rocks and the dark. If Thranduil was right, if the mountain was killing Bilbo, she was surprised only that he lasted so long. Five years under the mountain, six total away from home. It was a good while longer than he could have got. It was not so short, in the lifespan of a hobbit.

(“You don’t need to comfort me,” said Bilbo quietly. “I’m already grateful for what I got. Now I’m ready to settle in the Shire again.”

“Are you ready because you have no choice?” said Tauriel.

“If I have no choice,” said Bilbo, “I may as well get ready.”)

In the throws of the unexpected book club, after Tauriel told that version of her tale to Dis, Bilbo went back to the kitchen for refills. Two hobbits, who looked at an invalid in a wheelchair and decided that he shouldn’t be the one solely responsible for catering, came with to help him. They were lingering by the doorway, though, trying to catch all the vital background information Dis was giving so that the hobbits could understand anything about what it is they’d just heard.

“My brother went off to reclaim our homeland—” Dis began.

“Well, how’d he lose it in the first place!” someone interrupted.

“Imagine that, losing a whole homeland.”

“Don’t you judge, Daisy, you’d lose your own head if it wasn’t screwed on.”

“There was a dragon,” Dis said loudly, “and it killed a rather lot of us.”

There was general murmuring in the parlor, a bit of sympathy mixed with muffled debated as to
whether that was a sufficient reason to lose a perfectly good homeland. There was only one voice in the parlor that Bilbo did not hear. Tauriel, as far as Bilbo could reckon, had said nothing since finishing her tale, which Dis probably had no objections to (if Bilbo could make a few suppositions about Dis as a mother-in-law that were probably unfair and mean and accurate), and the hobbits, following Dis’ lead and their own natural distrust of anyone over five feet tall, were unlikely to initiate conversation with her. Which meant that Tauriel was perched politely on Bilbo’s couch, the first elf held hostage in the Shire.

“You’d never get a dragon in the Shire,” Missus Birch said to Miss Brownfoot as they stacked more biscuits on a tray.

“Yes, they are attracted to all the gold we don’t have, aren’t they?” Bilbo replied, and popped the cork on his bottle of a decent red. Mostly decent, anyway. You could drink it, anyway.

Unsurprisingly, the two women left Bilbo to finish up the work in the kitchen by himself just as quick as they could. Bilbo couldn’t terribly blame them—Dis was just getting to the Battle of Five Armies, which was always everyone’s favorite part during the ballads (though Bilbo had never heard Fili and Kili’s achievements in battle interspersed with quite so many descriptions of how much of a pain they had been while they were teething). Bilbo hardly needed their help. After a few moments bumping around the kitchen, Bilbo had discovered that the wheelchair Dwalin had built him was so disgustingly easily to use that Bilbo was going to have considerably difficult getting anyone to do something for him. Bilbo raised himself slightly in his seat using the pump Dwalin had fashioned, grabbed a loaf of bread off the counter, and silently lamented his inevitable future of having to do things for himself once more. There are some advantages to infirmity, at least if you’re tremendously lazy in that genteel hobbit way.

Bilbo glanced at the wine bottle on the table, the last dregs still there, before he sighed and started on a pot of coffee instead. He’d been up half the night talking with Tauriel, and that was after he’d been up the first half of the night talking with Dwalin. It had been a long time since Bilbo could say that he was tired because he hadn’t gotten enough sleep. This, he supposed, was improvement. Chores and exhaustion.

Bilbo jumped as Tauriel appeared from nowhere to sit next beside him by the fire. Thankfully, most of his drink had stayed in his cup.

“Coffee makes me jittery as well,” Tauriel said as Bilbo wiped his waistcoat with a rag.

“I have difficulty imagining that.” Bilbo resigned himself to a stain—why like a fool had he put on his white linen today?—and took of what was left of his coffee. “On the whole, which story was more of a lie? The one you told me? Or the one you told just now?”

“Dis requires more editing,” Tauriel said simply. “Though I do like her. She’s been a good friend to me, when I was settling amongst the dwarves.”

“That is the most surprising fact you’ve recounted to me.” He took another sip, felt the warmth flow through him, felt a little more vitality snap behind his eyes. “And then Kili asked you to come to the Shire?” Bilbo asked.

“More or less,” Tauriel said. “I wanted to come, and he agreed it was a good idea.”

“Did you think Dis would be more amenable if she knew your presence was the result of your son’s idea, rather than your own?” Bilbo asked.

Tauriel smiled a little, just the corner of her mouth, and shrugged lightly. “Bilbo, I think a little
fresh air would suit me now. Would you like to join me?"

He finished his coffee in two swallows. “I suppose I could give you the tour,” said Bilbo, sounding more reluctant than he felt. In truth, he was twitching to get outside. He practically wanted to romp. Him. _Romping_. He hadn’t romped in decades. He was fairly sure it was illegal after age fourteen. “Did you know that yesterday was the first time I’ve been out of the house since I woke?”

“So long indoors!” Tauriel said, aghast, this being that lived off starlight as much as food. And then she got that look in her eyes that made her look very much like Kili’s true love. “Have you looked out the window yet today?”

“Why are you asking that in that tone?”

She grinned at him. “Grab your hat, Bilbo, and bundle up. You are not in Erebor, and the sky is giving the surface dwellers a gift.”

The snow looked like diamonds as it fell, the first snowfall of the season. Bilbo barely had time to think about how happy that comparison would have made Thorin before Tauriel pushed, and they went flying down the road, elf and hobbit in chair, and if there was unsightly whooping on the part of one or more of them, you could hardly blame them. They were above ground, under nothing but the open sky, and the Shire was beautiful in winter.

So Drogo scrounged up another bedroom, and Tauriel stayed. Dwalin greeted her with a bear hug when he came back from the forge, and Tauriel told her tale for a third time over dinner. Afterwards, Primula helped Bilbo with her exercises, while Dis read by the fire. And the snow kept falling. Bilbo cheerfully excused himself from shoveling. Dwalin solved that problem by barreling straight through it. Tauriel picked up her Sindarin lessons with Bilbo, and his tongue relearned the sounds it had forgotten from lack of practice. Dis said that she might break the ultimate taboo and simply teach him Khazdul, simply so she wouldn’t have to listen to any more elf talk as she knitted with Primula in the evenings. They talked in low voices and laughed together at jokes no one else in the room quite heard. And Drogo would come over and join them, and Dis always sat so that Primula and Drogo had to squish together on the couch. One evening, Primula leaned her head on Drogo’s shoulder. He had eyes like stars for the rest of the evening. And Dwalin meanwhile would come in from the yard or the pantry or the storage room, wherever he had found something in need of repair, and he’d announce to the room what he had fixed. Tauriel sat off to the side, by herself. She found a harp in the marketplace and played it to the pleasure of the hobbits and supposed consternation of the dwarves, who were forever cajoling her to pick a decent dwarf ballad. But mostly she just watched. She was like Bilbo in that regard.

And so a week passed, and then two, and then another, and it was a month since Dwalin had arrived, and two months since Bilbo had awoken. And the snow kept falling.

Bilbo climbed up the hill behind his home nearly every day, as winter settled in with picaresque snowfalls and miserable chills. Dwalin could clear a path just by stomping through the snow, and he did just that for anyone who asked, a great deed that made him the bitter enemy of the lads who made their pocket money shoveling. With Dwalin at the lead and someone—usually Drogo, often Prim, occasionally Dis, and rarely Tauriel, too tall by half to comfortable grip the handles—pushing the wheelchair, Bilbo made it to the summit of the little hill easily enough. And then Bilbo
started halting his assistant a little way down from the top. He managed a few feet uphill that first day before he collapsed. He managed the same distance the next day and the next, and when he got comfortable with that small trek, he started from a little lower down on the hill. Everyone got very good at catching him before he could tumble backwards head over heels down the slope. (Once had been enough.)

Then, his excursion outside completed, he would loudly announce that he was done with exercise for the day, thank you, and lock himself in his library until dinner.

And that is how waiting passed into routine.

“He fits in well,” Tauriel said as she settled down by Bilbo in the library. Bilbo had stopped jumping when she appeared. Tauriel couldn’t have walked loudly if she tried, and she rarely remembered to say hello before she started talking to you, and so you simply had to get used to turning around sometimes and seeing her there, halfway into a conversation with you that you had not actually yet participated in.

“Dwalin, I take it?” Bilbo said, closing the book he’d been halfheartedly reading. Miss Grub had picked this week’s book for the club, a rather soppy love story about two hobbits who fell in love over the objections of their feuding families. He’d given the first chapter the benefit of the doubt and was now reading almost entirely out of the hope that at least one half of the couple would die before the end.

Tauriel drew back the curtain on the window. Bilbo could see in the distance, down the path, Dwalin’s bald head gleaming in the winter sun. He appeared to be giving three separate children a piggyback ride. “He’s raising a little army,” Tauriel said.

“Inform Thranduil that the dwarves have broken their peace treaty,” Bilbo said. Dwalin was teaching the hobbits to wrestle. He said it was an outrage, the way they grew up never knowing the right way to make a fist, and when Bilbo suggested that was because hobbits on the whole did not routinely punch each other in the face, Dwalin stared at Bilbo as if he’d said that hobbits didn’t believe in wearing clothes. “You’ve got to know how to keep yourself safe,” Dwalin said so firmly it was clear that he was not actually asking anyone’s permission to teach them, and ever since then, Bilbo could glance out his window and see half a dozen youngsters following Dwalin through the snow. Bilbo was never sure how the children’s parents felt. On the one hand, a strange dwarf was encouraging their youngsters towards violence, but on the other hand the average hobbit couple had about a dozen children, and if you could get a few out of the house for a while, it didn’t much matter what they were doing. And at least Dwalin had given up on teaching them all axe work, when it was clear that his battle axe was taller than all of them.

“I heard rumor his best pupils are planning to share with him a demonstration of their skills gained in long range ballistics,” Tauriel said.

“They’re going to pelt him with snowballs?”

“That’s what our reconnaissance reports.”

Tauriel too had her own following of hobbit children. They were a less literal following than Dwalin’s, it being apparently beyond even the aptitude of the young and eager to keep up with an elf in—which is to say more accurately, on—the snow. Bilbo had more than once looked out the window to see Tauriel striding across the top of the powder while in her wake a few knit caps and flowing scarfs bobbed as best they could through the powder behind her.

Bilbo put aside his book and asked Tauriel, “Did you hear Dis and Dwalin are building me a
sleigh?”

“I did. Congratulations, Bilbo. I believe it is the first cooperative effort they’ve shared since I’ve been here.”

“Then it’s the first they’ve done,” Bilbo said, “since Dis was nearly at Dwalin’s throat for a while there.”

“She is a woman of passions. I admire that.”

“You only say that because you are not the subject of her passions.”

Tauriel raised an eyebrow. “Really,” she said dryly. “You don’t think the elf her son loves has experienced any of King Dis’ passions.”

“Right,” Bilbo said. “Good point. I’m amazed she likes you so much, to be honest.”

Tauriel shrugged, her hair sliding off her shoulder like spider silk. “It’s because she knows she’ll never need to be my mother-in-law,” she said bluntly. “She’s welcomed me into her family so long as we have no actual kinship bond.”

Bilbo frowned. “What do you mean? You’re married, same as me.”

“No at all.” Tauriel sat on the edge of Bilbo’s desk. “We are married as elves are married because we love each other to the exclusion of others. There’s nothing that binds us as the dwarves have bound you to Thorin.”

“No eighty-seven page contract?” Bilbo asked.

Tauriel smiled wryly. “Do the peace and trade treaties between the Greenwood and the Mountain suffice?” She looked back out the window again. She looked beautiful in the cold sunlight, though it was hard to imagine a natural light that would not cast Tauriel as a beauty. (That’s elves for you.) She never looked so beautiful in Erebor. The light of candles and forges and light crafted by mortal hands never fell so elegantly upon her face. She’d always looked a little ashen under the mountain. Bilbo wondered if she had looked at him and thought the same.

“Why are you here, Tauriel?” Bilbo asked.

“Because Primula told me to fetch you for tea.”

“No, no, that’s not what I mean,” Bilbo said. “Wait, what’s for tea?”

“Miss Brownfoot made us a stew, apparently.”

“Well, as long as Primula didn’t cook it, it should be edible enough.” Bilbo sat back in his chair—his office chair. His wheelchair was in the corner of the library. He had enough strength to shuffle from one seat to the other these days, and his body appreciated the change of scenery, so to speak. “I mean, why are you still at Bag End? Don’t get me wrong, Tauriel,” Bilbo added hurriedly. “I like having you here. Compared to dwarves, you’re so quiet it’s like you’re hardly there, your presence gives Dis something to grumble about that’s not Thorin, who knows how Dwalin would entertain himself in the evenings if he didn’t have you to spare with, and my winter plants have never been better than when you’ve looked after them.”

“Oh, Master Hobbit,” Tauriel teased. “It’s so nice to be appreciated for my personality.”
Bilbo waved his hand. “And I suppose you’re nice enough. But winter travel is clearly no problem for you. I’m fairly sure you could ice skate home on a slush during a blizzard, and get there two days before you left.”

“Is the most gracious homeowner in the Shire telling a guest to leave?” asked Tauriel.

“No, I’m practically begging you to stay. My poinsettias will die without you. I just want to know why you are here. I know you and Kili,” he said, and Tauriel’s eyes lowered for a moment. “Why are you away from him?”

Bilbo had studied, more extensively than any hobbit currently living, he felt confident saying, the differences amongst the races of the earth, and he had formed a few opinions on comparative physiology that he had seen noted nowhere else. Dwarves had faces built for angry, for glowering, for banked coals and bursting flames. Next to dragons, they were the race most likely to breathe fire. Hobbits had faces built for youth, noticeably only when you had seen enough Men, who had faces built for change. Hobbits aged without ever looking old, wrinkled and hunched and rasped and never lost the look in their eyes of the children they had been. Men looked different every time you saw them, the children quickest of all. Each time Bilbo had visited Dale, Bard’s children had been rendered unrecognizable from the last time he had been there.

And elves? Elves were sculpted for sadness. Their resting face was one of quiet grief.

“Imagine you are a prince,” Tauriel said quietly. “You are a prince one life away from the throne. No one was prepared for you to be that close. No one was ready for the king who is now king to be king. The old king, the mythic king, the reclamer touched by greatness and madness and glory and the right to rule—he has disappeared in the middle of the night. For love. For the love of an outsider. Imagine you are that prince, and you love an outsider as well. And the eyes of the kingdom are upon you as you try to convince them that you can lead.”

“Oh,” said Bilbo.

“Kili did not ask me to leave,” said Tauriel. “We discussed it, however, and thought it might be best if I was away from Erebor.” She had left Erebor before. Kili had always gone with her. Bilbo could see how Erebor would want to see that Tauriel could leave and Kili could stay. “It was easy to decide to come here. You are the only person I know who loves as I love.”

“I’m sorry,” said Bilbo.

Tauriel glanced at him as if surprised to hear the words. “Are you saying that because you offer your condolences?” she asked. “Or because you think you somehow at fault?”

“I’m saying it because I know how hard it is to be away from the person you love,” said Bilbo. “I have frankly done nothing wrong.”

Tauriel laughed, and if you have never been lucky enough to hear an elf laugh, let Bilbo assure you—it is sweet to hear. It makes flowers bloom in the midst of winter. Elves are made for grief, it seems, and so they have become adept at finding the joy in the midst of it. “The separation is not so bad as I feared,” Tauriel said. “Forgive my bluntness, but it is a better situation than yours. We write to each other every day.” It was true. Dis’ ravens were being run ragged by love. “I do worry—I worry all the time that something will happen while I am gone.” Tauriel shook her head, looked out the window again. “But I suppose being apart from him, knowing his soul is somewhere but not with me—I suppose this is good practice. For what we know must come.”

The library rang with silence.
Once, two or three years after the reclamation of Erebor, the two of them had snuck off from some banquet or another to complain about Erebor where Erebor couldn’t hear, Bilbo’s exact memories of that night were fuzzy. Dwarf banquets were eighty percent ale. “And it is hard,” he’d said, trying very hard to remain upright. “You know. Loving someone who isn’t like. You know. You.”

“Back aches from bending over,” Tauriel had replied, tried to demonstrate bending, and then nearly fallen over. For an elf of Thranduil’s court, she didn’t hold her liquor very well.

“Boots trodding on your toes.”

“Beards.”

Bilbo had nodded so emphatically he’d gotten a little sick. “Beards.”

And as far as Bilbo could remember, the next ten minutes had just been them morosely saying beards to each other, which was a pleasant enough way to round out an evening. If only that had been the end of their conversation.

“But I’m the lucky one of the two of us,” Bilbo had said.

Tauriel had smiled a happy little ale-filled smile. “And how so, Master Hobbit?”

“I am almost certainly going to die before Thorin.”

And Tauriel’s smile had frozen. And Bilbo, in that way you do sometimes when a bucket full of cold water splashes over you, had sobered up a little. Not enough to apologize. Just enough to be horror-stricken.

“I suppose you’re right,” Tauriel had said simply, and they’d never discussed it again.

In the library of Bag End, in the silence, Bilbo said, “Go back to Erebor, Tauriel.”

“I cannot,” Tauriel replied, “any more than you can.” And then she smiled again. “But we can both go to the lunch table for tea.”

Dwalin joined them at tea just as they were tidying up. “Are you fighting keen, elf?” he asked Tauriel.

“Far more than you, dwarf,” Tauriel replied. “Or have you forgotten our last wrestling match?”

“I remember you cheating,” Dwalin said. “Finally. It made me right proud, seeing you fight dirty like that.”

“Warriors are strange simple folk, aren’t they,” Primula said to Bilbo. The warriors ignored them.

“The little ones tell me there’s rumors of a bear on the outskirts of Hobbiton,” Dwalin told Tauriel.

“This far into winter?” she asked.
“What I thought. Might be nothing. Might be more.” Dwalin nodded at Bilbo, who was now paying very keen attention. “This one tells me the Shire’s had problems with winter predators in the past.”

“It’s not bears we’ve had problems with,” Primula said, the beginnings of worry in her voice. Was she even old enough to have lived through the Fell Winter? It didn’t matter. She grew up in the Shire, and that meant she’d have learned the stories as well as if she’d lived them herself. “Can wolves look like bears?”

“I hope not,” said Bilbo.

“Someone might have awoken it from hibernation,” Tauriel said. “We should help it return to sleep.”

Dwalin patted the ax strapped to his hip. “My thoughts exactly.”

And it wasn’t until after they left, that Bilbo thought. Oh. A bear.

“Put aside another bowl of that stew,” Bilbo said to Primula. “A bowl with quite a lot of meat.”

When Bilbo had lived at Bag End before he left, he hosted, on average, about one visitor a month. He preferred calling on others, as it was always easier to leave someone else’s home than it was to get someone to leave yours. So it was a testament (although perhaps comparatively the smallest one) to how much his life had changed since that fateful unexpected party that when Tauriel and Dwalin came back a few hours later and told Bilbo that Beorn was in the front yard, Bilbo just said, “Tell him to come in, if he can fit through the door. We have some dinner ready for him.”

Bilbo really was getting quite used to guests these days. Just so long as they were anyone besides the person he wanted.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Since my plot outline got tweaked a bit, I ended up writing this chapter and the next at the same time because many of the events were supposed to happen in just one chapter before it got too long for that. So I decided to pop them up at the same time rather than making you wait for them :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bilbo couldn’t tell you the exact moment he’d fallen sick, when weariness turned into something unspeakable, but he could tell you the exact moment he’d known. Like all well-bred hobbits, he was a mild hypochondriac who viewed every sneeze as ominous portent of, if not death, then inconvenience just when he needed it least. Despite this gloomy cultural inheritance, Bilbo had never viewed illness with terror or dread; he considered it rather like another distant relation who made periodic claims. It probably wouldn’t kill Bilbo, but that didn’t mean he wanted it hanging around.

So somewhere in Erebor, about five months before the unwaking that prompted abduction and abdication, there was a journal in Bilbo’s rooms with an entry that read, “Guild luncheon a success tho damnedable headache the whole time. Begged off dinner to take nap instead.” The luncheon of the ascendant craftsmen of the Clockwork Guild had been the first time that Bilbo’s health had pressed so direly against him (while also indeed being a success, and several dwarves complimented Bilbo on the event in the week after, not that this detail is particularly relevant to this narrative, but no reason not to emphasize it). Bilbo had spent half the luncheon propping his head up with his hand; his neck didn’t seem equal to the task. The craftsmen thankfully didn’t disparage the lack of manners. Bilbo doubted they noticed. At any given dwarf gathering, an elbow upon the table was hardly the most egregious breach of etiquette.

He mentioned his poor aching head to everyone that day, and sometimes mentioned in as many times as it took to solicit the proper amount of sympathy. Thorin had needed little prompting; he inquired after Bilbo’s health the moment he saw Bilbo come back from the luncheon and all but ordered Bilbo be confined to quarters for rest. This was perfectly sufficient sympathy, and Bilbo had kissed his husband on the nose with more good cheer than he had felt all day. Then he had taken a nap.

He hadn’t thought to go to a doctor. Neither had anyone else encouraged him to. Bilbo complained of various aches and maladies all the time, and if he didn’t have any at the moment, Bilbo could always remind a dwarf of his horrendous head-cold he’d gotten saving the party from Mirkwood, or of the constant cough he had his first months in Erebor when they were still clearing out the dragon char. Dwarves reminisced about battle wounds; hobbits, their various colds.

It was not until two weeks after the luncheon, at the planning committee meeting for the coronation anniversary coming up, that Bilbo began to be concerned in earnest. “You don’t look well,” said Freya as she sat down beside him at the table.

“I don’t feel well,” Bilbo said, gearing up for a good long complaint. But he paused. Freya never inquired after his health. Specifically because she didn’t want to hear his good long complaints. “Is
it that apparent?” he asked instead.

Freya nodded, concern in her eyes as she studied with the careful eye of a master dwarven craftsman. “You look concerning,” she said bluntly and with such weight that for the first time Bilbo thought that maybe he ought to be concerned.

His mother had gotten sick often, though less so the older she got. She was always wondering away from home, leaving Bilbo and his father to their own devices. And then she would always wonder home, with new stories and gifts and a special light in her eyes that made her look like herself. But she was frequently under the weather when she returned—headaches, lack of appetite, paleness. It was nothing very extreme, nothing more than you’d get if you’d slept poorly for a few nights. Bilbo’s father said that it was just Belladonna tiring herself out traipsing across the countryside, hither and thither and who knows where. Bilbo’s mother said it was the coming home that gave her the headaches, with such boys as she lived with. These explanations were often exchanged while Bungo and Belladonna sat in their chairs by the fire, their hands clasped and the merriness in their voice warming the room.

Belladonna stopped travelling when Bungo died, and Bilbo couldn’t tell you if it had halted her illnesses because if it had, then grief had stepped up to replace them. But Bilbo could tell you he’d never suffered any such regular weakness of body as his mother had periodically in his youth, and Bilbo for his part had never gone hither and certainly not thither. And when he finally went on his journey to who knows where, the conditions of the expedition were so uniformly terrible that it never occurred to Bilbo to associate his aches and weariness to anything besides sleeping on the ground, trudging through the rain, and rather more sprinting from goblins than that comprehensive contract had advertised.

And he had been happy. Happier than he’d ever been in his entire, healthy life.

There were downsides to everything, Bilbo supposed, but he’d always considered the aches and stresses of the road well worth the rewards they offered. It was the same way Thorin’s beard might scratch, but Bilbo would never turn away from the press of his husband’s lips.

He’d been happy in Erebor as well. As miserable a place as the underside of a mountain can be, it was beautiful too, and cozy in its own way, raucous with a distinctive cheer Bilbo imagined you couldn’t hear anywhere else in the world. The dwarves roared their constant welcome home. They offered it to the dwarves returning; they offered it to the dwarves that had never before been. They even offered their welcome to Bilbo, who had no claim of blood or memory to the strange mountain on the other side of the world. But Bilbo, the dwarves told him in no uncertain terms, would be welcome in Erebor until the end of his days.

Sometimes when Bilbo thought that he might live in Erebor until he died, he wept at the thought, and then he dried his tears and continued to live in Erebor. With the dwarves. With Thorin.

At least in Erebor, he’d had Thorin.

"Thorin,” Bilbo said for the third time, with the most careful enunciation of the name. When Beorn continued to look dist millionfully thoughtful (distressing, that is, to Bilbo; Beorn looked altogether too mild about the issue), Bilbo added, "Dwarf. On the tall side, for dwarves. Black hair. Beard.
"Beaky nose." Bilbo paused and tried to think of a description that wouldn't apply to half the dwarven race. "Very kind eyes?" he added hopelessly. "You've seen him, Beorn, I know you have. I was there when you met him."

"I remember thirteen odd dwarves in my home," Beorn said. "Can't place which one was yours."

"You fought at the battle that placed him on his throne."

Beorn shrugged one massive shoulder. With Beorn sitting down, Bilbo was eyelevel with his shoulder for the first time and he could attest that it was indecently massive. "All kings look the same. They are like dwarves in that regard."

"You didn't like him very much?"

Beorn just gave Bilbo a look that conveyed how little that narrowed things down.

This conversation, by the way, was happening on either side of the dining room window. Tauriel and Dwalin had brought Beorn back on their invitation to Bag End, but the measurements had not worked out. The door to Bag End was about five feet tall. Beorn was about two-hundred. He'd stooped, grinned through the doorway, and said, "What kind of hospitality is this, little bunny? This is how you repay me for letting you into my home?"

When Bilbo followed this up by offering him a dish predicated on him forgetting that Beorn, in certain forms at least, did not eat meat, Drogo had full-on glared at Bilbo for the first time ever before he offered served Beorn a meal more in line with his diet. "This is no way for a Baggins to treat a guest," Drogo had said to Bilbo.

"Forgive me, cousin," Bilbo had said, with a smile and shrug. "The illness has made me forget my manners."

"You can’t keep blaming everything on your illness," Drogo had replied, which again, was the sternest thing he had ever offered Bilbo. Bilbo had to laugh. Drogo looked so much in that moment like Bungo Baggins, affronted that his wife could somehow manage to forget that Missus Birches didn’t like to sit on the left side of the table or that Belladonna had put her elbows on the table again. Bilbo had been like his father for so long, had even served with his father’s emphasis on decorum as a representative of a government, and yet Bilbo was continually finding new ways to remember that he was his mother’s son.

Bilbo wasn’t laughing now, as Beorn sat outside and finished his lunch, seemingly without a care about the snowflakes drifting down into his soup. He looked back at the gathered guests of Bag End, sitting around the dining room table. Tauriel rested with her head on the table, Dwalin leaned back his eyes closed. And Dis sat with a strange placidity.

"So you haven't seen him then," Dis asked. "Nor have you come here on his request."

"I am not an errand boy for any dwarf," Beorn said. "I came here to suit my own purposes. This land is one I have not ventured to in some time, but I have been here before and owe some alliance to the land. There were whispers in the woods of wolves prowling through this land in search of an easy meal."

"Wolves?" Bilbo, Drogo, and Primula asked at the same time.

Beorn grinned with all his teeth. "Not anymore. Those that aren't dead won't return for a long while. You can rest easy this winter, and I can put to rest my debt to ranger who protects this land."
Primula and Drogo sighed. "Thank you," Bilbo said to Beorn, and truly meant it. "Then I suppose you were just finishing up when Tauriel and Dwalin met you."

Beorn nodded at the parties in question. "That lot? They insisted I come to you and tell you all I know."

"Which is nothing," Bilbo said.

Beorn shrugged and held out the now empty bowl. "Not about any dwarf king."

"Thorin," Bilbo tried helplessly again as Drogo hopped up to refill Beorn’s dish. "About this tall? Would have been frowning? Er. Blue coat?"

"Also had a hobbit strapped to his back," Dis added dryly.

Bilbo glanced back at her and she raised an eyebrow. "Right," Bilbo said weakly. "That was perhaps what I should have lead with."

"A hobbit?" Beorn said. He eyed Bilbo. "You?"

"Yes, I've been quite sick. I—"

"Too long and far from your home."

"Yes, yes," said Bilbo. "Did everyone know about that except me?"

"The Shire is a land unto itself, and its people have their own mysteries," said Beorn. "We do not protect it just for the hobbits who live here. It is a peerless land, with its own magic that must be protected."

"Yes, well, it's very inconvenient," Bilbo said. "And you didn't think to mention it when I met you?"

Beorn shrugged again. "You had your quest. I knew nothing of your ignorance."

Bilbo sighed, his head dropping into his hands. "I thought—I hoped," Bilbo said at last, "that you would have seen him."

"Too many dwarves have passed through the lands I protect for me to recognize yours," said Beorn. "Though most go towards your Lonely Mountain, many head away as well."

"Traders and messengers," Bilbo said glumly. "I worked with plenty from Erebor in my time. I would not think there were so many in just the last four or five months—"

"I do not memorize every dwarf that passes through."

Bilbo sighed again. "No, no, you wouldn't. And with Dis sending out her men to look for Thorin on top of everything," Bilbo sighed once more. He might keep sighing forever. "He has a very high pitched sneeze?" Bilbo tried one last time.

Beorn laughed, a laugh with a timber and depth never before heard in the Shire. You needed a minimum of two meters height to produce a sound like that. "The world is big. Your dwarf is small. What is his life to mine? I have not seen him, Bilbo Baggins. He did not bring me here."

"But you’re the fourth," Primula said. Everyone turned to look at her, and she flushed a little. "I mean, well, you know. It’s silly, I know. But you’re the fourth person to arrive, and it’s just, and I
know this is silly and all, but fairy tales, it’s always the fourth thing that’s the important thing.” As everyone stared at her, she faltered.

“Right!” said Drogo, leaping to her defense. “Like, the first brother tries and then the next and the next and then it’s the fourth brother that does it.” He put the bowl of soup on the window ledge. “So she’s right, you’re the fourth.”

“Third,” Dwalin said.

“No, Dwalin, that’s not how counting works,” Dis said.

Dwalin threw a dinner roll at her. “I mean it’s always the third thing that’s the important one. It’s never the fourth.”

“It’s always the fourth,” Drogo said.

Primula nodded. “The third is too soon. You’ve got to try three things in fairy tales, and then with the fourth you get it right.”

“No, it’s not,” Dis said, and Primula shot her a look of pure betrayal. “Fairy tales always work in threes.”

“Dwarf ones do,” Bilbo said, whose role in his own household was increasingly becoming that of cross-cultural translator. “Hobbit ones work in fours.”

“Elf ones work in patterns of fives,” Tauriel said. “If anyone is interested.”

Drogo pointed at Tauriel. “So maybe we just need another person to arrive!”

“But I don’t think Beorn counts as our proper fourth,” Primula said. “Since he isn’t adding anything.”

Beorn knocked back his bowl. “Don’t know what’s happening,” he said. “But in my people’s fairy tales, someone usually ends up eating someone else.”

“Horrifying,” Bilbo said. “And not applicable to this situation.”

“At least we hope,” Dis said.

Primula muttered something to Drogo that sounded like Lobelia; Drogo snorted and shushed her.

Bilbo rolled into the kitchen for another cup of tea. Disappointment sat in his throat like a stone; he swallowed his drink around it. He wanted to be alone.

“It doesn’t matter which culture we’re drawing on,” said Dis, who now and then was capable of sneaking up on you when she remembered to take her boots off.

Bilbo scowled and wiped off the tea he’d sloshed on himself when he’d jumped at the sound of her voice. “No, I don’t imagine that this situation is governing itself by the rules of fairy tales.”

“Quite right,” said Dis, reaching over to pour herself her own cup. “It’s clearly a murder mystery.” When Bilbo glared at her, she added. “Minus the murder, obviously. Bilbo, I’m joking with you.”

“I’m not in a joking mood.”

“I gathered.”
“I wouldn’t think you’d be either.”

“I’m always game to joke about my brother. It’s the only way we’ve ever survived each other.” Dis sipped her tea. “I do wonder if he’s dead.” She said it casually, as if she were remarking on the weather.

“He’s not,” Bilbo said with a surety he didn’t feel. “I would know if he was.”

“How?”

“If he were dead, I wouldn’t be nearly so cross with him.”

Dis laughed. “You see?” she said. “Look who made a joke.”

Bilbo smiled despite himself. “Don’t let it fool you. I’m still devastated.”

“As am I, Master Hobbit. But what else is new?”

They finished their tea together in companionable silence, and when they were done, Bilbo let Dis push him back out to the dining room, where Beorn was reaching through the window to poke Drogo in the gut, proudly proclaiming him a far better chubby little bunny than the poor Bilbo Baggins, who barely had any meat on his bones these days. Drogo looked a little proud of this assessment and seemed to be watching Primula out of the corner of his eye to see if she was impressed as well. If Primula was, she was hiding it well under the cover of a very animated conversation about Tauriel regarding different versions of their fairy tales. Dwalin drank up Bilbo’s ale and appeared to be participating equally in both conversations, which meant ignoring them to the same amount.

“Mahal’s forge, has this place become crowded,” Dis said.

Dwarves now and then did excel at understatement.

That night, Bilbo lay awake in bed for reasons besides Beorn’s earth-shattering snores. The skin-changer was camped out in Bilbo’s garden at Drogo’s invitation; he would have offered him the last of the spare beds, but even if Beorn could have comfortable fit himself inside Bag End, he’d have shattered whatever he tried to lay on. But Beorn didn’t mind the snow, it seemed. In fact, the one time Bilbo hobbled himself to the dining room window to yell Beorn awake (he could stand and walk for a whole minute now, wasn’t that a remarkable achievement matched only by very young toddlers), he looked out into the black night and saw a great deal more fur that he’d been hoping for. Bilbo believed in letting sleeping bears lie.

So he lay in bed and look up at the ceiling and thought to himself, once upon a time. Once upon a time, there was a king who disappeared to save his love, and he encountered trials and tribulations along the way. He saved his love from the jaws of death, but there was a cost. And the cost was…

Bilbo couldn’t think of anything past that point. Maybe he just wouldn’t.

Dis was right anyway, Bilbo reasoned as he flopped over in bed trying to get himself comfortable. (His latest letter to Bofur was still half completed on his library desk, and Bilbo thought tomorrow
he might add something like, *insomnia continues to be an infuriating sign of improvement. Some nights I wouldn’t mind being sick again.*) This wasn’t a fairy tale. This was a mystery, and all his guests red herrings, and soon there’d be the glorious parlor scene where the detective explained everything. *You all were looking in the wrong place! Only I, the great detective of Bag Shot Row, could solve the mystery of the hobbit in the pumpkin patch and his missing dwarf. It all started when I was called to the garden of Pippa Bracegirdle, sister of the notorious—*

Bilbo sat up so quickly he nearly blacked out. Beorn kept snoring outside while Bilbo thought. “The scene of the crime,” he whispered to himself with a hysterical little giggle, adrenaline beating his heart like an anvil, hope fluttering as hope kept doing.

When Primula, the earliest riser in the Bag End, came to the kitchen the next morning, she found Bilbo dressed and ready with a kettle ready on the fire. “We’re going out,” he told her.

Primula, unflappable to her core, just said, “Pour me a cup to wake me up and I’ll grab our coats.”

And an hour later with the sun barely over the horizon, Lobelia Sackville-Baggins with her baby on her hip opened her front door to see two of her least favorite hobbits in all of creation waiting to be invited in.

Lobelia served tea. It was a sign of how long he’d been in Erebor that this fact surprised Bilbo, but hobbit hospitality was inviolate. Two hobbits might stab each other over biscuits, but the host would make sure that they served the biscuits in the first place.

“What a delightful blend,” said Primula.

“Thank you,” Lobelia said stiffly.

Lotho on Lobelia’s lap tried to fit his entire fist into his mouth. He was making good progress. The lack of teeth probably helped.

“Is your husband well?” Primula asked.

“Yes,” said Lobelia.

“Good,” said Primula.

“Indeed,” replied Lobelia.

Silence reigned in the parlor. Bilbo blew on his tea and didn’t sip until Lobelia had. Every time he’d supped with her, he couldn’t shake the fear that she might have poisoned the dishes.

“When I returned to the Shire, you were the one that found me,” Bilbo said. Lobelia and Primula both looked shocked that he’d spoken. The average tea time featured at least ten minutes of forced small talk before anyone broached the business of what actually brought them there. Bilbo had lived in Erebor long enough to learn impatience as well.

“My sister found you,” Lobelia corrected. “You were lurking in her garden.”

“I was unconscious, I believe.”
“Don’t need to be awake to lurk.”

“Actually I think you do. Otherwise, it’s just called being unconscious in a garden.”

Lobelia sniffed like she didn’t think that sound any better.

On reflection, she wasn’t wrong.

“Fine,” Bilbo said. “But I was in her garden.”

“Yes.”

“Did you find anything in the garden?”

Lobelia looked at him like he was an idiot. “Obviously we did.”

“Anything in the garden besides Bilbo,” Primula said. “Did you or your sister find anything in the garden or maybe at the funeral?”

“At the funeral?” Lobelia asked. She drew herself up. “Are you asking if I looted my kinsman’s corpse?”

“Did you?” Primula asked.

Lobelia squawked with indignation. In her lap, Lotho gurgled a noise that was almost the same.

“Well! To be insulted in my own home like this!”

“Primula,” Bilbo said quietly.

Primula narrowed her pale eyes. Bilbo sighed, and passed it off as blowing on his still scalding tea.

Bilbo had spent his time in Erebor assiduously avoiding many of the traditional tasks of a king’s spouse—the endless receptions, the meetings, the event planning, the awards, the constant good cheer and careful diplomacy—but he hadn’t dodged them entirely. He’d served at Thorin’s side of enough years to learn some diplomacy; he’d also served enough time to learn about audiences. It was a tricky thing, having a third party in the room. It created an additional person for everyone to perform for. Easier, sometimes, to converse without.

(Bilbo would not confirm nor deny whether or not he had maybe perhaps used an object of some sort to be present in some meetings that he was not, in the strictest sense of the word, allowed to be in. But if Bilbo, hypothetically, had ever done that, it had taught him an interesting lesson on the difference between how people talked in front of you versus how they talked the rest of the time. Bilbo had spent his entire life in the Shire learning the theory of this principle, but it’s one thing to see how your mother and her sister talk about their mutual friend when she isn’t there and quite another thing to stand invisible in a room and listen to a dwarven council form their objections to your foreign presence at their high table. Hypothetically.)

“Primula, what if you took Lotho off Lobelia’s hands for a bit?” Bilbo asked. “I’m sure Lobelia wouldn’t mind.”

Lobelia wrapped her arms around Lotho who promptly drooled on them. “I very much would.”

Primula, after a brief breath, tipped her head and said, “What a sweetie. I’ll be happy to take him, Lobelia. If you’d like.”

“You insult me and now you want to watch my child?” Lobelia sneered.
“I want to give you a few minutes alone to have a conversation in which you don’t need to worry about breastfeeding, diapers, or if Lotho is going to put something he shouldn’t into his mouth.

Lobelia opened her mouth. Then she shut it. She did have the look in her eye of a woman who hadn’t been more than ten feet from a baby in weeks. “Well, if you insist,” Lobelia said as she practically tossed the infant at Primula. Primula slung Lotho onto her hip and, cooing gently at him, slipped out of the parlor.

In the new emptiness of the parlor, Bilbo crossed his hands in his lap. “By the way, yes,” he said. “I am accusing you of grave-robbing, minus the grave. You’ve stolen so much from me while I’m alive, that I can’t imagine you passed up the opportunity when I was dead. In fact, I don’t know why the thought hadn’t occurred to me before.”

Lobelia spluttered. “I have never stolen a thing in my life, Bilbo Baggins! I ought to take you before the magistrate for slander!”

“Do! I’ll be happy to show him the place in my pantry where my mother’s silverware ought to be.”

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you mean.”

“You stole them at my father’s wake, if that jogs your memory.” Bilbo leaned back in his chair and reminded himself, *diplomacy*. But on the other hand, he had learned much of his diplomacy amongst dwarves and they solved a great many interpersonal conflicts via head-butt. “The point is,” Bilbo said while Lobelia kept up a muttered litany of *how dare you* and *I never* and *the cheek of some people these days,* “is that you are not one to let an opportunity go to waste.”

Lobelia interrupted her monologue of self-righteousness to ask, “And what does that mean?”

“It means did you find anything on me or around me that says where Thorin is?”

Lobelia said nothing.

Bilbo leaned forward. “I’ve been so thick,” he said. “I’ve been the biggest idiot. Thorin would not leave without a trace or abandon me without a message. It must be somewhere, Lobelia. Do you have it?”

Lobelia was quiet a moment. Her silences were always more sullen than thoughtful. Then she said, “I visited you, you know. That first week you were in Bag End.”

“After you tried to bury me alive.”

She shrugged, as if to say *what are you going to do.* “A lot of us were at that funeral, let’s not point fingers. I visited you, is the point.”

Bilbo didn’t remember that. He must have still been asleep at the time.

“Our cousin told me to piss off,” Lobelia said. “In no uncertain terms.”

Bilbo tried to imagine Drogo telling anyone to piss off in no uncertain terms. The best he could imagine was Drogo standing apologetically at the door. *Sorry, Missus Sackville-Baggins, I really would, but Mister Baggins still needs his rest and I wouldn’t want you catching anything, if you can catch this from foreign parts being magic like that, since I know you’ve got a young one at home and you need to be fighting fit for the lad. How is Lotho, by the way? And your husband? And your cousins? And your sisters?*
That, Bilbo could picture.

“Incomparable rudeness,” Lobelia said. “And the Brandybuck nurse—” Lobelia glanced at the door to the study suddenly, a spasm of tact overcoming her. “Well, you can just imagine.”

Bilbo very much could. It said much about Primula’s personality that she got on so well with Dis.

“I know when I’m not wanted,” Lobelia said, “and when that’s the case, I’ll take my presence elsewhere.”

“You’ve never removed yourself from my doorstep simply because I wished you gone,” Bilbo retorted.

“We’re family. Customs dictate you let me look in on you. You’re the sad bachelor of Bag End. We all thought that if someone didn’t knock on your door now and then, we’d find you years later moldered to rot in your bed.” Lobelia, reflecting on her good deeds towards her unworthy kin, puffed up so much Bilbo was tempted to give her one good jab with a needle just to see what happened. “So naturally when you came home, I wanted to see how you were doing, and I was bustled away by your goons just as sure as if I’d been a bandit in the night. Fine, I thought. Just as well, what are they to me, I’ll wait till Bilbo Baggins can receive me himself, if he can, and if he can’t, I’ll know why and have the two of them brought before the magistrate for murder of a helpless decrepit.

“And then I get word in the market that you’re feeling better. Up and about even, or at least up, and I thought, well, my dear cousin will be wanting some relief of company, and head I on up the road to your house pleasant as you like, grapes and wine and all that for your health. Then all of a sudden comes this…this…ogre creature, horrid, hairy, tall, stinking of Eru only knows and this creature, this beast stops me. Me! Minding my own business! And asks me for directions to Bag End!”

“And I take it you gave them,” Bilbo said.

“It was a matter of life and death,” Lobelia sniffed. “And don’t you judge me for it, Bilbo Baggins. You would have done the same in the face of brute with an ax and a beard, a beard. Bilbo. I have a child and a husband, don’t you know. You wouldn’t know what it’s like, having to keep yourself safe for the sake of your family. You get to run off into the wilderness whenever you feel like it and never mind if anyone’s going hungry at home or the laundry needs doing.” She shrugged. “And they said they knew you. I believed them, of course.”

“Oh course,” Bilbo said dryly. “You weren’t wrong, I suppose, since I do think that’s King Dis you are referring to. Mind that you never let her know how you’ve described her.”

“You’ll tell her the moment you get home, no doubt.” Lobelia harrumphed and crossed her arms. “Don’t understand why half the ladies’ in the Shire are so eager to join her book club.”

“A strange charisma runs in her family,” Bilbo said. “Trust me.”

Lobelia harrumphed again, a noise of principled distrust towards anyone generally likeable. “You let her stay in Bag End, of course. You’re more hospitable to strangers than your own family.”

Bilbo considered saying something like, Dis is my family and she didn’t give me much choice, but he thought better of it at the last minute. No sense giving Lobelia ideas.

“Anyway, when it was clear that your brute—”
“Dwarf.”

“That’s what I said. Anyway, I thought to myself that I wouldn’t go visiting you until she was gone, but then she was never gone, and as the weeks went, I started thinking to myself about trying my way up the hill again when your dwarf was out and about in the village—stomping about like she owns the place, I ask you, that doesn’t seem very kinglike to me, I didn’t vote for her or all that—and so I take myself up the hill again, still with the grapes and the wine and all that.”

“Same grapes from last time?” Bilbo asked.

Lobelia glared. “Everyone knows grapes keep fine. And so I’m bringing them to you up the hill when lo and behold, what do I see?”

She waited with such an indigent silence that Bilbo sighed and said, “Another dwarf?”

“Another dwarf!” Lobelia flung her hands up in the air as if this were the most ludicrous thing anyone had ever heard. And, to be fair, Bilbo realized after a moment that it was indeed, by Shire standards, very ludicrous. If it had been Bilbo six years ago recounting this story, he would sound very much the same as Lobelia. How very large, he marveled, his world had grown.

On her couch, Lobelia was shaking her head without words, apparently too shocked to form them. She persevered nonetheless, and wrung a few out. “And then a few days later, what pops up around town but that unfortunately tall one, the elf or what have you, could look quite pretty if she wasn’t such a freak, and after your first two guests, we’re all thinking, well, at least this one’s quiet, at least this one’s beardless, at least this one doesn’t always look at you like she’s sizing you up for dinner. We could have lived with the tall one. The tall was as decently acceptable, except by now Bag End is overflowing with outsiders, brutes and thugs and all that, and it’s to the point that I wouldn’t like my Otho even go near that side of Hobbiton, a just concern that any good wife would share with her husband. And then, and now, with your bear man—”

“He’s not my bear man,” Bilbo said, though he was momentarily impressed how quickly that news had spread through the Shire. “He’s just a bear man in the area who decided to say hello. Nothing to do with me.”

“He’s napping in your garden!”

Bilbo couldn’t dispute that.

Lobelia shook her head once more, her hat bobbing with disappointment. “We had a quiet respectable village, and you went and decided that if you couldn’t go to the mountain, the mountain would come to you.”

“Lobelia!” Bilbo snapped, and what patience he had snapped with him. “Did you find anything? Were you going to bring me something?”

“Why’s it matter so much to you?” Lobelia said. “If some prick left me for dead in a pumpkin patch, I’d never waste another moment thinking about him again.”

“Because that prick is my husband!” Bilbo said. “And he would not leave me for dead!”

Lobelia’s jaw dropped like the trapdoor of a gallows.

Oh, Bilbo thought. Perhaps Drogo hadn’t spread that bit of gossip the way that Bilbo had assumed he would.
“Husband?” Lobelia asked.

“Yes.”

“Married?” Lobelia asked, a full octave higher.

“Yes, married! And glad of it, Lobelia,” Bilbo added, “so if you’ve anything to say about it, you can keep it to yourself.”

She gaped at him some more, her mouth opening and closing as she stared. Then she snorted. “You’d know something about keeping things to yourself, wouldn’t you!” Lobelia said. “Married! And you didn’t even send us a wedding present!”

Bilbo actually laughed. “No, Lobelia, I did not. Astonishing. I’m amazed it wasn’t you we found in Erebor, squatting on all that gold. Of all the greedy—”

“It’s not greed.” Lobelia’s voice cracked like a whip. “It’s how it’s done. Did you go off to, to, to your Erebor and start demanding to be given gifts on your birthday? Wouldn’t be surprised if you did, and if you asked for nothing but—but socks! And fine dwarven boots! Your feet got cold so far from home, I imagine.” Lobelia was a picture of affront, a kind of personal offense so convincing that even Bilbo almost believed it. “No wonder you married a dwarf. You’re no hobbit.”

“Believe me, Lobelia, I was never more a hobbit than when I was in Erebor,” Bilbo said. “And it would seem I’m never more of a dwarf when I’m here. Maybe you should have gone on the quest, you’re always perfectly horrible in any and all circumstances.”

Lobelia sniffed. Her hat almost toppled off in disgust. “Married,” she said again. “Typical Bilbo Baggins, isn’t it? Nothing homegrown good enough, you had to import. And look where it got you! On death’s door, it did. Everyone knows you aren’t supposed to leave the Shire, but you thought you were too good for that.”

“Silly me, thinking that was just yet one more superstition from hobbits so small-minded that the only time they look beyond their front porch is to sneer at the neighbor’s.”

“Maybe lots of us want to look beyond our front porch,” Lobelia said hotly, “only we haven’t the money to live alone, and we’ve mouths to feed, and a hearth to clean ourselves with our poor own hands. Your wicked mother settled right down when you were born, didn’t she? That’s what it means to grow up, the way a hobbit ought to. You don’t get to be selfish till you die. We’re not supposed to leave.”

“So you’ve been trying to bully and evict me from my home for more than a decade because of your deep selfless compassion.”

Lobelia stamped her foot. Her hairpins gave up, and her hat tumbled. “Oh, why should you get everything! Why should you get the mountain and the adventure and the hearth and the home! Now you’ve got the life of a bachelor and the life of a husband all in one. Married! Why do you get to live here and there when the rest of us put down roots and hope something grows? You get the nicest home in the Shire, then you get the kingdom in the mountain? What have you done that makes you get and get and get? And!” Lobelia shouted this last word so harshly that Bilbo jumped. She jabbed a finger in his face. “And! You get and! And the rest of make do with our or.”

“I don’t have and,” Bilbo snapped. “How do you not get that? I made my choices, and my choices were made for me, so don’t act like a martyr when only one of us has got a live-in nurse because
their choices nearly killed them. I’m here, not there. I’m a husband, not a bachelor, and I want to know if I’m a widower!”

Lobelia snorted. “You won’t stay. You think I’m greedy? You’ll get tired of the Shire when it’s not enough for you, and you’ll remember Erebor before you got tired of that—”

“Because I got ill!”

“An illness that made you tired of Erebor!” Lobelia presented this fact like a trump card with such confident surety that Bilbo just gaped at her a moment.

“Well,” he said at last while Lobelia smirked, “I can’t leave the Shire. So you are, alas, stuck with me, and I should make clear that I fully intend to die in that house before I let you get so much as one silver spoon.”

The promise barely landed on her before she brushed it away. “You left before and you were fine for a while. You’ll leave again.”

“I won’t.”

“You will.”

“I won’t.”

“Just wait.”

“I won’t,” Bilbo said slowly, “because among other reasons besides it killing me, since that reason apparently hardly matters to you, this is the only place in the world my husband knows I am. So even if I was inclined to leave, I couldn’t.”

Lobelia said nothing to that. In place of words, she offered an eloquent glare. And then, her nostrils flaring, she said, “So maybe I did find something.”

Bilbo sat very still. “What?” he asked.

“Maybe I went back out to my sister’s garden and found something there that the idiot constables jostled out of our pocket as they moved you. And maybe I tried to bring it to you, only to be horribly turned away. Like a beggar at the door. Or worse. And then maybe I forgot about what I found for a while until this very moment.” Lobelia sniffed again. “You might have said you were married. I might have remembered sooner if I’d know you were married.”

“What did you find, Lobelia? Give it to me now.”

“Promise that you won’t send any of your brutish guests to my house.”

“Lobelia!”

Bilbo pushed himself out of his chair. “What a crock!” Lobelia exclaimed as Bilbo hobbled over to her. “You don’t even need that thing, you’ve just too lazy to walk and want some sympathy, I see, I
“Lobelia,” Bilbo said, his heart pounding from far, far more than the exertion of walking, “shut up.”

Lobelia rolled her eyes. “Or what?”

At which point Primula, who had put Lotho down for a nap before sneaking into the dining room on the other side of the parlor to eavesdrop, burst through the open door and cold clocked Lobelia with such force that she simultaneously broke Lobelia’s nose and her own thumb.

“All right, you kelpies!” Primula shouted. “What do you think you’re playing at?”

“Thumb outside the fist!” Dis yelled at her patient, as was the norm in dwarven medical care. “Honestly, Prim, you’d think you’ve never thrown a punch before.”

“I never have thrown a punch before.”

“No wonder the Shire is in the state that it is then! Respectable young hobbits not even learning how to fight!”

“Oh we do fight,” Primula replied. “It’s just mostly hair pulling and biting.”

“She’s teasing,” Drogo said. Bilbo doubted very much that she had been. “Hobbits don’t solve our problem with violence. Er. Usually.” Drogo was the reason that Dis was the one bandaging Primula’s hand, instead of Primula just taking care of it himself. He wouldn’t let Primula’s unharmed hand go. Primula didn’t seem to mind.

“I do hope she’s alright,” Primula said.

“I don’t,” Dis replied in a voice that implied warfare. “I very much hope the opposite.”

“Don’t do anything to make your hope so,” Primula said sternly. “It was a nasty thing to do, keeping that letter to herself, but you can’t blame her too much for being the way she is. She can’t help it. My mother’s always told me that Lobelia could have been a great woman ‘cept that she was cursed to humble circumstances. She ought to have been born as one of those bloodthirsty royals who kill all their relatives to get their own children on the throne. No offense, of course, your majesty.”

“None taken until you implied I ought to,” Dis replied.

All this was the conversation at the lunch table, and the words carried through Bag End’s hallways with the unfailing clarity of that voices always attain when all you want is a bit of quiet. Then all of a sudden, the voices dropped, as best as hobbits and dwarves in the full swing of conversation can manage. “Is that really all it said?” Bilbo heard Drogo whisper, and Primula responded in a murmur so low that Bilbo couldn’t make out the words. He heard Dis’ sigh perfectly. It was almost more annoying when they were trying to be considerate towards him. Bilbo rolled over to the door of his library, and pressed it gently shut. After a moment, he turned the lock. Then he went back to the place his favorite armchair used to sit before a caravan of dwarves had carried it across the world and reread the letter by sunlight.
It was short. It was scrawled. And it went as followed:

*My dearest burglar, I am bringing you home as promised. The king of all birds has replied at last to my missives and will ferry you to the Shire. I have promised him my service in return. When my obligation is fulfilled, I will meet you healthy and hale in the Shire where you may scold me for all my actions in person. Awaken. Heal. Do not worry about me, amrâlimê. I will see you soon.\* 

*Yours, Thorin.*

And then underneath, somehow even more hurriedly scrawled to the point of near illegibility, *and if you could write to Dwalin, tell him I’m sorry about our parting, he’ll know what I mean, longer apology to both of you to follow, have to go, eagles flying now*

“No wonder Lobelia didn’t know we were married,” Bilbo muttered to himself, running his fingers over the letters. “It’s about as romantic as a shopping list.”

Fili and Kili got a much better note. If Thorin was going to make such a habit of rushing out, he ought to start carrying drafts in his pocket with blanks he could just fill when the time came. *Dear [Name], so sorry to leave you, but something has come up. I feel [emotion] about it, but because of [reasons] this must be done. I assure you, I am emotionally tormented by this, but no one in the world should have to shoulder the burden of [stupid noble thing] besides me. Lots of love, see you around. Thorin.*

Bilbo had read the note a hundred times so far, from the first time as Primula sprinted him out of Lobelia’s house in his wheelchair, staring at the words as they bounded over the dirt road, Primula saying, “Sorry, sorry, so sorry, I just lost temper,” as they fled.

“No, quite alright, quite alright,” Bilbo had murmured mindlessly back, as he read the letter a second time, a third, a fourth. It was short and scrawled and lacked his nephew’s flair for romantic language, and it was Thorin. It was Thorin’s hand, it was Thorin’s promise, it was Thorin’s stupid, stupid plan.

“To be fair, it worked,” Primula had pointed out on the bench where, having sprinting a mile from Lobelia’s house, they deemed it safe to rest a moment and catch their breath.

“Thorin got himself indentured to the King of All Birds,” Bilbo had replied. “Bloody stupid plan, everyone knows the Eagles are temperamental at best.”

“But I read your book, they helped you before.”

“They inconvenienced our enemies. It’s not the same. You should have sat in on the meetings we had with them. They spent half the time poaching Dale’s herds and the other half complaining that the Men were shooting at them as they tried to do it.”

Bilbo remembered distinctly one meeting where King Bard had looked conspicuously innocent as an emissary of the Eagles protested their treatment. “We are so very sorry that our archers have been trying to shoot you down,” he said with such wide-eyed earnestness that Bilbo almost forgot that he’d spied Bard on the parapets himself this morning, taking aim with that big black bow. “The people of Dale are perhaps a little oversensitive towards winged beasts who steal our things.”

Thorin’s ring was still in Bilbo’s pocket. He kept it where his own ring had gone, not his wedding ring but that gleaming one still hidden deep in Erebor. Bilbo found he didn’t miss that either ring nearly so much now that he had Thorin’s. And Thorin had offered it to the Eagles as payment,
perhaps, or proof of commitment that he’d pay them even more. When it was rejected, then his
mother’s wedding bead. And perhaps that had done the trick.

Alone in his library, Bilbo pulled out Thorin’s ring and slipped it onto his thumb. *I will see you
soon*, Thorin had written. Bilbo sighed to the empty air. “Would it have killed you to be a little
more specific?”

Outside his door, the waxing and waning clamor at the lunch table cut off suddenly, a silence that
grabbed Bilbo’s attention. He looked up and listened. There were footsteps, and then the front door
opened. He heard Drogo’s voice. He didn’t hear a response. But Drogo spoke again, and his tone
was polite as ever as the front door swung shut, and then there was more murmuring in the hallway
that Bilbo couldn’t catch.

“Horrid little man,” Dis said. That came through loud and clear.

Bilbo arched his neck out the library window, and saw Otho Sackville-Baggins hurrying back
down the road.

Drogo knocked on the library door. “Bilbo? I’ve got something for you. Lobelia sent her husband
with it. He said she, er, that it happened somehow to be in her possession and she just remembered
she had it as well. So I guess that means she nicked this as well.”

Bilbo opened the door.

Drogo gave him Thorin’s wedding bead. Thorin’s mother’s wedding bead. The one Bilbo had
braided into Thorin’s beard himself.

It was likely the closest that Lobelia would ever get to an apology. Bilbo wasn’t going to accept it.
The apology, that is. The hand that wasn’t holding Thorin’s letter closed around the bead, and
Drogo knelt down to embrace him as Bilbo started to cry.

Dis should have been the next one to see the note. That was what Dis argued, at least. But when
Tauriel and Dwalin came back to Bag End that evening, it was Dwalin Bilbo sent Drogo to fetch.
Dwalin read the words over once, and handed the letter back. “That’s that then,” Dwalin said.

Bilbo blinked at the paper outstretched to him. “Is that all?”

Dwalin shrugged. “What else is there to say?”

“Many things,” Bilbo said, finally taking the letter. “About emotions. And how you feel. About all
this.”

“Thorin got you here safe. Nothing else to say.”

exasperation? Or something about how we should have known it was the bloody Eagles all along?
Or any worries at all about where he is now?”

“With the Eagles,”
“Maybe! If they haven’t eaten him alive or dropped him off a cliff or heavens knows what!”

Dwalin thought for a moment. “Nah,” he said. “Thorin’s fine.” He scratched his beard. “Thorin knew what he was doing all along. Stupid to think he didn’t.”

“Dwalin…” Bilbo said.

Dwalin gave him a look that said the end of that sentence didn’t need to be said. Bilbo sighed and surrendered. “Very well. I imagine I’m not the hobbit you’d want to talk to this about anyway. Drogo’s a good listener, if you ever decide to admit that you do in fact have emotions.”

“It’s ain’t—” Dwalin snorted and half turned away. He rested his arm on the fireplace, and the flames from beneath made Dwalin’s beard look like shadow. “I don’t blame you. Anymore, I mean. For him leaving. Shouldn’t have ever in the first place. That was Thorin’s choice. It always was.” Dwalin looked at Bilbo sidelong, his knuckles getting knocking on the mantle. “We’re fine, you and me. Have been. Thought you knew that.”

Bilbo was silent a moment. “Yes, I did,” Bilbo said at last. “I know—I know we’re good friends.” It was a strangely intimate thing to say, into a room where the words echoed and you thought for a moment that they might be rejected. It felt just a little like flinging yourself off a cliff. Dwalin just nodded a little. That felt a little like a net, just before you hit the bottom. “But I wouldn’t blame you if you were still… I know I derailed what you thought your life was going to look like.”

Dwalin chuckled. Bilbo hadn’t been expecting that. “The dragon did worse.”

That startled a laugh out of Bilbo. “I suppose you’re right.”

They stood together a moment by the light of the fire, the moonlight streaming in from the window outside.

“Give it back,” Dwalin said, tugging at his beard. “I’ll show it to Dis.”

“Are you sure?”

Dwalin shrugged. “Someone has to.”

“Are you…” Bilbo tried to figure out the politest way to end this sentence. “On speaking terms yet?”

Dwalin looked at him in surprise. “Course we are.”

“But you two never actually seem to speak to each other.”

“Not everyone prattles like hobbits.”

Fair enough. Bilbo held out the letter and Dwalin took it without looking at it. “She might have questions about your mention in the postmark,” Bilbo said cautiously.

“I’ll answer them,” Dwalin said. He kept tugging his beard in thought. “I’m happy, I suppose,” he said, almost to himself. “Happier than I’ve been in a long while.” Dwalin glance sideways at Bilbo. “That enough feeling talk for you?”

“That ought to do it,” Bilbo said.

Dwalin nodded and left. Bilbo rolled his chair over to the doorway to listen. He heard Dwalin’s steps go down, heard the knock on Dis’ door. Heard the door open. He did not hear voices.
Dwarves really were very good at silence when it suited them. It was all that work around the
deafening forge. You learned to say the things you needed to say without saying any words.

It made eavesdropping very inconvenient, Bilbo could tell you that.

Dis’ door closed again, and Bilbo waited for the sound of Dwalin’s footsteps walking away. They
didn’t come. It took Bilbo a long moment to realize that he must be in Dis’ bedroom now. Bilbo
did his best to stop listening. Whatever was said or not said in the bedroom was the business of
those in the bedroom alone. Bilbo knew that very well. He was a married man, after all, despite
everything. You learn a few secrets about people in the process. Bilbo touched his pocket, the
outline of Thorin’s ring underneath the fabric. The outline of his wedding bead now too. Then he
went over to the window and spent a good long while that night looking up at the sky.

Bilbo couldn’t tell you the exact moment he’d fallen in love with Thorin, when affection turned
into something ineffable, but he could tell you the exact moment he’d known: his hands pressing
down on Thorin’s stomach wound as Thorin smiled at Bilbo with the softness like the sunrise in
his dark eyes, the rising of something that would blot out what was there before. It took death
crouching on Thorin’s chest to make Bilbo see the truth.

That much, Bilbo is sure. He’s just not sure when the truth that he discovered in Thorin’s dying
smile first became true.

In his more romantic moments, he thought it might have been love at first sight. There was
something to that theory, no matter what Dwalin had to say on the matter. Thorin did cut a splendid
figure in the doorway to Bag End, a woodcutting of a king come to life. And he looked as nothing
ever looking in Bag End, not even his fellow dwarves: he looked as if he didn’t belong. He was too
grand for the domestic. Bilbo could see that at a glance. And there was something about the
foreign nature of Thorin, the sheer strangeness, that Bilbo could very easily love.

Hobbits would ascribe that inclination to Bilbo’s Tookish side, but Bilbo placed the blame
elsewhere in his family tree. His mother was a wild and strange one, yes, but it was his father that
had loved her. Respectability ran deep in the Baggins’ blood, respectability that meant a shudder of
horror at the unrespectable; it was a shudder Bilbo felt when he first looked at Thorin. But
shudders could mean anything. Revulsion and fascination were sometimes impossible to tell apart.

Oh dear. This isn’t the most romantic start, is it? To be fair, ultimately neither was Thorin and
Bilbo’s first meeting. It might have been the start to everything, the journey and love initiated in
one fell swoop. But then Thorin had to go and open his mouth. Even Bilbo’s romantic side had to
admit that Thorin’s words did not make nearly such a good impression as his looks. Call Bilbo a
sentimentalist, but he prefers his potential romantic partners not to openly regard him with such
disappointment. Even if Bilbo as he was certainly encouraged that disappointment.

So maybe Bilbo fell in love on the journey, in those first weeks. It was hard to see where, though.
For the first leg, Bilbo spoke to few in the company besides Bofur and his relatives, for Bofur had
an easy and gentle kindness so easy and gentle that you might never notice it was there except that
it warmed you as well as any fire. Bofur was hobbitish, in the best meaning of the word, and
without much fuss he accepted Bilbo into his circle with an ease that never suggested that he was
doing Bilbo any great favor in doing so. By all rights, it should have been Bofur that Bilbo married,
if Bilbo had been looking to marry, for Bilbo had enjoyed the same relationship with Bofur that a
great many hobbits enjoyed with their spouse: a gentle companionship, an easy friendship. But if
Bilbo had wanted to marry a hobbit, he would have married a hobbit. (And presumably Bofur had
his own opinions on the matter.)

Thorin Oakenshield was as distinctly not-hobbitish as beings came. Sentimental revisions of
personal history aside (love’s pull was powerful enough that it had an insidious tendency to rewrite
the past in cheerier colors, to add weight to looks and silences that had been nothing but looks and
silence), Bilbo felt little towards Thorin in those first months beyond fascination. Who wouldn’t be
fascinated by him? Who couldn’t stand beside Thorin Oakenshield and not feel the tug of destiny?
(Many people, Bilbo would learn, and though he suspected this was love speaking as well, he
couldn’t understand why: even when they’d been strangers to each other, Bilbo had seen Thorin
wear his greatness like a halo.) To stand before Thorin was to stand before the tale’s hero; it was to
see yourself as the supporting character in someone else’s quest. All this Bilbo felt and respected as
any proper reader would.

But Bilbo certainly did not love Thorin for it.

Rivendell then? The city was as good a starting point as any, back on the subject of love. Standing
at Thorin’s side as Elrond declared the madness of Thorin’s line, the first stirrings of pity for
Thorin the person rose in Bilbo’s chest. “They say we have madness in my family as well,” Bilbo
could have offered, but he’d known that Thorin would take no comfort and much insult in the
Durins being compared to Bilbo’s mother who was wild enough by hobbit standards but perfectly
mild by dwarven once. The Bilbo in Rivendell had been sure that he knew how Thorin would
react, just as sure as the Bilbo back in Bag End after the fact was sure that his past self had been
wrong. Thorin would have liked nothing more than to be offered anything other than the silence of
pity. Perhaps there’s a world where Bilbo was a little braver; where he didn’t pass off cowardly
silence as tact; where Bilbo that night spoke; and where Thorin after a moment of surprise
responded. Perhaps there’s a world where Bilbo and Thorin fell in love that very night, and perhaps
Bilbo would even have recognized the falling at the time. It would have saved them some time.

So no, it was no Rivendell, and it was not the road from it, and it was not the night of the Stone
Giants and Bilbo’s faltering heart. It was not the moment of terror that came with separation. It was
not Bilbo’s first kill in the dark. Bilbo had not been rushing towards the dwarves—any of the
dwarves—so much as he’d been rushing away from everything else. He fell in love with his ring
faster than Thorin. (Somedays, he even missed it just as much, which was the closest Bilbo ever
got to truly understanding gold sickness.)

Bilbo did not fall in love with Thorin the moment that Thorin fell in love with Bilbo.

When the confessions were made—the hospital tent outside Erebor, the words making explicit
what they’d both known in the blood-soaked snow—Bilbo and Thorin had played that favorite
game of new lovers, where every moment of the relationship, already well-worn through excessive
interrogation, is taken back out for shared reexamination, to cross-study the assumptions each of
you made, to answer the questions that you’d been trying to ask without asking. To laugh and say,
“You thought I was angry at you that evening? I never would have sought you out for dinner if I
hated you.” Or, “I thought you were the most insufferable prick the first time we met.” Or, “I was
never happier when you put your sleeping mat near mine.”

“Did you really think that I’d gone back to Rivendell?” Bilbo asked, his head on the pillow beside
Thorin’s.

“I hoped you had,” said Thorin. “Or else you were dead in the mountain. If we barely survived, I
didn’t imagine that you could. Though I worried about you on the way to Rivendell as well. I thought you would die in the wilderness on the way there if the elves did not find you.”

“You worried about me?”

“All the time. You are so small. I didn’t know what you were capable of.” Thorin smiled, such a sweet and mystified smile that it was not love that caused it, it was certainly the dwarven painkillers that Oin had administered. “Little did I know.”

“Little did anyone know,” said Bilbo. “Most of all myself. I didn’t know you cared for me then.”

“I cared for you as a member of my company. If you died, it would have been on my head.” Thorin pressed his forehead against Bilbo’s. When Thorin breathed in, Bilbo thought, he inhaled what Bilbo exhaled. And vice versa. The thought was so intimate that Bilbo had to squeeze his eyes shut. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to cry or giggle.

“I did not love you,” said Thorin, “until you returned.”

“And then?” asked Bilbo.

“Then I loved you, and will never cease to.”

“Because I told you I would help you reclaim Erebor?”

“No,” said Thorin. “Before that. When you returned.”

“Not after I jumped in front of that warg for you?”

“By then, I loved you so firmly that I could not remember a time when I hadn’t.”

Bilbo curled tighter against Thorin’s side. He didn’t know what to say. How could you say anything to that? Where would you start? “Then I might not have jumped in front of that warg then,” Bilbo said. “Could have saved myself a bit of trouble if I’d know you already liked me.”

Thorin laughed and winced, and Oin stuck his head back in the tent and shouted once more about not reopening stitches, which accomplished nothing except making Bilbo and Thorin laugh some more. Bilbo laughed and buried his face in Thorin’s shoulder, and marveled. Thorin fell in love with Bilbo with a kind of love that Bilbo had never known and would never know and could never know except by outside experience, for Thorin loved like a striking match. His heart was inert; then, aflame. When it was done burning, it would be no more a match, just ash in the wind.

Bilbo didn’t love like that. Bilbo didn’t understand how anyone could.

Why had Bilbo come back to Thorin that day in the Misty Mountains? Because that was where safety lay. Why did Bilbo pledge to help Thorin retake his home? Because Bilbo so sorely missed his own. Why did he place himself between an orc and his kill? Because—and here the easy answers falter.

When Bilbo had lain awake the night after, up there on the Carrack with everyone too exhausted to even think about climbing down, he’d wondered himself to sleep chewing on that question. Because it was the right thing to do; that would be the obvious answer. Bilbo didn’t buy it. He knew the limits of his heroism. Or he thought he did, at any rate. Because Bilbo was the closest. Because after the orc killed Thorin, Bilbo and the company would have been next. Because this was Bilbo’s time to achieve some fraction of a hero’s greatness. Bilbo thought all these reasons, weighed them like a rock, flung them at the target of his thoughts. None struck bullseye. None felt
I did it for Thorin, Bilbo thought that night, and found to his surprise that the words felt like a stone that would skip across the water a dozen times until it bounced onto the far shore, never sinking.

Bilbo loved the way as writers love, as writers write. There are words and words and words and erasures and mistakes and torn out pages you wanted to keep and paragraphs you learn to live with, and then at some point a pile of papers becomes a story. Before it has a beginning, middle, or end, it is a story. There’s a moment when the story lives on its own, and the words are just only way you can think of to show to the story: a blanket thrown over an invisible figure to gain some sense of its shape.

This perhaps was the reason Bilbo had always known Thorin would come back. It wouldn’t be a very good story otherwise. And Bilbo knew the way writers know that Thorin was always going to be the best story Bilbo ever told.

Chapter End Notes

Super thank you to the commenters on the last chapter who pointed out that Beorn is a vegetarian. It totally just slipped my mind. I thought about discreetly editing it, but honestly I’ve found out that writing a WIP just means continually learning to live with your previous mistakes.
Bilbo had nightmares sometimes. They were usually about birds. In his dreams, blood and birds are one and the same. The one summons the other. The first time Bilbo saw the Eagles, they carried Thorin’s body like a limp doll. The second time, they had done the same. From Ravenshill they took off, Thorin in their talons, and Bilbo had stood on the ground amidst the red, red snow and watched them fly. In both cases, he had hoped with all of himself that Thorin was not dead. In both cases, Thorin had lived.

In Bilbo’s nightmares, the story ends differently. The Eagles keep flying. Thorin lies in the snow. His face slackens in something that looks nothing like sleep. Bilbo watches the snowflakes land on his unblinking eyes. His blood stops spilling, and the blood against Bilbo’s fingers turns cold. And the shadows keep passing over Thorin’s face. The Eagles fly, and they block out the sun.

The nightmares were hardly new. Bilbo had been having them for over five years at this point, and while they would never be comfortable, never be fine, over his time at Erebor, he’d gotten used to them. It was easy enough to refute them. If he was sleeping in Thorin’s bed that night, he’d reach over and there Thorin would be: warm, breathing, snoring. If Bilbo was sleeping in his own quarters (which had been a good portion of the time due to the aforementioned warmth and snoring, both of which were fantastic indicators of life but also felt sometimes like Bilbo was sharing a bed with a malfunctioning furnace), then in a few moments he wouldn’t be. When the nightmares came, Bilbo went and slept with Thorin, and Thorin in his sleep would draw Bilbo closer to him. Thorin used to say that mornings were sweetest when his burglar had crept in during the night. Bilbo would smile and say nothing about the reasons for creeping.

The nightmares returned in Bag End. They’d been there for months, alongside nastier ones, newer ones, the kind creative minds made when they didn’t know what they were afraid of. In Bag End, there had been no quick remedy for them. In Bag End, Bilbo lay in his parents’ old bedroom and felt like a child again, in all the worst ways.

In his nightmares, an Eagle carries Thorin in his talons as they fly. In his nightmares, Thorin is not limp at all. He is alive, alive, alive, and the sight of him makes Bilbo want to cry. But the Eagle doesn’t know that Thorin is alive, or he doesn’t care, or the weight is simply too much for him. So he uncurls his talons. He lets Thorin go. And in Bilbo’s nightmares, he watches Thorin fall, fall all the way to earth, and he watches his body smash against the stone underneath the parapet, and Bilbo looks from underneath his crown at Thorin’s body and knows that he pushed him.

Two weeks after Lobelia surrendered Thorin’s note, Beorn disappeared. Everyone had been amazed that he’d stayed so long. But it had been too long since he’d been in the Shire, Beorn said, and Bag End’s garden was a fine place to sleep: he liked to keep an eye on the stars. Drogo stretched the limits of his vegetarian cooking in an effort to keep up with Beorn’s appetite, Tauriel spent evenings with him speaking languages no one else understood, and Dwalin ignored him.

“You should be one thing or another thing.” Dwalin told Bilbo. “None of this bear sometimes, man other times.”
Dis merely kept asking him if his honey would ever be available for general sale since the hives near the Iron Hills kept dying off, and by the end of his stay at Bag End, Beorn promised he’d send a swarm over when the weather changed in exchange for dwarves agreeing to place their burgeoning trade routes outside his territory. Bilbo had never seen political boundaries and trade treaties discussed through the open window of his dining room, nor had he ever seen negotiations terminated because a pack of roving hobbit children kept calling to the bear-man to come join them because they needed his help to take down Dwalin’s snow fort.

Then one day Bilbo woke and realized that he’d had the most pleasant night sleep. The kind only possible when the night hasn’t been filled with the sounds of snoring that rang like arrhythmic thunder claps in the night. (That was Bilbo’s description. Dwalin had gone with “drums in the deep, but also somehow right next to your ear.” Tauriel had offered, “It’s like the sound of nightmares, except you can’t have the nightmares because you can’t get to sleep.” Primula’s description was currently the winner; she’d offered a terse, “Phlegm. So very much phlegm.”) When Bilbo grabbed his cane and hobbled out to the kitchen, almost everyone was already gathered for breakfast. They looked remarkably well-rested.

“Not that we weren’t glad to have him,” Drogo said hastily, ever the gracious host. “But it was a pleasant night.”

“Did he say goodbye?” Tauriel asked.

“Slipped out in the night,” Primula said. “Very dramatic like that.”

“He probably didn’t want to make a fuss,” Drogo said.

“If he’d cared about that,” Dis said, buttering her toast, “then he would have slept several miles away.”

Dwalin came into the kitchen at that point, just in time to help Bilbo get over to a chair. It was a new chair. Most of the chairs in Bag End at this point were new. Dwalin had spent his time in Bag End meticulously repairing, replacing, or enhancing the furniture, which of course was an unnecessary effort that Dwalin needn’t trouble himself with, and Bilbo would be sure to tell him that just after Dwalin finished that new ottoman he was working on. “Beorn left a gift,” Dwalin said.

“Oh did he?” replied Drogo cheerfully. “How wonderful, what is it?”

Dwalin sat down and helped himself to breakfast. “Wolf skins.”

There was a general pause around the table. “Wolf skins.”

“Wolf skins,” Drogo said.

Mouth full of bacon, Dwalin nodded. “Good ones. He left them to tan in the front yard.” He looked up after Drogo’s little splutter. “I moved them to the back.”

“Very good of you, Dwalin,” said Primula, hiding a smile behind her mug as Drogo recovered. “We’d hate for the neighbors to think we were weird.”
Beorn’s departure seemed to trigger something. The strange emptiness of the landscape (and soundscape) made Bag End feel, if not lonelier, then a little emptier. It seemed to remind people that Bag End could be left. Bag End had a way of making you forget that; Bilbo knew that more than anyone. And once Beorn shrugged off its domestic spell with as little care as he’d shrugged off the snow that had fallen on him in the night, it was as if the house simply slackened its grip.

It was a only a week after Beorn’s departure when Tauriel came sprinting into Bag End, forgot why she shouldn’t do that, and promptly knocked herself out against the ceiling.

Bilbo and Dis didn’t know that was exactly what happened. They had been in the library reading peacefully together (which for them meant silently). All they heard was a whoop, followed by a thump, and then Primula’s cry of “Tory!”

Dis didn’t even look up from her book. “Loathe as I am to admit it,” she said lazily, turning the page, “she is in many ways a very good match for my youngest.”

Bilbo sighed, bookmarked his place, and picked up his walking stick. He hobbled towards his friend. Primula and Dwalin were already there: Primula holding Tauriel’s hand and pressing a compress against the elf’s forehead, Dwalin shifting in the background, trying to not look useless, the way you do when you rush to help and find someone far more competent at this particular breed of helping got there first.

Up in the rafters was a tired looking raven: a messenger raven from Erebor. Bilbo’s heart did several things that would alarm Primula if she’d been pressing her ear to his chest. Surprise, nostalgia, and alarm did have a way of kicking the rhythm off.

When Tauriel saw Bilbo (with eyes a little less focused than usual), she beamed at him bright as a moonbeam. It was a smile elves did best, a little bit on unearthly light slipping through the teeth. “I must thank you for your hospitality,” she said merrily. “I’ll not overtax it.”

Bilbo blinked as he translated this. “Did you concuss yourself on my house so you could tell me you’re leaving it?”

Tauriel held out a letter. There was a little bit of blood flecked on it, courtesy of Tauriel’s forehead and Bag End’s ceiling. The sight of a blood-soaked letter from Kili was a strangely nostalgic sight. “‘My dearest, my darling, my brightest star and finest gem, and the jeweler of what worth this rock of my heart has’—good heavens,” Bilbo said, scanning the note. “Does Kili ever write you or just exhaust himself in salutations?”

“He’s inviting me home,” said Tauriel.

Bilbo looked up. “Home?”

Tauriel’s eyes lowered just a shade. “To Erebor.”

Dwalin straightened, as Bilbo’s eyes lowered. “I thought you two and Fili said you best keep yourself sparse from there.”

“We did,” Tauriel replied to Dwalin.

“Then what happened to that?”

“Quite a lot of pining,” Bilbo answered, already skimming the letter’s third page. “If Kili can be trusted, it was a particularly painful, agonizing, torturous, and long-winded kind of pining.”
“Oh, ignore Kili,” Dis said, coming down the hallway and sounding cranky that whatever was happening out here had been happening for long enough that she had to come out and check on it. “If my son honed a craft half so much as his romantic streak, he’d be a Guildmaster already. What did he write then?”

“A missive,” said Tauriel, “asking me to come back to him.”

Everyone looked at Dis expectantly while trying to also look like they weren’t looking at her. Everyone except Tauriel who stared right at Dis with a look on her face that said she’d already made up her mind as to what she’d like to do, but if Dis had something to say, she was welcome to her opinion. Dis met her daughter-in-law’s gaze with the kind of lazy power of kings.

“You’re the last thing he needs right now,” Dis said.

“Untrue,” Tauriel said quietly, and with a simple dignity that belied the fact she’d just accidentally head-butted the rafters. “I’ll be inconvenient for him right now. He can handle inconvenience.”

“I’m not sure it’s wise.”

Tauriel raised her chin. “That does not matter. I am going.”

In the corner, Dwalin said, “You should.” The women turned to look at him. Dwalin shrugged. “Durins get stupid about love, case in point.” He nodded at Bilbo with this statement, who a little flattered and insulted at the same time. “They’re worse when they don’t have it than when they do.” He looked at Dis. “And it’s Fili who is king. Who cares what the brother does?”

“A great many people would say the siblings of kings matter,” Dis replied.

“Yes, when they’re mad usurpers of the throne,” Bilbo said. “That’s why everyone keeps an eye on you, Dis.”

“Slander,” she said mildly. “I didn’t usurp the throne of Eren Luin, Thorin was perfectly happy to give it up, and it’s worked out wonderfully for everyone.” She looked back at Tauriel, who got her gaze levelly. “I am advising you as a king, by the way. Not a mother. Kili’s elven lover returning will not make thing easier for him while he seeks to help his brother assume control of the mountain destabilized by someone’s foreign lover.”

“I don’t care,” said Tauriel. “I miss my job, my home, my forest, and my love. I banished myself from my side of the world for his sake, and while I have enjoyed my experience—” this last bit added hastily while nodding at Bilbo who was still processing being described as anyone’s foreign lover— “I am eager to return to my life. And to Kili’s.”

“Traveling will be hard in winter,” Primula said.

Tauriel gave her a look. “For you, perhaps.”

Primula smiled. “Egotist.”

“That’s elves for you,” Dis said.

Tauriel shook herself loose from Primula’s careful grasp and stood—keeping a close eye on the ceiling as she did. She looked at Bilbo and spoke in Sindarin. “If you don’t mind my leaving.”

Bilbo’s hand tightened on his cane and he answered in kind, albeit with a far rougher accent. “Why would I mind?” Why would Bilbo mind that Tauriel could go back to Erebor? He didn’t, not at all.
He was happy here. He was waiting here. That was that. That had to be that.

“I think it’s terribly rude when people speak in foreign languages, don’t you?” Dis said Primula loudly.

“Don’t you dwarves got a secret language you won’t teach anyone?” Primula replied.

“Yes,” Dis said. “We’re a very rude race like that.” She fixed her gaze upon Tauriel and Bilbo in turn. “So you’re going then?”

“Yes,” said Tauriel. And then she smiled again, as if she couldn’t help it. “It is time I went home.”

“Home to Mirkwood and to visit Erebor, of course,” Dis said. “I know how much you hate our mountain.”

“My home is Kili,” Tauriel said. Her eyes flicked to Bilbo for just a moment. “Wherever he lives is my home.”

Dis grimaced. “Mahal, you two are perfect for each other. Two disgusting romantics in love.”

Tauriel simply kept smiling. Kili had once sworn to Bilbo that he’d seen Tauriel glowing. Looking at her now, Bilbo could believe that.

Down the hallway at that moment, the front door opened. “Big news down in the market!” Drogo called from the entry way. “Missus Birch nearly broke her hip slipping on ice today! Bilbo, I said she could use your wheelchair since you’re nearly all done with it, up and about as you are.” A many-layered wool mummy that Bilbo assumed was Drogo fresh in from the cold popped his into the hallway where the entire rest of the population of the house stood. “What are you lot doing all gathered around? Something exciting happen around here?”

Everyone who wasn’t Drogo looked around at each other. “Good news, Drogo,” Dis said before anyone could beat her to the punch. “You get to throw a going away party.”

Tauriel said that she wouldn’t leave until the end of the month since the worst of the snows would be over by then. No one asked how she knew this. They simply accepted it as fact, and spent the remaining days getting ready for her egress from Bag End. It was hardest for Drogo and Primula. The only time they had ever said goodbye to someone they honestly never expected to see again was when the person they were saying goodbye to was one their deathbeds. Bilbo had joked plenty with his friends in Erebor about how provincial hobbits were, but it wasn’t until Dwalin and Tauriel saw the hobbits poorly containing their sniffles that they understood how much Bilbo hadn’t been exaggerating. Bilbo had walked into the kitchen once to find a very confused Tauriel holding a weeping Primula in her lap. “I will visit,” Tauriel kept saying, “I will come back. I promise.”

“But! Tory!” sobbed Primula, which was not a thing Bilbo had been aware Primula could do. “You’re! Going! So! Far! Away!” Great hiccups of grief interrupted every word.

“Well.” Tauriel—an elf who had routinely patrolled a territory that was larger than the scope of Primula’s entire life—looked utterly lost. “Yes, I am.”
This understandably did nothing to quell Primula’s distress.

Bilbo tiptoed back out of the kitchen. He decided the scone he’d been after really wasn’t worth it.

Drogo took a different approach, one that seemed to consist entirely of fattening Tauriel up. Drogo had talked quite a lot to Beorn about the realities of life as a bear and, as he said every morning as he slid about twenty pounds of food onto Tauriel’s plate, you had to bulk up to keep warm. Tauriel, truly a good sport, ate everything that Drogo put in front of her—or perhaps it would be better to say that the food was eaten. Sometimes Dwalin, who always sat by Tauriel’s side, ended meal times looking a little overstuffed as well, but together they kept Drogo happy. Or as happy as he could be when he was sure that Tauriel was going to die.

“I did get here safely,” she pointed out to him one evening around the fireplace as Drogo kept trying to convince her to take his lucky rabbit foot, the only thing he was sure could keep her safe in the wild. “I can take care of myself, I promise you.”

“You got here safely this time,” Drogo replied grimly. “You only need to die once for it to stick.”

Tauriel opened her mouth, apparently decided that she couldn’t argue with that, and closed it. “I cannot take your talisman from you. You need it more.”

“Be gracious and take the damn rabbit foot, Tauriel,” said Dwalin, whittling a new rocking chair in the corner.

Tauriel rolled her eyes and took the damn rabbit foot. “Thank you,” she said to Drogo.

Drogo simply shook his head. “Not enough out there,” he said sadly. “Just look what happened to our poor Bilbo.”

Their poor Bilbo was currently lying on the floor as Primula extolled him to do one more stretch. “Yes,” Bilbo panted. “Just look at me. Horribly mistreated by all around me.”

“You’re spending more energy whining than you are stretching,” said Primula, which was an easy thing to say when it wasn’t you doing the stretches.

Dis came into the living room, took a moment to smirk down at Bilbo who returned in kind, and said, “Dwalin?” Dwalin looked up from his work with an unreadable face. Dis nodded outside. “Can we talk?”

Dwalin got up, brushed the saw dust off of himself onto the floor (Drogo didn’t even wince; the dwarves broken him long ago) and said, “Alright then.”

Bilbo watched them go. Then Primula snapped her fingers. “Oy! One more, let’s go,” she said, and Bilbo found it beyond himself to wonder about the secrets of dwarves at that moment.

Two days before Tauriel was planning to leave, Dwalin came in during Bilbo’s exercises and said to Primula, “You mind if I beat him up for a change?”

Primula sat back on her heels. “What have you got in mind?”
“Have I got a say in this?” Bilbo asked from the floor, or would have if he was not simply appreciating a moment’s breather.

“A walk,” Dwalin said. “I’ll make him do your lunges and whatnot out there.”

Primula shrugged and looked at Bilbo. “Your choice. Hurt with me or hurt with him?”

Bilbo looked up at Dwalin who looked down. He had that same unreadable look on his face he’d had with Dis. “Dwalin,” Bilbo said. “Fresh air and all that.”

Dwalin waited patiently as Bilbo bundled up. He hadn’t been outside much. Bilbo as a rule did not go outside much during winter, and the prospect of fainting into a pile of snow didn’t improve his willingness. But the weather was better than he expected outside, warmer than it had been in weeks and with a sun that made him immediately regret a few of the final layers he’d piled on. Tauriel had been right, Bilbo thought as he steadied himself with his cane. This would be a good time to leave.

They walked in silence down a few roads, Bilbo stopping now and then to catch his breath and remove a scarf, when Dwalin said, “I’m leaving with Tauriel.”

Bilbo took his hat off. “Sorry,” he said. “I must have heard you wrong through all the wool.”

“I’m leaving,” Dwalin repeated. “Two days’ time, same as her.”

Bilbo stopped walking. Dwalin turned around and regarded him, quiet, waiting. “I don’t understand,” Bilbo said. “I thought you were here. Waiting. For Thorin.”

“I was,” Dwalin said. “And I’d keep waiting, except Dis has asked this of me.”

“Dis?”

“She said I’m sworn to the king of Erebor. To keep him safe. I can’t bring Thorin to the Shire any quicker, and once he’s here…” Dwalin spread his arms at everything around him, the quiet houses tucked in gentle hills covered with sparkling snow. “There’s nowhere safer he could be.” Dwalin lowered his arms, tucked his hands into the pockets of the sweater Missus Flynn had knitted him in exchange for his work on her porch. “Fili and Kili need me more there than Thorin needs me here.”

“I don’t understand,” Bilbo said again. “I thought—you’re not—I thought you were here to wait for him as a friend. Not as a sworn anything.”

Dwalin looked away. “Aye.”

“Then…what?”

“I got to thinking a bit,” Dwalin said. “About how maybe the first thing he wants to see in his new life isn’t someone hanging around from his old one.”

“Dwalin…”

“I’m not saying it like that. This isn’t self-pity. But I thought…” Dwalin shrugged. “Maybe you ought to receive him on your own.”

Bilbo didn’t know what to say. He wrung his hats in his hands as his mind whirred in a circle, and he said as delicately as he could manage, “But isn’t there…business? You wanted to deal with? You and him?”
“Nah,” Dwalin said definitively. “We’re fine. He apologized.”

“He—you mean that scrawled postmark at the bottom of the letter?”

Dwalin smiled. “Took the time to write it, didn’t he? And he’ll know I apologized too.”

“Did you?” Bilbo said, more confused that he’d been when the conversation started.

“Came here, didn’t it? Fixed up your house, scoped out the neighbors, made inroads at market getting them used to dwarves and all. Life’ll be a little easier for Thorin when he get here. And I looked after you.” Dwalin paused and conceded, “Much as anyone could need looking after here.”

“That’s not an apology,” Bilbo said, baffled.

Dwalin looked back at him, equally baffled. “What the hell do you think an apology is then? Just the words, I’m sorry?”


Dwalin grinned. “Nah. Sounds and air, that’s all. You didn’t need Thorin to write ‘I love you’ in his note to know that he loves you, did you?”

“No,” Bilbo said, and looked away as the world blurred a little, the way it always did when Thorin’s love snuck up on him. “I suppose I didn’t.” He sighed. “I suppose you’re right. Or at least I suppose that I can see your point. Erebor needs you, I suppose.”

“That it does.” Dwalin jerked his head forward and started walking. Bilbo collected himself and joined him.

“It still doesn’t make sense to me,” Bilbo said as they walked. “You came all this way for Thorin, and now when we know he’s coming back—”

“Don’t know when,” Dwalin said. “Don’t know what those birds have asked of him. Could be tomorrow, could be next year.” He scratched his beard. “It’s just I got my duties. Thorin chose to come here, live here, that’s fine. But I gotta honor my vow to my king. Fili’s a good kid, but what does he know about battle? He can fight one, but he doesn’t know how to plan one. And what’s he know about security? Theft’s the biggest threat to our mountain.” Bilbo always felt a flush of embarrassment when people said things like that. “That’s where I’m needed. Can’t keep hanging around here putting it off.”

“Thorin will be sorry he missed you,” Bilbo said quietly.

Dwalin grinned. “Ah hell, I’ll visit. Mahal knows I’m not sure how I’m gonna get away from you hobbits without promising that.”

Bilbo smiled in return, even though his chest was aching with something that had nothing to do with exercise. “Good,” he said. “When you do, you can bring back all my stuff. And a good barrel of Dale’s pipeweed, though don’t tell Primula about that bit. She’s half convinced it was all the foreign plants going into me that made me so sick. I’m on a strictly local diet now.”

“Drogo’ll keep you well fed.”

“Indeed. It will be odd with you and Tauriel gone. We’ll back to the strange little family we had when it was the three of us and Dis.”
Dwalin was silent too long at that statement. “About that,” he said eventually, and the ache in Bilbo’s chest bloomed.

“No,” Bilbo said.

Dwalin said nothing.

“Everyone?”

Dwalin said nothing.

“How long have you known?”

Dwalin sighed. “About a week. We thought it’d be easier if we waited.”

“Easier for whom?” Bilbo asked coldly.

“For the hobbits,” Dwalin said firmly. “The real hobbits.” And when Bilbo fixed him with a look, Dwalin said, “You know what I mean. Them two. Drogo and Primula.” Dwalin tugged his beard again, with such a firm grip that if he’d grabbed the rest of his hair so strongly, Bilbo would understand why he went bald so young. “It wasn’t just me wanting to tell you face-to-face that we’re out here. Dis told me to get you out of the house. Said she wanted to tell Primula in private.”

“Oh,” Bilbo said and pictured that. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“She’s telling her right now?”

“Should be.”

They walked in silence for a moment.

“Let’s not rush home then,” Bilbo said.

“Mahal no,” Dwalin replied. “Dis can deal with that one.”

By the field, Bilbo called mercy and sat on the bench that overlooked the area. Children played in the distance, throwing themselves down into the freezing mud and squealing with joy about it. One of them spotted Dwalin. A dozen little hands went up into the air, waving excitedly. Dwalin looked down at Bilbo. “You fine to wait here a bit?” Dwalin said. Bilbo, still panting, gestured at Dwalin to go ahead.

Dwalin nodded, drew up to his full height (certainly nothing to sneeze at here in the Shire), and bellowed, “Come on and fight me, you wretched knaves!” Bilbo stared. Dwalin shrugged. “Children like fighting,” he said simply before two of the beasts in question came flying at him.

As Dwalin gently defended himself from the most vicious hoard Bilbo had seen in years, Bilbo sat on the bench and watched. This should have been a strange sight in the Shire; when Dwalin left, it would become a strange sight once more. But none of the passing hobbits paid much mind to the dwarf wrestling with a frothing ball of children. Most of them glanced more curiously at Bilbo, the reclusive mad adventurer who so rarely ventured out. It was almost the same as those first months in Erebor, where no one knew exactly what he was.

*I’m the biggest oddity in Middle-earth*, Bilbo thought. *Neither here nor there; neither this nor that.*
You would have thought he was used to the feeling by now.

Drogo was listlessly cooking in the kitchen when Bilbo and Dwalin came back. He looked up when they walked in, his eyes glancing over Bilbo and settling on Dwalin. “I’ve only got the one rabbit foot,” he said sadly. “You’ll have to share it.”

Dwalin came over and clasped his hand on Drogo’s shoulder. “I’m sure there’s luck enough for all of us in there,” he said kindly. Drogo nodded solemnly and then burst into tears.

Bilbo found Dis in the garden. He wasn’t aware she’d known he had a garden. Dwarves firmly ignored them on principle. She sat on a bench that Bilbo’s mother had brought home for Bilbo’s father, a neat bit of furniture commissioned in Bree. The Shire though it swooningly exotic. There were several copies of it all around town, and as time passed, more and more claimed to be the original.

“I simply must see about getting these back in Eren Luin,” Dis said, and blew a smoke ring at Bungo Baggins’s pride and joy of a onion plant.

“Please don’t choke my plants with your particularly vile pipeweed,” Bilbo said. “And I’m sure that even in Eren Luin you have onions.”

“Yes, obviously we do, Bilbo, I am saying that I want your breed of the plant, which is far and away the best strain I’ve ever had. I’m trying to pay you a compliment, you daft hobbit.”

Bilbo snorted. “Silly me, why couldn’t I tell.”

Dis rolled her eyes. “Sit down.”

Bilbo sat on the bench besides her, his legs gratefully collapsing and his walking stick leaning into the exact same notch where Bungo had rested his walking stick years ago. Dis held out her pipe. Bilbo accepted. The Iron Hills strain was a particularly noxious one, but he was going to miss dwarven leaf.

“Don’t tell Prim I gave you that. And don’t smoke too much. I’m almost out,” Dis said. “I’ll have to steal some of yours for the journey home.”

Bilbo blew a smoke ring. It did a small loop-de-loop before dispersing in the air. Thorin would have been proud. And then immediately bested it. “Where is Primula?”

Dis’ eyes turned downwards. “In her room.” She leaned over, rested her elbow on her leg and her chin in her palm. “She said she needed to be alone. Mahal, I understand now why Thorin slipped out in the night,” Dis said almost to herself. “How the hell do you leave to someone’s face?”

Bilbo breathed the smoke deep, let it burn him inside and out in a way he knew he’d regret soon enough. And he breathed it out. “So why?” he asked, belching smoke.

Dis tilted her head to smile at him that smile she shared with her brother: a perfect split between sadness and humor. “I’m a king, dear brother. What would it seem like if I ran off and never returned?”
“They’d say it ran in the family, I suppose.” Bilbo took another puff and let the burn of it seep all the way to the tips of his wooly toes. “You said you’d return when Thorin did.”

“And he will. But I could put my life and reign only on pause so long as I didn’t know he would.”

“You could wait a while longer. He’s bound to be home any day.”

She held out her hand. “I bet you your onions that it still isn’t anytime soon.”

Bilbo dropped her pipe into it. “Good try, dear sister. You’ll pay for those seeds.”

“You’d charge your kin to furnish their gardens?”

“I’ll charge the king of Eren Luin to mass produce my father’s carefully developed special strain. And you forget, I did control the outer gardens of Erebor. I know far more about agriculture on the mass scale than you do, even if I did cheerfully delegate most of the fuss away.”

Dis snorted and popped her pipe in her mouth. “Mahal save us from power-mad little hobbits.”

They say in silence together. She was nearly as tall as her brother, and looked like him as well, in the corner of Bilbo’s eye. Bilbo had always had to look her straight on for just that reason. It was too painful to regard her otherwise.

“What would you have done,” Bilbo asked, “if Lobelia had never shown me the letter?”

“Then I’d have done what I planned to do in the first place. Waited.”

“For how long?”

“Until my brother was found.”

“And if he was never found?”

“Then you and I would be in the same wretched boat.”

Bilbo paused. “But you’re leaving now.”

“Yes.”

“When you know he’ll be here soon.”

“I know he’ll be here. No one said it would be soon.”

Yes, people kept pointing that out. “Everyone’s leaving when they know he’s coming,” Bilbo said.

“We can leave because we know he’s coming. Waiting will be horrible, but you’re right. He is coming. so we know you’ll be fine now.”

Bilbo started. “Me?”

Dis glanced wryly at him. “Is it so inconceivable that we were worried about you too?”

Bilbo didn’t know what to say to that. The thought had never truly occurred to him. “You’re worried,” Bilbo said, “but you’re leaving me to wait in the Shire alone with people who don’t know him.”

Dis flinched away with the same look she had when she’d mentioned Primula. “We’ll visit,” she
“said lamely. Then she shook her head. “We have lives, Bilbo. Like my future daughter-in-law said. And our lives cannot be put off forever. Thorin decided to retire. The rest of us, we have our work. We don’t all get to live here in the idyllic paradise of gentle hills and gentle people and gentle worries.”

“If that’s what you think the Shire is,” Bilbo said, “then you don’t understand this place at all.”

“This is the finest land I have ever been in.” He’d never heard such wistfulness in Dis’ voice. “Look at it sometime, with eyes that have never seen it before.” She straightened, leaned back against the bench. “It feels the way that Erebor should have felt.” This last part she said so quietly, that Bilbo felt it was not for him at all. Just something that she had to say. He turned away to the garden bed, the slumbering land just waiting for a little more warmth.

“I miss Erebor,” Bilbo said quietly. Dis looked at him. “I miss it more than I ever missed the Shire. But perhaps that was because I always had this faint idea that I would live to die in Bag End. That perhaps we’d go to the Shire when we were old and Thorin was king no longer, and we’d retire here happily. But I never truly expected it. I knew Thorin would never leave Erebor.” Bilbo smiled ruefully. “Not when he went to all that effort of getting it back.”

Dis’ smile matched Bilbo’s. “You two. Always wanting what you don’t have. It’s amazing you’re so happily married.” She nudged Bilbo with her shoulder. “Your husband still owes me a proper marriage party, by the way. He never ever gave me the chance to make an embarrassing speech about him.”

“When he turns up,” Bilbo said, “I’ll send you a save the date. We’ll hold it by the Party Tree, and I’ll expect you to be in charge of planning.”

“It’s a date,” said Dis.

Bilbo was silent for a long moment. Then he said, through the ache in his chest, “Good.”

“Good,” Dis echoed quietly. They sat together, brother and sister, as the sun dipped lower and the cold began to rise. Bilbo shivered, and Dis stood. “Come on. Prim is already upset with me. If you catch a chill tonight, she’ll never write me in Eren Luin.” Dis caught herself and shook her head. “I understand your bout of illness now,” she said wryly as she helped Bilbo up. “Other people’s homes have a way of infecting you.”

Tauriel, Dwalin, and Dis left. Everyone ate breakfast together that morning, and everyone finished packing, and then the three of them left. Primula, Drogo, and Bilbo stayed in the doorway as the others left. Drogo waved and waved. Primula pulled her shawl tighter, crossed her arms, and silently cried. Bilbo leaned on his cane, and watched his friends disappear on the road. They’d get new ponies down the way, more supplies in Bree. They’d travel together until the road split. Then Tauriel and Dwalin would head back to Erebor, and Dis would head to Eren Luin. And Bilbo would stay here. Waiting.

The three hobbits stood in the doorway long after the travelers were gone. Then Primula wiped her face. “Let’s get inside then,” Primula said, a little shakily but otherwise normal. “Can’t have my boys lying up with a cold.”
The three hobbits went inside. They sat in the too empty parlor of Bag End, on the chairs Dwalin had worked on. Primula didn’t sit on the couch she had shared most nights with Dis. Drogo didn’t talk. They just sat, like at a wake.

Bilbo was tired of missing everything.

A week after their friends went, the snow came. It fell, and fell, and fell, and sometimes when the weather felt like offering a brief respite, the sun came out just long enough to melt the snow so it would freeze overnight.

“What a pleasant winter we’re having,” Primula said as she helped Bilbo with his exercises.

“There’s been a snowstorm every day this week!” Bilbo protested.

“Yes, looks like the whole town’s been dipped in icing. So lovely. Give me another leg lift, please.”

After a great deal of groaning, Bilbo gave her another leg lift. When she asked for one more please, he collapsed into his mother’s armchair. “It’s never just one more.”

Primula perch on the arm of his father’s chair as Bilbo panted. “You’re getting stronger.”

“Nonsense. I’m more in risk of dying now than I ever was. I’ll stick to the wheelchair.”

“You’ll barely need it soon, you’re so steady on your feet.”

“You say that as my legs are shaking too much to stand.”

“That’s just excitement, Mister Baggins. They’re trembling with the urge to leap through the snow.”

Bilbo groaned again, half at the thought of leaping and half at the thought of snow. Bag End was considerably colder than Erebor, lit as the great mountain was by its forges, the heat that always rushed up to pleasantly that you wondered why dwarves wore all those furs anyway. Bag End was a solid hole planted in a hillside, and yet every firm breeze coming up the slope seemed to slice right through the windows. The area around the Lonely Mountain was colder than the Shire, significantly colder, but Bilbo had scarcely noticed it unless he wanted to. He’d spent his last four winters retreating into the heart of the earth and not coming out until someone said there buds on the trees.

“I’d never have to do this in Erebor,” Bilbo said. “They’d be perfectly happy to construct an entire network of various tunnels and shoots to get me where I needed to go. I’ve ridden their mining carts before, did I tell you? They’re convenient. They’d make a very good transit system.”

“Yes, the bit with the dragon, you’ve given us a fair regaling. Thorin swept you up in a wheelbarrow and carted you away on a river of gold.”

Bilbo closed his eyes and smiled. “Yes, that’s it exactly.” Or more or less. The story always changed a bit in the telling. Someone had been on the river of molten gold, and Bilbo had been in such a state of wild panic that day that he could scarcely remember how they survived at all. Even in his nightmares, the details seemed to always be changing, a fiery flux of terror and dragon and the glint of sharp things. Smaug’s scales. Thorin’s sword.

“Swept you off your feet, did he?” teased Primula.
“Once or twice,” Bilbo said distractedly as remembrances stirred.

In the privacy of his own head, Bilbo pulled out the memories he often thought about and never mentioned, those long black days where Thorin transformed back into a stranger. He thought about the tip of Thorin’s blade pressed against Bilbo’s chest. The gleam like molten gold in Thorin’s eyes. He thought about the wall against his back. He thought about the long drop. He took out these memories now and then, weighed them anew, tossed them back and forth to find the feel of them. And Bilbo never quite managed to make himself fear Thorin. Even in those moments, Bilbo had just been afraid for him.

What a silly, stupid, lovesick conclusion that was, but it was Bilbo’s and it was the strongest conviction that he’d ever had. It was almost Thorin-like in that regard, an emotion you could have built a mountain out off.

Bilbo sighed and opened his eyes. Primula, still sitting on the chair across from him, had her hands clasped as she waited. “Only one more leg lift?” Bilbo asked.

“Of course,” Primula solemnly lied.

Bilbo groaned once more and stood.

When Primula was done abusing him—for this afternoon at least, though she had been making very threatening noises about early morning stretches which combined Bilbo’s least favorite activity with his least favorite time of the day—she released him to hobble to the library until dinner, to settle wincing into his second favorite armchair. His favorite he had shipped to Erebor years ago. He really did need to send for it to come back along with the rest of his things. The thought made Bilbo want to cry, though there was no point in that. His things had never settled properly into Erebor. He hadn’t used a fourth of what he made the dwarves bring to him. Hell, Bilbo spent more time on Thorin’s couch than he ever did in his own armchair. He may as well have left it here.

So the snows would clear and he’d bring his things home. Good, yes, exactly what must be done, time to get down to the practical matters of moving back to the Shire. Back to where he’d started. Back to where he’d run away from.

And back to where he was happy to be, in a way, and at least it wouldn’t kill him of anything more intense than boredom, and Bilbo was well inoculated against that after all his years at home. And maybe if he had his possessions again, the important ones that he’d made Thorin’s dwarves walk across the world for, that would make him feel at home again.

Bag End was a house he had used to live in missing all the things he most cared about.

At least the Shire was beautiful in winter. The Shire was always beautiful. The Shire was as claustrophobic as Erebor had even been, more small-minded, more stifling, and more stultifying, but it had never lacked in aesthetics. The Shire was, in fact, the most beautiful of the regions on Middle-earth, with very little competition for that title save for, perhaps (and Bilbo could practically hear Thorin’s teeth gnashing right now) Rivendell on a good day. Even a good day, though, would not correct the unnervingly vertical proportions of that place, every structure intended for immortal beings that were six feet tall and two inches wide.

As much as Bilbo loathed to admit it as well, feeling no shortage of loyalty and love towards the place, Erebor was not in the running for the title either. Beautiful was, of course, subjective, but some qualities are in disputably objective. Qualities like smoky, for example. Or dark.
Indeed, there was something very objective about the perpetual smoke belched up from the forges. Or the ash that caked on everything below in the Lower Hearth, which the dwarves of the Lower Hearth then trekked up to the rest of the mountain. Or the darkness. You could hardly notice the ash, Bilbo had tried to comfort himself more than once, and since Bilbo was exceedingly good at puncturing his own attempts at happiness, he then immediately pointed out to himself that, no, you couldn't see the ash since the mountain was so sunless and dim that one could hardly see anything at all, but you certainly could notice the ash, usually when you'd wandered into one of those areas of light—areas so rare that Bilbo assumed the room had been illuminated by accident and that some dwarf would promptly be along to snuff out the candles—and as your eyes adjusted to being able to see once more, you'd notice how the trousers you'd put on this morning that had been bright green were now the dingy grey, that the waistcoat you'd put on this morning that had been the most delicate cream was now dingy grey, that the skin you'd woken up with this morning that had been pale and pink was now dingy grey. Clean in Erebor meant clean to the touch, and nothing was clean in Erebor.

It would be unfair to call Erebor ugly. Erebor was striking and had Bilbo visited there for only a week or two, he would have surely found himself so overawed by the splendor and scale that the ash and dust the mountain ground into him would have simply been the most exciting souvenir. But Bilbo had lived in Erebor for five years, which is plenty long enough to learn the local's way of hating their town.

Erebor was rather like the Shire in that regard. That was the rub.

It would be better when he had Thorin. This he thought. This he knew.

It was just the waiting time now.

And then one afternoon—thought it would be wrong to say that, one afternoon, as if Bilbo stood up one day and found himself utterly restored, like it wasn’t a long process of rolling a boulder up a hill while Primula and Drogo cheered him on—Bilbo felt good. Bilbo felt fine. He got out of bed and stood on his own two feet, walked to the kitchen to pull together breakfast, opened the blinds and leaned on the windowsill to check the weather outside. All this he’d done before, but today he did it without thinking, without planning, without worry. It was the worry that was the most exhausting part of illness, the constant monitoring of the self that there is when the self might collapse at any moment.

Primula came in and said good morning, and Bilbo turned around and said, “I’m better.” And Primula smiled.

“You should still do your exercises,” she said.

Drogo came in and sang, “Good morning, Prim!” He saw Bilbo and added, “Good morning.”

Bilbo smiled at him over his tea. Primula and Drogo had gotten very used to each other while nursing Bilbo. Now that he was healthy, Bilbo felt more and more like an intruder in some private matter. An intruder or perhaps a chaperone.

“I’m not courting her, nothing like that,” Drogo had said very firmly when Bilbo asked the other
day. “She’s too young for that, to be thinking about settling down and not even thirty-three yet.”

“But when she is?” Bilbo had pressed.

Drogo had looked into the fire which surely gave off as much heat as his face did. “If she likes.”

When Bilbo had asked Primula in the roundabout sort of way you asked young women who were
not related to you but might someday be, she said, “Aye. I imagine I’ll marry him when the time
comes.” And she had blushed as well. Primula would be his kin when they married. Primula
Baggins. He thought he might leave something nice to the two of them when they started their
family. Bag End was too big for one hobbit living alone.

But what if that hobbit was not living alone, he couldn’t help but think. Bilbo could not look the
thought straight on. Disappointment would come as it always come. There was no need to make it
larger by dwelling on it.

“I thought I might go for a walk today,” Bilbo said.

“Where to?” Drogo asked.

Bilbo waved his hand airily. “About. I thought I might just head out and see where I felt like
going.”

“Alone?”

“I think I can manage it.”

Primula came over with a plate full of muffins. “Stick to roads with people on them, won’t you?”
she said. “Just in case you collapse. And take your walking stick, and something to drink.”

“I know how to walk,” Bilbo said.

“Maybe I ought to go with you,” Drogo said.

“I’ll be fine. I did walk all the way to Erebor the first time around.”

“Yes, and we read how that journey went,” said Primula. Then she and Drogo shared their
customary look when someone mentioned the quest, a look of a shared dread.

Bilbo shook his head and said, “I’m going,” and walked out the front door before they could
object.

He shouldn’t be cross with them. Primula and Drogo were still adapting to their new friends’
absence. In truth, they were half in mourning. Primula would walk through the parlor and sigh,
touch a chair and saw, “Dis used to sit here.” Or Drogo would make a meal, sit back frowning, and
say, “Dwalin would have loved that.”

On one exceptionally clear night the three of them had sat outside on the garden bench, looking up
at the stars. “Tauriel used to know the name of all those,” Drogo had said sadly.

“She still does,” Bilbo had replied. “They aren’t dead. They’re just…elsewhere.”

Primula had nodded. “In a better place.”

“No, sleeping in a ditch by the road, wishing they’d waited until spring.”
But Primula and Drogo could not be persuaded. Their friends had left, as hobbits (almost) never did. They could not talk to their friends. They could not know if they were fine. All they could do was hope that they were happy, and that they all would see each other again someday. Framed like that, Bilbo supposed it was not that very different from death after all.

*Thorin is dead by their standards,* Bilbo had thought, and then he had refused to think the thought again, except late at night and early in the morning and in the quiet moments of the day when his mind slipped against the fact that Thorin’s letter only proved that he’d been alive to write it.

*Fine, fine,* Bilbo thought as he walked, his limbs warming up to the old habit. *Thorin is dead. And I am dead to Thorin, who last saw me lying like a corpse on the ground. Death doesn’t have to be forever. Thorin is dead now, but he will come back. He said he would, and he does what he says.*

After all, on the whole Bilbo had to conclude that he was glad not to be dead—that despite all the fuss it caused, he was glad Thorin brought him home. And he was glad it was Thorin who did the bringing: who else would Bilbo consign his vulnerable body to? Thorin’s journey made life a bit more complicated for a great many people; Bilbo would have done the same for his husband. That was what marriage meant. In sickness and health, and damn the consequences.

Till death, and then some.

Bilbo started walking and never really stopped. He came home now and then to sleep, but otherwise, he was outside. It was easier to wait outside. And to walk was a pleasure these days, an act that had grown stale from repetition and gained fresh pleasure from its absence. He liked walking, and Primula liked him walking, and she packed lunches for him to carry upon his back as he wandered the rolling hills of the Shire.

He walked the roads he had once walked every day. They were exotic to him in their familiarity. Bilbo passed the street corner where at the age of twelve he had fallen and broken his right arm. The tree root that had tripped him was still there, still proudly jutting out of the dirt like a mischievous foot. Bilbo knocked it with his walking stick as he went past. The air in the Shire was so thick with his own history that Bilbo wasn’t sure how he could breathe it. He wasn’t sure either how he had ever breathed any place else.

Dis had asked him to see the Shire with eyes that had never looked upon it before. Impossible. Bilbo would never see the Shire as a stranger to it, any more than Dis could look at Erebor anew. But Bilbo kept walking, and he found he could see it through eyes that had flown so high that Middle-earth became a rolling map. He had mapped the world and sweated it, see it from on high and muddled through the filth of it. He had seen the forests and the mountains and the waters, the peoples and their bodies, the monsters and the swords. He lived intimately in a strange land beside a strange man who loved him and whose love turned the domestic into an adventure, adventure into the domestic. Bilbo had lived thoroughly and well. And then the Shire had called him back.

Somedays, he didn’t mind that last part. Somedays, he walked, and his heart forgot Erebor for just a moment.

And then he ran out of the places that he had known.
So on quiet afternoons, Bilbo started walking down roads he had never travelled that took him to fields he had never passed tended by hobbits he had never known. And though they likely knew him, by infamy if nothing else, they nodded to Bilbo as strangers do. He dozed underneath trees that never before shaded him, skipped rocks in streams that never before washed him. When the weather turned, and winter slipped sideways into what came next, and the nights grew no chillier than they’d been on his journey away from the Shire, Bilbo slept under the familiar sky in meadows he’d discovered only that day. He had never explored the Shire before. He had only lived in it. And every hill he mounted, every road he meandered, he found something he had never seen before, and he’d look upon it with his eyes that had lived to see unfamiliar stars.

Bilbo looked upon them and he thought, “I know you, old friend. Well met.”

And that was how Bilbo waited.

The last month of winter had been so mild you might have thought it spring already. But spring carries its own lightness, and Bilbo felt it the moment he woke. For one he was not covered in frost. His blanket came off with no crunch of ice, his breath remained invisible in the morning light. And for another, he heard a song he hadn’t heard in years. It was the Shire-lark, twittering at the sunrise in greeting. Where the larks went during the winter, Bilbo wasn’t ornithologist enough to know, but he understood what it meant when they returned. The winter was over. We made it through and home.

Bilbo rose from his sleeping place nestled in the roots of an oak. It would have been horrendously uncomfortable to lie in once upon a time. In fact, it still was. Bilbo could remember many a night on the quest when he’d refused to spread his mat on any ground as uneven as what he’d just slept on. But you could get nostalgic for anything, even for cricks in your neck, and Bilbo rose and stretched with a good-hearted groan of satisfaction as his spine cracked. Above him, the larks sang the song of spring.

“Oh, do shut up,” he said to them good-naturedly. “It’s too early for all that fuss.”

The larks went on singing, and defeated in the face of that much early morning good cheer, Bilbo shared the crumbs of his breakfast with them. Then he sat awhile to watch the sunrise brush away the last tints of night. It would have been quite peaceful if not for the larks who were cheerfully squabbling amongst themselves who would get the last of Primula’s walnut rolls. Their raucous joy attracted their fellow fowl, and soon enough Bilbo was sprinkling crumbs to what seemed like half the birdlife in Westfarthing. One raven in particular kept edging its way forward. It was the size of seven larks strapped together, and it had a beak like a pincer.

“Leave them alone, you naughty thing,” said Bilbo who had gotten quite good at smacking off aggressive ravens while living in Erebor by necessity. He was in fact unsure if there were such a thing as a gentle raven; the most you could hope was that their aggression would be passive, and the worst they’d do is give you the silent treatment when you needed a letter delivered. This particular raven who would have fit in very well amongst the Erebor jocks cawed dismissively in Bilbo’s direction and batted off a sparrow.

Bilbo chucked a pebble at the raven’s head. It bounced off the bird’s offended skull, and Bilbo witnessed the most affronted fluffing of feathers that he had ever seen. The raven shot Bilbo a look
with too much intelligence to be comfortable, and it looked even angry when Bilbo laughed. Bilbo couldn’t help it. The offended bird looked so much like Dis that for a moment he wondered if she were a skinchanger as well. Then Bilbo stopped laughing. And he looked at the raven closer. And he saw a white patch on the bird’s chest, almost like a thumbprint. It was a crest of Erebor.

The raven tossed its head back with such human intelligence that Bilbo could practically hear it saying coldly, “I know when I’m not wanted.” And before Bilbo could say, no, wait, you very much are, the raven beat its wings and was gone. Bilbo watched the fleck of black disappear into the morning sky. Then he packed up his things, a fair bit quicker than he normally did. Hope, he’d heard it said, was a thing with wings. Those wings beat against the inside of Bilbo’s chest.

But the air felt different today, and the larks were singing. The winter was over. The birds were coming home.

Bilbo climbed a small hill with a dirt road used almost entirely by sheep. And at the peak of the hill he saw the peak of the next, for the Shire was a sea of hills rolling gently towards the horizon; walking through it, a journey of crests and troughs. Bilbo stood on a crest and saw a figure in front of him disappear into a trough.

The sun came up from behind the clouds and its rays struck Bilbo’s back. It might have turned him to stone for how long he stood there. Then his courage gathered, he walked. Down. And then up. And when he stood where the figure had stood, he saw before him the figure disappear again into the next tiny valley, and Bilbo walked, land rising to his feet, and cresting again, he saw the figure once more, once going down into the valley. And Bilbo, no longer brave but terrified, began to run. The next hill he vaulted up on silent feet and steady legs as he had not run in years, and reached the crest as the figure reached the nadir of the dip and started his own journey up the next hill. The figure walked like clockwork, forward propulsion a machination for getting where he needed to go without even a glance to either side at the sprawling beauty of the Shire’s countryside. Bilbo had to hurry, the figure’s legs so much longer than his, always so much longer and when he was not careful so much faster as well. But the figure trudged and Bilbo flew. Bilbo flew silent as a ghost. He could not have spoken if he tried. He knew a myth where a hobbit went into the underworld to claim her love from the grips of death, and found Death Herself who said, “Leave this place you have hurried to before your time. Your love will follow you out so long as you keep your eyes to the light. Turn around too soon, and I reclaim what belongs to Me.”

They always look back too soon.

“Thorin,” Bilbo breathed.

Thorin walked on.

“Thorin?”

Thorin didn’t falter.

“Turn around, you old fool.”

And Thorin froze. And turned.

And there was Thorin at last.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh okay so I thought I only had one more chapter to go when I was working on it, but it turns out that chapter was about 30,000 words long, so I broke it into two slightly more reasonably sized chapters. They are both done, which means the fic is done. Because I just want to do a little more editing, I will post chapter 11 either tomorrow or the next day depending on when I have internet again (fun fact! I am posting this from Alaska, two months into a four month transcontinental roadtrip) but yeah! We're here! Let's do this!

Once upon a time—for that was the proper start to these sort of things—there was an exile who lived to crown himself king. But that is not really the beginning of a story. In stories, the kinds of stories that start with such phrases as “once upon a time,” you’re lucky to see the man arise a king with enough pages left over for him to actually sit down on the throne. The crowning is the end of matters. No one tells tales of proper waste management legislation.

This was why Thorin was convinced that the bards of Erebor were disappointed he hadn’t managed to get himself killed in some properly tragic way. His continued existence was hell on their dramatic arcs.

So here’s a story, a new one for them, to tell in Thorin’s absence from the mountain: once upon a time, there was a king who lived to name himself exiled. And he exiled himself for love, of course, which was nearly as good for drama as tragedy was (and the two were admittedly nigh inseparable). The love of a stranger from a strange land: there’s a reason to exile yourself. You hardly need to name the lesser causes that he might prefer the bards keep to themselves.

Weariness, Thorin thought very privately, was such a very private thing. In fleeing, he’d confessed it to too many people already, and some nights in the aerie, he lay tormented by the guilt that Bilbo’s illness had perhaps been nothing but a cover for him, a clause of plausible deniability for why he couldn’t not wear the crown a moment longer. That the true reason that he had left was nothing more dramatic than that after a century of trying to get home, five years of trying to rule it had proved too exhausting to sustain; that he had wanted something and gotten it and then found himself surprised when he discovered that having gotten it he was now expected to keep it. What if Bilbo had never gotten sick (Thorin would lie awake and ask himself, again and again and again, the way you do when the night is quiet and the eagles are abed and you’ve nothing to do but think)? What would Thorin had done then? Would he have still fled in the night?

Perhaps, he thought, perhaps, but Bilbo would have fled alongside him, running on his own two legs, and they would have run for nothing more than the pleasure of leaving, not because death was snapping at their heels, with Thorin running, running, flying to save what in this world was most worth the saving—

And terror at this point typically devoured guilt whole, and Thorin would spend the rest of the night picturing Bilbo as he had left him in his garden in the dead of night, arranged with what quick dignity Thorin could give him and with a letter too hastily written tucked in his pocket, and then in Thorin’s memory, Bilbo stayed still but grew smaller as the eagle that had delivered him
home rose up with Thorin clinging to his back. Thorin had expected Bilbo to awaken the moment he touched the soil of the Shire. Thorin had thought he would at least get to tell Bilbo goodbye in person, as Bilbo awoke from his long dreams. But Bilbo had rested unchanged upon the ground, and as Thorin took off he realized that Thranduil’s words had all been lies, or they had all been true but Thorin was too late, or that Bilbo had died on the journey and no one he’d met had had the heart to tell Thorin. And then Bilbo was gone, and the world was sky.

The land turned to winter, and winter lengthened the nights until each one stretched like a year, and Thorin spent the years sleepless in the aerie of the great eagles. He fingered Bilbo’s wedding ring like a talisman, taken from Bilbo’s too still and too cold hand. Thorin had traded Bilbo’s body for it, taking the ring and giving the bead the raven had returned to him, had spat out in Thorin’s hand along with the eagle’s second rejection. Thorin had been passing through Beorn’s lands when the raven had brought him this refusal, alone and without companion except for Bilbo’s quiet sleeping body on his back. The raven had waited. Thorin had offered him the only thing left that he could think to offer.

And the raven had returned with the King of All Birds himself, who asked Thorin why he kept bothering them.

Bring him home, Thorin begged the King, begged as he had never once begged in all his previous exile. And when begging did nothing, Thorin who was no longer a king did what he did best as a wandering craftsman: he bargained.

“You have done well,” the King of All Birds told Thorin on his final day with them. It was the first time in his entire stay that he had offered Thorin a compliment, or indeed any indication that he did more than begrudgingly tolerate Thorin’s uselessly bipedal figure skittering through his domain. But the King of All Birds was still a king, and after five years on the throne himself, Thorin was not ignorant about what it took to bribe kings. No bird had ever worn a crown before, as Thorin had pointed out several months ago. And no king had ever by another king had his crown crafted.

As far as prestige went, Thorin humbly suggested, the opportunity couldn’t be beat.

The birds had demanded Thorin craft the crown from their own materials, in their own land, and so Thorin spent his winter singlehandedly inventing metallurgy in the aerie. If he hadn’t been needing to get somewhere else—to put the problem mildly—Thorin might have relished the challenge of introducing beings without hands to millennia of artisanal skill. As it was, he was delirious with joy just to be finished with the damn thing.

Once upon a time, Thorin thought as the King of All Birds preened with his new crown in the reflection of a mirror Thorin had built for just this purpose, there was a dwarf who loved a hobbit and his life only got stranger from there.

“You have done very well,” the King of All Birds said in the tones of a monarch who had just realized why those other mad tyrants locked their best craftsmen away to ensure the noncompeting clause in their contract.

“I have done as I said I would,” Thorin said. “Will you do as you said you would?”

“Return you to the land of the halflings?” The King cocked his head, his gaze still fixed upon the mirror as though he could not believe that the creature he beheld was himself. “But why to such a place? Would the king of Erebor not rather return to Erebor?”

“No.” Thorin hesitated, and then said the sentence he had been worrying over in his mouth and in his sleepless bed all his months at the aerie. “I would rather go home.”
The King of All Birds shifted his gaze in the mirror from his own face to Thorin’s. “We carried you dying towards Erebor twice,” he said with as much of an arched eyebrow as an eagle could manage. “If you didn’t want to go there, you could have said so and saved us considerable effort.”

Thorin was not convinced that picking up his ragdoll body from first the Misty Mountains and then Ravenhill had taken any particular effort at all, but he decided to keep that thought to himself. “At the time, I wanted Erebor. Now my home is somewhere else.”

“Why?”

Thorin hesitated. And then he said, “Because my home is with the one I love most. And because I am tired of being king under the mountain.”

The King of All Birds clacked his beak approvingly. “Yes, yes, that makes perfect sense,” he said, which had not quite been the answer Thorin had been expecting. “Never understood why you lot wanted to live under the mountain in the first place. Horrifying place. It makes my feathers ruffle just thinking about it. Very well then, former king, ex-king, the no more king under nothing but the sky. Let us end your deal with the eagles. We delivered your hobbit on faith. Now for this crown, we shall take you home.”

Thorin rode on the back of the King himself, his hands around the King’s great throat as they soared up to meet the sky, and as the great bird turned west towards the rising moon, Thorin thought for the first time the thought that would come to beat inside him like a drum, or a heartbeat, or someone else’s heartbeat: I will never see Erebor again.

And the King took him home.

Thorin had thought Bilbo a ghost. He had hoped Bilbo a hallucination. A ghost would mean that the unthinkable had happened, and a hallucination would mean nothing more that Thorin had dreamt of Bilbo so long and with such longing that his dreams had begun to walk in the daylight hours.

“You look horrible,” his hallucination said.

And then Thorin’s arms were filled by the one he loved. And there was Bilbo. Warm and solid and alive.

How long did they embrace? Thorin couldn’t tell you, couldn’t even think to guess, for who could say when the embrace even ended? Bilbo would pull back enough to look up at Thorin’s face before he buried himself once more in Thorin’s chest, and Thorin buried himself in Bilbo’s hair, as if they were both each other’s sweet graves. Bilbo smelled as he never had in Erebor, a new musk, a new sweat. The last time Thorin had smelled Bilbo, he’d smelled death, and so Thorin breathed deep the new sweetness. The smell was new and familiar. As Thorin smelled it for the first time, he realized how sorely he had missed it.

“Oh, Thorin,” Bilbo exhaled, his words spoken against Thorin’s heart. “Thorin, my love, my husband, my Thorin.”

“Bilbo,” Thorin breathed and Bilbo pulled himself closer, and Thorin embraced him tighter. They
might have been trying to become one person in the oldest way possible. It was an instinct that Thorin could never have defeated, a new form of goldsickness that was no sickness at all. Take what you love. Pull him close. Keep him safe.

It was a little after ten in the morning on a Tuesday when Bilbo kicked Thorin out of Bag End. By this point in the day Thorin had been awake for five hours entirely out of habit, although he’d stayed in bed on principle until the more leisurely hour of seven o’clock. Thorin was trying his best to learn how to sleep in; he had once even manage to remain under the covers until the unbearably decadent time of noon, though he had been so overwrought about his indulgent indolence for the rest of the day that Bilbo had suggested that if Thorin did not enjoy sleeping in, he was under no actual obligation to do so. But Thorin was trying, and he was proud of himself this morning for getting up after the sun did. Living in Bag End was almost like slipping back into Erebor time, a chronology measured not by the rising and setting of some invisible sun somewhere on the other side of all that rock but a day attuned to needs and needs alone. Except replace needs with wants. Then you had Shire time.

“We do still have duties, chores, and strife in this land,” Bilbo had said when Thorin offered him this observation this morning along with another cup of tea. “Such as this writing that I would very much like to get done sometime this year.”

“Why?” Thorin asked honestly.

This was likely the question that got him exiled for the rest of the day. But Thorin’s point remained: Bilbo worked for no deadline save his own and he could quite freely, if he had felt so inclined, come enjoy a pot of tea with his husband. But whether it was for anyone’s benefit save his own didn’t matter; Bilbo was in the last throes of his latest work, an updated and expanded edition of the quest, edited for hobbit sensibilities (so as, Thorin suspected, to best offend them), and he simply couldn’t, to quote Bilbo directly, stop his work every five minutes because Thorin would like to come in and chat. It was hard enough trying to make debates with Dale over the wheat tariff interesting. Whatever inspiration Bilbo could trap into propelling him through that section wouldn’t stick around through another interruption.

“I don’t remember you being this grouchy when you were writing the book in the first place,” Thorin said.

“That’s because when I was writing the book in the first place, you were dealing with the massive resettlement of your people into your ancestral home. And, I might add, being a considerable grouch yourself in the process.”

Thorin frowned. Or perhaps, thought he wouldn’t be the one who said it, pouted. “I don’t remember being particularly grouchy.”

“Grouchies never do.”

Thorin laughed. And lingered. When Bilbo looked up at him from his papers curiously, Thorin tried to look as though he was merely studying the titles of the books on the shelf.

“I am here,” Bilbo said, leaning back in his chair. “I am sitting in the library, and I will be here in
an hour or two when you get back.”

So Thorin had not been as subtle as he would have liked. He sighed. “What a tactful way to tell me to piss off.”

“I learned politics in Erebor, didn’t I? Now piss off, love. I spent long enough getting fussed over while I waited for you, and my fussers had the very good excuse that I was dying at the time.”

Thorin almost said something about how he thought after all their time apart, there was nothing wrong with a little fussing, but he stopped himself. Bilbo was right, even if he didn’t know what he was reminding Thorin of. There was something too much like hoarding in Thorin’s hovering.

To Thorin, Bilbo was a drink from a bottomless cup. Thorin could have happily spent every moment of their lives together gulping Bilbo’s presence. Just being in the same room with him was enough, sitting in the silent domesticity that rose to fill the spaces where danger and fear used to go. In his sickness, Thorin would have locked Bilbo in the mountain, his finest of gems, and Thorin thanked everyday what little strength he’d held onto in those hours that he had never acted on the urge. But the sickness had only twisted what lived in Thorin’s heart, and the sickness never really went away: Thorin wanted Bilbo every moment of every day until they died, ideally within the same hour and based entirely on Bilbo’s natural lifespan lived to its fullest.

“My dear,” Bilbo had said calmly when Thorin explained all this to him, the both of them lounging after dinner by the fire on Thorin’s third day in the Shire, “this is why you need a hobby.”

“I have a hobby.”

“I am not a hobby.”

“That wasn’t what I was going to say.”

“Then what were you going to say?”

“That I have several hobbies.”

Bilbo had looked at him expectantly.

“Like whittling,” Thorin had said.

Bilbo had snorted. “Whittling isn’t a hobby. It’s a compulsion for you and an endless source of sawdust for me.”

“I thought you liked my whittling.”

“I love your whittling, I haven’t needed to worry about losing a pipe in years. But whittling alone isn’t going to engage you.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Dear, you’re whittling as we speak.”

Thorin had looked down at the small bear figure he was perfecting. The carpet below him was tawny with dust. Messes were so much more visible above ground. In Erebor, if you dropped something on the floor, you could just kick it into the shadows, assured that no one would ever see it again.

“Don’t grind the sawdust into the carpet,” Bilbo had said.
“I’m not.”

“I’m watching you do it.”

“A trick of the light.”

“You’re cleaning that carpet tomorrow.”

“I’ve seen you do the same with your pipe ashes.”

“I would never,” Bilbo had replied primly, as he proceeded to use his big toe to rub a few ashes into the carpet. “The point is, if you can hold a conversation while you do it, whatever you’re doing is not engrossing enough. And I am not interesting enough to be the sole focus of your attention. And while romantics might say that love alone would make our every moment together pleasant, I don’t think I could love you one drop more without bursting and yet somehow there are whole moments in the day where I feel content without you by my side.” Bilbo leaned back on the couch, brought his feet up, folded his hands over his stomach. “I need time apart from you. You know that.”

“I know,” Thorin had said, and he did know. It was just—“It was easier to be apart from you when I was king.”

Bilbo had chuckled, a sound warmer than the fire. “True enough. It was being together that had been the tricky part then. No trick to it now.”

No trick at all.

Thorin shook the memory from his head. He was not king now, and though that thought made him giddy with relief when he allowed himself to linger on it (presuming he could ignore any of the other thoughts that lurked around the edges) he had nothing yet to fill that gap in his life. Nothing except Bilbo, and his husband had made it clear that they’d technically had separate quarters in Erebor for a reason.

“Really, it ought to be me fretting, if either of us must,” said Bilbo. “You are the one who left me. I never went anywhere.”

“I am sorry,” Thorin said, again and always.

“I wasn’t saying it to scold you,” Bilbo said.

“I assume you’re always scolding me.”

“When I’m scolding you, you’ll know.”

“That’s why I assume you’re always scolding me.”

“This is why I kick you out while I write.”

“Because I’m charmingly distracting?” Thorin held up his hands as Bilbo scoffed. “No, no need to dispute it. I see my danger to you now. You just can’t think straight around me, I understand. I’m leaving. What do you want for lunch?”

Bilbo rested his chin in his hand and glanced at his papers. “A finished manuscript.”

“Barring that?”
“Perhaps some fish.”

“Some fish it is,” Thorin said, and, tempting Bilbo’s wrath, snuck a kiss against his husband’s forehead. Bilbo swatted Thorin away by caressing his cheek. “I’ll pick it up a fresh filet on my way back from the tailors.”

Bilbo nodded distractedly and then, as the words Thorin had said actually reached his brain, he said, “The market? By yourself?”

“I can handle the market,” Thorin said. Bilbo opened his mouth. “I was a traveling smith, Bilbo. I have survived many, many small town markets.”

Bilbo shut his mouth. After a moment, he sighed. “I suppose you’re right,” Bilbo said as though he didn’t suppose that at all. “Just—be on your best behavior. They’ll remember everything you say and do, and don’t say and do, for the rest of your life until you die and then some.”

“But I shouldn’t worry.”

“No, not at all.” Bilbo squinted at Thorin dubiously. “Do you need directions?”

“I remember from our tour of the town.”

Bilbo pulled out a scrap of paper and started to write. “I’m going to give you directions.”

“I don’t need directions.”

“Here are some directions.”

Thorin took the directions.

A few minutes later after Thorin finally located his boots in the kitchen (he was half-convinced Bilbo was hiding them), Thorin stepped outside, breathed in the summer breeze, and started his walk south. After another minute’s thought, and the compelling argument of the sun in the cloudless sky, Thorin ducked back to the house and grabbed Bilbo’s father’s old straw hat which, being constructed to accommodate the girth of an aging hobbit gentleman in his later years of leisure, could have sheltered a small village under its enormous brim.

The hat, in addition to making Thorin feel as though he were wearing a serving tray, was an incongruous addition to Thorin’s wardrobe. He still wore the clothes he had arrived in two weeks ago, an outfit that—in addition to being severely worse for the wear and carrying the unshakeable smell of bird—was horribly out of fashion for his new location. But nothing else would fit. There were very few hobbits Thorin’s size, at least vertically, and none of them offered to share. The problem would end today at least: Dis in his absence had gone to the effort of commissioning him a wardrobe before Thorin arrived. The tailor had put off making them, being the old-fashioned sort who insisted on actually measuring his clients, but when Thorin and Bilbo had gone in last week to get the details sorted out, the hobbit whipped a tape measure around Thorin twice and told him to come back next Tuesday.

That had been Thorin’s fourth day in the Shire, the day after Bilbo had told him that they’d need time apart and then proceeded to escort him everywhere he went. Bilbo and Thorin had gone to market in the morning, and had spent the hour they were there being gawped at on all sides. It was as though Thorin waded through a shallow sea of eyes. It parted as he approached, and filled in so thoroughly in his wake that Thorin couldn’t help but feel surrounded. A cloud of hush had enveloped them as they went. The sounds of the market—chatter, barter, laughter, clatter—all seemed to be happening several yards from wherever Thorin and Bilbo were. By the time Thorin
and Bilbo had arrived there, the sounds had disappeared. Noise had walked ahead of them; whispers had followed.

When Bilbo had reached over to hold Thorin’s hand, a susurrus rippled through the crowd like a strong wind through high grass. Bilbo had laughed, and said to Thorin, “There. That’ll forgive me everything to them. They’ll chew on us for the rest of the century.”

“Nonsense,” Thorin had replied. “We’ll be so boring that they’ll grow sick of us in a week.”

If he had privately felt nauseated by the attention, Thorin kept that thought to himself. That wasn’t for Bilbo to worry about. *Maybe I should stay in today*, Thorin thought, even as he knew he couldn’t. Bilbo was right. Thorin needed to find his place in the Shire that wasn’t just his husband.

Thorin had made his choice, and he had burned the bridge behind him. Now is was time to see exactly what he had chosen.

The stalls of the market loomed at the end of the road. Thorin tugged his hat on tighter, took a breath, and walked. He waited for the eyes, and the eyes found him. He waited for the silence, and the silence fell. But then the eyes, having looked Thorin up and down, turned back to where they had been looking before. The silence, having contemplated his arrival, rose again to let the noise settle back in.

“I’m not paying that, Herb, and you know why,” said the hobbit nearest Thorin to another hobbit, presumably Herb, who then threw up his hands and began explaining exactly why the first hobbit should pay that.

Across the street, in a stall overflowing with yarn in more varieties than Thorin knew existed, two women were bundling up what looked like a thread of the sky into a skein, laughing as they did so. Three young children, perfectly genderless in the way that children are when they are small, happy, and half covered in dirt, ran around the women’s legs, laughing and screaming. A hobbit in an apron was trying to push his cart past them, and a child almost succeeded in snatching a loaf of bread as he went, but then one of the women with the yarn who hadn’t seemed to be looking at the child at all grabbed them by the ear. “Percival Barrows, don’t think I won’t tell your mother!” she said before the child squirmed free.

The baker succeeded in fording the market entrance only to promptly hit a roadblock of several goats being led past by another hobbit with a shepherd’s stick. “Aw move it, Hemly, we’ve got places to be,” the baker shouted over the general din.

“I am moving it, Bert, not my fault you got here late this morning, is it?” the shepherd shouted back. A few goats bleated in what seemed like agreement. The baker came around to the front of the cart, and the shepherd shifted his stick, and Thorin prepared himself to see a fight, but then the two man clasped hands like they hadn’t seen each other in some time and settled into chatting, right there in the middle of the street. Herb, of the argument about why he wasn’t going to get paid today, joined them and bought a seedcake.

All this in the first minute, all this in the first ten feet, and not a bit of the clamor aimed at Thorin.

Thorin glanced down at his hands without thinking about it. Maybe the old straw hat worked like Bilbo’s magic ring. You put it on, and suddenly you’re invisible.

“You’re the dwarf we were waiting on then,” said a voice by his elbow.

Thorin turned around and then, with an action he realized would have to become natural for him,
looked down. A ruddy, sturdy woman with a face like a walnut studied him. She pulled a cart overflowing with flowers.

“Bit of an obvious thing to say, I suppose,” she added. “Not too many folks around here with a beard and boots, now that Dis and her fellow are gone.” She put the arms of the cart down and wiped her hands on her apron before she offered one to Thorin. “Missus Lily Twofoot. I live down on Briar Lane, south of the field.”

Thorin took her hand. He’d never held a hobbit hand that wasn’t Bilbo’s and hers was even smaller. His fingers swallowed hers, and he saw her eyes dart down in surprise. He release his grip instantly. “Thorin Oakenshield.” And remembering Bilbo’s advice, he bowed a little. “At your service.”

“At my service, ey?” Lily said, with a glint in her eye that suggested that she would have done just fine at the negotiating tables of Erebor, and that was how Thorin found himself hauling a cart through the market in the heels of a particularly diminutive hobbit with a hell of a bellow. “Move it, move it, out of the roads,” Lily shouted cheerfully, herding the crowd with a great deal more efficiency than the shepherd had managed with his goats. “Flowers, seeds, and herbs for sale, once you let me get to my stall.”

“Fine mule you picked up, Missus Twofoot!” a young man called from the crowd. Thorin’s head shot up. The crowd laughed, and Thorin did not.

“And with a hell of a kick,” Thorin added before he could help himself, something between a joke and threat. *Oh yes, well done,* he began to chastise himself, *that will make the hobbits love you,* and then to Thorin’s immense surprise, the crowd laughed once more without hesitation. And the conversation started by the young man’s shout disintegrated back into the unfocused hubbub of the crowd, a hundred and one conversations that for a moment had paid attention to a singular thing and now that attention was over. Thorin blinked. Lily tugged on his sleeve.

“Come on then,” she said. “No pausing at the finish line, Master Dwarf.”

Lily’s stall was about a block away from the entrance, which put her nearly at the heart of everything. The entire market was, in Lily’s words, “A stretch this way, a stretch that way, and not near enough space to fit everything when the farmers take up the backroads for laying out the summer harvest.” It had nothing on the markets of Erebor, sprawling beasts of light and jewels that stretched for miles into the deep, streets where you could walk a hundred yards and find every pleasure of creation labeled and priced before you. This was about the most densely packed hobbits ever got, Lily told Thorin as they unloaded the flowers together into a rickety stall that looked like once, long before the founding of Erebor, someone had painted it green. The markets were only like this during the first weeks of summer. Something about the sun made people eager to get out just when there was the least space for it. Give it a few weeks, Lily assured Thorin. Soon he’d be able to walk through for shopping without having to elbow anyone out of the way.

“Though I suppose it’s nothing on your big city,” Lily added. She held out her hands and Thorin passed her the next tray of seeds to be unpacked. “You’re listening to me prattle on about the crowds and you’re thinking this is nothing.”

“In truth,” Thorin said, looking around at Hobbiton’s merchant economy sprawled around him on all sides, “I was thinking how overwhelming this all is.”

Lily frowned at him. “For you? Didn’t you kill a dragon?”
“No, actually,” Thorin said. “I only succeeded in bothering it.”

“That’s not what your sister told me.”

*My sister is here, my sister knows—*

The thought flared up quick as fireworks, quicker than the remembering that his sister had lived some months in the Shire. She’d lived here, and she’d left before Thorin arrived, and she wasn’t here now. There was no one in the Shire but Bilbo and strangers. Thorin reminded himself of all of this, and hoped Lily had not seen his flinch. “You spoke with my sister?”

“I told you I knew her, didn’t I? I was in her book club, wasn’t I?” Lily replied, which was the sort of statement for which Thorin probably should have demanded an immediate follow up. “She told us all about you and your adventures.”

A thousand childhood memories played rapidly through Thorin’s mind. “I don’t want to think what my sister was telling you.”

Lily laughed. “Well, in any case, if all you’d done was marry Bilbo Baggins, that would be dragon slaying enough.” She shook her head. “He’s lucky to have you. I knew his mother, you know, and the things I could tell you about Belladonna Took—ah, she didn’t do well by her son. She made him a bit too much like her, which might have been alright if he wasn’t a bit too much like Bungo as well. If you don’t mind me saying.”

“I’m not sure what exactly you are saying.”

Lily shook her head again. “Tooks are just difficult ones to love.” She winked at him. “Which I’m betting you’re glad you didn’t know before you married one.”

Thorin was trying to puzzle out exactly what she meant when a customer came up, an older woman with pure white hair on her head and suspiciously brown hair on her feet. Lily greeted her with a stream of conversation that neatly pushed Thorin off to the side. Tucked next to Lily’s flower stall, he studied the street more carefully. There was the sky, obviously. That was the biggest difference between being Here and being There. Erebor’s vaulted ceilings were so high as to often be invisible, but that didn’t make them feel any more like the open air. Quite the opposite, actually. The issue with the sky was its unending visibility. It demanded upon you—now it’s bright, now it’s rainy, now it’s cloudy, look at this sunset—in a way the architecture of Erebor never did. The architecture of Erebor simply was. It had been dreamed up, planned out, and carved up. After that, it existed, barring disaster or redecoration. It was what it was. And the sky was everything that it ever could be.

What he said aloud when the customer was gone was, “The houses are very far apart here.”

“Suppose that’s all a matter of perspective, Master Dwarf,” Lily said without looking up from counting her money. “They sure seem close enough when the neighbors are fighting next door.”

Thorin stayed with her a few minutes longer, but the stall was set up and she now seemed neither in need nor want of him. She chatted with the people who came by with a familiarity that locked Thorin out as securely as a door. He stood by looming and dumb nonetheless. Lily Twofoot was the first hobbit he had ever talked to without Bilbo by his side, and her presence seemed like a buoy in a vast ocean. Thorin had never been very good at swimming.

At least the hobbits weren’t staring at him. They were looking at him, certainly, but they weren’t staring at him. Thorin could handle being looked at. He’d been the only dwarf in town as a
wandering blacksmith, he’d been a prince of his people, he’d been their king. He was comfortable being an anomaly. But there was the look of a people studying something new and the look of a people casting about for stones. The hobbits of the Shire had worn a look that was uncomfortably between the two when Thorin and Bilbo had first come to market. Perhaps it had been nothing but surprise, though. They certainly seemed less ill-disposed now.

Thorin took a deep breath that he hoped no one noticed. “Lily,” he began.

“Missus Twofoot, if you please,” Missus Twofoot replied.

“My apologies.”

Missus Twofoot waved him off. “You didn’t know. In fact, call me Lily if it suits you. Is that what dwarves do? Dis did warn me about your manners.”

“She warned you about my manners?” he asked, and Thorin didn’t think at all about what it said that his sister’s name fit so well in the mouth of this stranger while he couldn’t bear to say it aloud.

“She said you wouldn’t have any, and not to blame you because you were raised in the wilderness like a beast, and you did the best you could. She did say that if we told you what was right, you’d do it.” Missus Twofoot paused for a moment to greet a passerby. Thorin took the moment to contemplate the level of slander his sister was capable of spending; for a moment, amusement nearly untwisted his shame. “You know, why don’t you call me Lily? Your sister did by the time she left.”

“She earned that honor, did she,” Thorin said dryly.

“Ay, she did,” Lily Twofoot said, with as much quick sharpness as the woman who had snagged the child’s ear. “A fine lady. And a good sister, though how could she not be after everything you did for her children.”

Guilt rose like bile in Thorin’s throat. Lily must have seen it, for she quickly added, “Making them kings and all.” She patted Thorin on the arm just above his elbow. Her height being what it was, she had to reach up a little to do so. “I don’t pretend to know much about kings except what you hear, but you do hear the worst things about all of them. Dis told us that you stepped down because of Bilbo, so you could help him out, and that’s how your nephew got to be king. We all agreed that was very decent of you.”

“I—” Thorin didn’t know what to say to that. He didn’t want to say anything at all. He didn’t want to discuss his sister, or her children, or his impact upon them. He didn’t want to now. He didn’t want to ever. It was hard enough in Bag End, watching Bilbo write letters to Erebor in the evenings. Bilbo wrote them nearly every night, as he said he had since he’d woken up. Thorin would sit at another desk as he did so, writing gibberish on parchment himself so Bilbo wouldn’t suspect. Thorin would close his nonsense up in an envelope addressed it to his nephews in Erebor or his sister in Ered Luin, and each morning Thorin would wake early and take the letters out to the mailbox.

When Thorin burned his own letters in the fire pit in the garden, he thought about burning Bilbo’s as well. Bilbo’s mentioned Thorin, they would, they had to, and when they arrived everyone would know that Thorin was here, regrettably alive and too cowardly for their love. But Thorin knew the line of lies he could walk; he’d hoarded too fiercely to ever trust himself against. Thorin put Bilbo’s letters in the mailbox every day and tried not to think about it. He was very good at that skill. In his life, he’d acquired so many things that he’d tucked away in the dark.
But Lily was waiting for an answer.

At a loss, Thorin fell back on Bilbo’s advice this morning. “Thank you for saying so, Missus—Lily. Please call me Thorin. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

Lily regarded him with unnervingly perceptive eyes. She was a poor woman to have stuttered in front of. “No, no, Thorin. You are released from service.”

Thorin bowed again, a little deeper than he would have normally just because she was so short he wasn’t sure that she’d noticed if he’d given her a shallow one. His hands, he realized, were shaking. He clenched them into fists, and shoved his fists into his pockets. “If that is the case, could I beg a favor from you?”

“Depends on the favor, my boy.”

Thorin pulled out Bilbo’s directions from his pocket and showed them to her. “Can you tell me where any of the landmarks he noted are?”

And a minute later, Thorin set off again for the tailor, this time with a map of the town freshly drawn on the paper wrapped the bouquet he had purchased.

“And Rothbert said that when it came time for clothes for the winter months, he could special order furs from the trappers he works with on occasion in Bree,” Thorin said as he laid out the plates, his voice raised so that Bilbo could hear him in the kitchen. “Having had a look at the scraps you hobbits call clothes, I wouldn’t mind that.”

“Forgive us if we don’t consistently feel the need to drape ourselves in the latest thing we killed,” Bilbo called back from the kitchen over the hiss of oil. “Rothbert, is it?”

“Am I saying it right?” Thorin asked.

“I imagine so. I’ve never called him by his first name myself.” The cooking sounds in the kitchen—Bilbo’s arcane art whereby heat and materials he crafted something that Thorin could never forge (“Yes, dear, perhaps because you keep thinking of the oven as a forge.”)—replaced themselves with the scrape of knives against plates. Bilbo came in carrying the steaming vegetables in and set the plate down next to the vase with Thorin’s tulips. “I ripped his waistcoat some years ago in a tussle, and he’s never forgiven me.”

“You fought the town tailor?”

“He wasn’t at that point the town anything. We were both about six at the time.”

Thorin pulled Bilbo’s chair out and as Bilbo sat said, “No wonder he gave me such a look when I mentioned you.”

“Dare I ask what look?”

“Well, now I understand it as the look of a man remembering a long ago battle he’d tragically lost,” Thorin said, seating himself. “At the time, I assumed you owed him money.”

Bilbo snorted and served the fish. “In his mind, I likely do. My mother went to him exclusively
after Goodbody and Sons retired, and he practically came to her funeral with a bill for her last outfit.”

Thorin was getting enough feeling for hobbits that he suspected there was a great deal of leeway couched in that “practically.” “He seemed pleasant when I spoke with him.”

“I’m glad,” said Bilbo diplomatically. He speared a pepper and took a bite. “So your journey to the market went well?”

Thorin took a forkful of his salmon to disguise the smile on his face—the Bilbo Thorin had first met in Bag End would never have stooped so low as to talk with food in his mouth, and therefore it always seemed like a personal compliment to Thorin when he did. “It went very well,” Thorin said after a moment of considered chewing. “Everyone I spoke to was polite, if distant. They’re giving me leeway for my boorish behavior. I think my sister spent her time in the Shire conducting a smear campaign on my behalf.”

“She’s a woman who always needs to keep herself busy.” Bilbo shook his head and speared another bite. “I’m glad it went well, at any rate. I was worried.”

“I know,” Thorin said. “But I’m happy I went. There was no need to worry at all.”

“I’m glad,” said Bilbo once more.

“I heard plenty of stories about you,” Thorin teased.

Bilbo smiled without his eyes.

They ate dinner, which was flavorful and hot and came in abundant amounts. Thorin asked Bilbo how his writing was going, and Bilbo replied that it had gone as well as could be expected, and Bilbo asked how the weather had been, and Thorin replied that it had been good and looked to be good for the rest of the week but who could tell with weather, and Bilbo said something about how he wasn’t sure he should trust a dwarf’s opinion about whether it would rain, and Thorin said something about how he’d lived on the surface for quite a long time, thank you, and he knew plenty about the sky, and Bilbo asked him what exactly he knew, and Thorin said, “The white bits are clouds,” and then they both laughed, and then eventually dinner was done.

And Bilbo, all through their conversation, never lost that look like he was chewing over worry along with his fish.

“You’re sure the writing went well?” Thorin asked as he poured out their tea.

Bilbo, leaning back in his seat with his hands clasped over his stomach, said, “What? Oh, yes, yes, it went very well. Well as could be expected. It’s much harder to write about the aftermath than the adventure, you know. There’s only so many ways you can make unending conversations about what belongs where interesting. It wouldn’t have killed Bard or Thranduil to try another dramatic attack on Erebor during the peace talks. It would have made everything more interesting for everyone.”

“I’ve often thought the same. But I suppose we did not reclaim Erebor so that our people could live exceptionally interesting lives.” Thorin hung the kettle back over the fire, and enjoyed the warmth of the flames near his hands. “Many people might argue that happiness begins where all the interesting bits ends.”

“Many might argue that, would they?” Bilbo asked. “And who might these many be?”
“Storytellers like you seem to be the principle people to blame. You’re the ones who make ‘happily ever after’ the ending.” Thorin looked back over his shoulder. Bilbo’s eyes were lowered into his tea, his mouth made gentle in a troubled frown. He looked his age, Thorin thought suddenly, and didn’t know why the thought came so suddenly or so unsettlingly. Bilbo glanced up and caught Thorin’s eye. Surprise flickered across Bilbo’s face; he clearly had thought himself unobserved. Bilbo always kept his most serious worries private. Bilbo’s mouth hardened. “I’ve been writing about our time together in Erebor,” Bilbo said. “I’m expanding the tale of our journey because I’m an author who knows how to take advantage of success and because it’s a story I think worthy telling. I’m—” He cut himself off and waved his hand as though he were flicking off some distasteful insect from it. “You know this.”

“I’m interested.”

“You always say that and I can’t imagine why,” Bilbo said. Then he held up his hand as Thorin opened his mouth. “No, dear. That wasn’t me fishing for compliments.” His hand went to his temples, shielded his eyes. His other one rested on the table. Thorin took it. Bilbo ran his free hand down his face, pressed his hand to his mouth, and looked at Thorin with unreadable eyes. Thorin sat still and allowed himself to be read.

“I need to ask you something,” Bilbo said.

“Then ask,” Thorin said.

“I have to admit that I don’t want to.”

“Then you don’t have to.”

Bilbo smiled wanly, and studied Thorin a moment longer. “What would you have done if I hadn’t gotten sick?”

Thorin leaned back in his chair. He tried to pretend the gesture hadn’t been a flinch. “Had a less stressful winter.” Bilbo gave Thorin a Look, the kind that gains its capitalization after the third year or so of marriage. Thorin sighed. He surprised himself when the truth slipped out. “I don’t know. I think I would have left anyway.”

“Even if you didn’t need to?”

Thorin said nothing.

Bilbo nodded, almost to himself, as his eyes cast downwards again. “I was writing about Erebor. I was writing about you. And I realized I couldn’t. Because as it turns out, I didn’t have the faintest idea what was actually going through your head.” In the silence that followed this, Bilbo brought his mug to his lips as close as he could get without drinking it. Bilbo always did that with his tea; he liked to feel the steam rising against his face. Thorin didn’t remember when he’d learned this. He couldn’t imagine ever not knowing it. “The throne is a millstone that makes dust of us all.”

Thorin looked away. “Yes.” He offered no more.

“When Dis first came, she interrogated me about whether I’d turned you against Erebor. She thought that maybe this whole illness was a scheme hatched up to help you abscond here. I think she was very distressed to learn that I was actually sick.”
“Like most schemers, my sister believes everyone around her is currently enacting some part of their one hundred part plan,” Thorin muttered.

“As opposed to just running off without thinking about it?”

Thorin reached for his mug. He drank, didn’t much like the taste, and kept drinking anyway.

“I know you were…” Bilbo paused. “Unhappy sometimes. At least. In Erebor. So why didn’t you tell me the extent of it?” His mouth twisted. “And for that matter, why didn’t I know?”

Thorin’s gut twisted like the fish had gone sour. He found himself studying his hands as he answered. “It didn’t have anything to do with you.”

“So you felt no need to mention it to me?” Bilbo pressed. “Not at all? ‘Hello husband, met with Balin today, might try to finish reading this book tonight, I hate my life, how was your day?’”

“I didn’t hate my life,” Thorin interjected, and this he said with enough certainty that they could meet each other’s eyes. “I knew you would take anything I said too dramatically.

Bilbo spluttered rewardingly. “You did not just accuse me of being the dramatic one in this marriage. Me. The dramatic one. Of the two of us.”

“I read your account of your encounter with Smaug. That was the most dramatic thing I’ve ever heard of.”

“I enhanced that for dramatic effect, for the sake of the children reading who wouldn’t be so interested in an account of a hobbit trying not to invisibly soil himself. And, and, and even if that had been exactly how I met Smaug, that would mean nothing because nothing I’ve ever done has ever rivaled anything you’ve ever done in terms of sheer—sheer—sheer sheerness.”

Thorin laughed. “My wordsmith.”

“You make me speechless.” Bilbo sipped his tea, but not before Thorin caught the smile curling on his lips. He added, “From exasperation, most likely. And you must admit that you have more dramatic flair than me.”

“I admit no such thing. In fact, several hobbits today remarked on how surprisingly quiet and restrained I am.”

“Don’t get too cocky, that’s just because Hobbiton only has Dwalin and Dis to compare you to.”

“It could have been worse,” Thorin said. “They could have had Fili and Kili.”

Bilbo and Thorin laughed at the same time and then promptly felt a little bad about it. Then Bilbo said, “Bofur, though,” and they laughed again.

Then Bilbo sighed, and got the look on his face that said, that was fun but don’t think you avoided anything. “Thorin, if you were unhappy here, would you tell me? Or would you keep it secret again?”

Thorin shook his head firmly. “I’m not unhappy here. And I won’t be.”

“That’s not what I asked. And impossible for you to know.” Bilbo glanced away. “I promise you, it’s quite possible to be unhappy in the Shire.”

Thorin leaned forward in his chair, his elbows on his legs. “Bilbo, if in Erebor I was ever
discontented, how could I speak of it? If I ever was, how could I? Not without feeling like a traitor to my people, to my family, to myself.” He spread his hands, as if he could grasp the words he was trying to say. He’d never spoken them aloud before. He’d barely thought them. “If Erebor had not made me happy—I had wanted Erebor for so long. What would have been wrong with me if I hadn’t want it after all?”

“You are still talking in hypotheticals,” Bilbo said. “You complained to me all the time, you tore your hair out over meetings, you—you could have said the larger unhappiness as well.”

“You complained often enough of headaches and colds,” Thorin said. “Why then didn’t you tell me that you were so sick until it was almost too late?”

Bilbo fell silent.

“I didn’t want to worry you,” Thorin said. “There was no reason to worry.”

After a moment, Bilbo drained his mug and rested it on the table. “I suppose if I tell you that when I comes to you, I prefer to be worried, you’ll only turn that against me.”

“There is nothing we need to worry about, either from the past or the present,” Thorin said. “But if something happens—I’ll try. I will.”

“Good,” said Bilbo, who stood and started gathering the plates. Bilbo always had a very shallow well of emotional wherewithal for discussions like this. The first time they’d confessed they loved each other, Bilbo had begged off a few minutes later, saying that he had to go lie down now.

Thorin grabbed his wrist as Bilbo reached for Thorin’s plate. Bilbo’s pulse was strong and steady under his fingers, a sensation that had yet to fail to make Thorin swoon with relief. “And you’ll tell me,” Thorin said, looking Bilbo in the eyes. “You’ll tell me if something is wrong with you.”

Bilbo looked back, his eyes unreadable again. His mouth twitched up. “Come help with the dishes.”

Bilbo slipped out of Thorin’s grasp. His fingers curled around air. “And is everything alright?” Thorin asked his husband as he picked up the plates.

“As well as can be expected,” Bilbo replied, which was really no answer at all. But before Thorin could ask anything else, Bilbo added, “I’ll wash, you dry,” and disappeared into the kitchen once more. And Thorin had been married to his burglar long enough to know the sound of a conversation being, at least for the moment, firmly over: a door shut and locked.

So Bilbo washed, and Thorin dried, and when they went the living room, Bilbo brought Thorin’s flowers with them and placed them on the windowsill. Then Bilbo sat at his desk and wrote his letters to Erebor. Thorin held his quill over his blank page until the ink dried. Then he put the quill down and let the page sit blank. When Bilbo finished writing, Thorin was stoking the fire. As Bilbo sealed his envelope, Thorin pulled out a book to read. If Bilbo thought it odd that Thorin wrote nothing, Bilbo said nothing. As Bilbo settled on the couch beside him, Thorin felt curiously weightless. Maybe this was what it felt like when you refused to carry even one more silent lie on your back.

*I will never see Erebor again*, Thorin said to himself as Bilbo rested his head on his arm. *I will not look back to try.*
On his first day back, Bilbo told Thorin that he was a few hours’ walk from Bag End. Thorin told Bilbo that he was sure that he’d told the Eagle who had brought him here the right place to drop him off. Bilbo had reached up to cup Thorin’s face. “No,” Bilbo said, his eyes wet. “You daft fellow, you’re miles off.”

On his first day back, Thorin embraced his husband. And on their first night together in Bag End since the last first night, Bilbo brought Thorin into the room Bilbo had described to him a thousand times before. Bilbo’s room looked nothing like Thorin had imagined. Bilbo’s bedroom had been off limits during the party, which meant the dwarves went in only a couple of times to grab extra pillows and blankets or to see what was in there. But Thorin hadn’t been one of them. And so Bilbo’s bedroom was as strange and foreign to him as Erebor must have seemed to Bilbo.

“It’s lovely,” Thorin said with a shyness he didn’t understand. He felt shyer now than he had only moments before, washed in a bath by his husband in front of the fireplace. But this was different. This was Bilbo’s room, the room Bilbo had dreamed in during the years of his life that Thorin had never known. This was the room Bilbo had retreated to and listened to Thorin’s song, sung for everyone at the party besides him.

I never knew the Bilbo who slept here, Thorin thought. I only knew the hobbit who ran away.

“You needn’t gawp like that,” Bilbo said. He carried a candle into the room and lit the lamps as he went until the space glowed. Nothing like gold, nothing like a forge. The room smelled like wood and cotton and the flowers on the bedside table. Bilbo placed the candle on the book beside them. Bilbo always slept with a book in reach, and often with more. One to read, one to write. More than once in the middle of the night, Thorin had woken to the sound of a quill scratching like rats in the wall. In the morning, Thorin would laugh at his poor burglar as he tried to interpret what he’d written in the midst of sleep, in the pitch dark.

The sight of a book placed at the ready to read, a sight almost as familiar as Bilbo himself, loosened something in Thorin’s chest, loosened a grip on Thorin’s throat. “Where shall I put my clothes and boots?” Thorin held his travel clothes in a bundle in his arms. Bilbo had taken him from the bath and dressed him in a sleeping gown of Dis’ creation, the embroidery on the sleeves her signature.

Bilbo hooked his fingers under his braces and slid them from his shoulders. “Just on the floor there for now. We’ll sort it out later. You haven’t many things, clearly, but we’ll find a place for them.” Thorin gripped the bundle all the tighter. Then Thorin summoned courage that he hadn’t realized had fled. He placed his clothes upon the ground just to the side of the door. The boots thudded onto the floor.

“I’ll take care of them in the morning,” Thorin said. “I don’t want my things getting in your way.”

“Our things,” Bilbo said, unbuttoning his waistcoat. “Our way. This is your house too now.” Then Bilbo took off his trousers, stepped neatly out of them, and hung them with his waistcoat over a chair by the window. He pulled back the covers and crawled in wearing only his shirt. Bilbo had gotten into the habit of his shirt as nightwear in Erebor. He claimed it made dressing easier in the morning, and indeed Bilbo could get away with wearing the same shirt for days on end. It was only the waistcoat people paid attention to. Bilbo claimed, the waistcoat and the blazer and everything else was ignored. Thorin had argued the point once, for no real reason beyond arguing the point, and Bilbo has scrunched up his nose and replied—
“Thorin,” called Bilbo softly. “Come to bed.”

Thorin went to bed. He went to the side of the bed Bilbo wasn’t lying on, the side without the end table and the candle and the flower and the book, and Thorin drew back the covers that went up to Bilbo’s chest. Thorin climbed into Bilbo’s bed.

His husband lay beside him, in the soft warm light of the room. He was so beautiful. Bilbo, his Bilbo, his love, alive, beside him, warm, smiling, alive. Thorin’s tongue felt foreign in his mouth. It was someone else’s, a fat heavy intruder, and he could not move it to form the words that ought to exist outside Thorin’s head.

Bilbo reached over. His hand cupped Thorin’s cheek. “Don’t ever leave me again.”

Thorin’s gaze softened and the room became a hazy glow. Even Bilbo lost what clarity he had had.

“Don’t cry, dear, don’t cry,” Bilbo murmured, but his hands were soft as tears against Thorin’s face.

“I want to cry,” Thorin managed. He held Bilbo’s hands and brought them to his lips. He kissed Bilbo’s wedding ring, now restored. “You look best through tears.”

Bilbo laughed, a bell of pure mirth. “Good heavens, what a horrible compliment.”

“I just mean that you always make me want to cry.

Bilbo buried the side of his face into the pillow, still laughing. “Why don’t you try that one more time?”

“Not all tears are evil ones.” Thorin reached out and pulled his laughing husband against him. “You are too beautiful for me to look at without some protection.”

Thorin could count on both hands the times he had made his husband blush (the opposite was far more often the case). But Bilbo looked away now, still laughing a little, and Thorin would have to start keeping track on his toes as well. “I’m too beautiful?” Bilbo sat up so that he loomed most pleasingly over Thorin. “Please. Half the Shire will be composing love poetry to you as we speak.”

“I don’t want their poetry,” said Thorin. “Only yours.”

“Good,” Bilbo replied with an unexpected solemnness. “Because everything I ever write has always been for you. Even before I met you.” He shifted, settled over Thorin, his weight heavy in Thorin’s lap. A good weight, a sturdy weight, the weight of health and seven meals a day, of fat and muscle and sturdy bones, of provisions for winter stored in the belly and thighs, of a body with a long future to prepare for. “I’m a secret romantic, you see,” Bilbo said. “Waiting all my life for my best story.” He leaned down and kissed Thorin’s nose. And then he kissed Thorin’s cheeks, and he kissed Thorin’s lips, and he kissed Thorin’s chin. Slowly, slowly, each kiss a blessing. Bilbo kissed his way along Thorin’s beard, and he kissed where hair met scalp. When Thorin closed his eyes, Bilbo kissed him against Thorin’s head and their foreheads pressed together.

“I love you,” Thorin breathed against Bilbo’s lips.

“Yes, obviously, dear,” Bilbo murmured back. “And I love you. Mahal, I love you.”

Thorin’s arms rose and encircled Bilbo, and if he thought it strange that all that mattered in the
world could be held in his arms, it was no less perfect for being strange. Rather like Bilbo himself in that regard.

Thorin remarked upon this to his husband, who laughed against Thorin’s neck. And there in the soft candle flicker against wood and memory, they moved once more into the familiar foreign landscapes of each other’s bodies.

On a pleasant Sunday morning, in Thorin’s fourth week in the Shire, he overslept. It was a novel occurrence for him. He wasn’t sure he’d ever overslept before, and he might have enjoyed lying in bed a while longer and examining how it felt. He didn’t, of course. Because the day Thorin learned to sleep in was the day that he was meeting Primula Brandybuck for tea. And he had managed to sleep in until the exact moment that they were supposed to be meeting.

The last time Thorin had gone from horizontal to vertical so quickly was when an orc raiding party had ambushed his camp. The sight of the clock announcing the time as exactly eleven in the morning was only slightly less terrifying.

Thorin didn’t bother looking for his boots. Trying to remember how his braces worked had taken up enough time. He flew out the front door of Bag End at six minutes past the hour with his hair flying and his shirt tails flapping.

Then he doubled back.

“Bilbo!” Thorin called, rapping on the closed library door. “I’m going into town.”

After a moment, Thorin heard a distant, “Have fun, dear,” through the door.

“Would you like to come?” Thorin asked. “I’m meeting Miss Brandybuck today. I thought you might like to come. You haven’t seen her since I arrived.”

There was such a long pause that Thorin thought Bilbo perhaps hadn’t heard him. Then Bilbo said, “No, thank you, I’m fine. And she invited you specifically. I wouldn’t want to impose.”

“But—”

“Send her my regards.”

Thorin raised his fist again. Then he sighed and pressed his palm softly against the grain of the door. “Are you sure?” Thorin asked. “You’ve cooped yourself up working for days now.”

There was no reply. It took Thorin a moment to realize that there wouldn’t be.

Thorin made it to the town square in a matter of minutes. The time he saved was proportional to the spectacle he caused. People in the Shire, Thorin had discovered, did not generally run. They ambled, they moseyed, they strolled, and, under conditions of the greatest duress, they could occasionally be put upon to bustle. Jogging was something you were supposed to grow out of, and running was a cause for alarm. Sprinting was a myth. (This was, like all universal truths that hobbits held, patently false in practice, and any hobbit who found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time, an occurrence there was no shortage of around here, could break landspeed records.
But hobbits believed it to be true that no proper hobbit would ever run, and in a conflict between how things ought to be and how they were, no self-respecting inhabitant of the Shire would base their understanding of the world upon the latter.)

Thorin was of course excused from this complex arithmetic, being obviously and hopeless foreign, and so as he ran his way to the Whitfoot Tea Room, Thorin garnered mostly amusement from the hobbits who glimpsed him blurring past. “What’s the rush, Master Dwarf!” someone called to him from the side of the road. “Call the constable, we got a dwarf loose,” someone else joked, and a third shouted as Thorin skidded to a halt in front of the Tea Room, “Them hairless feet can sure move!”

“They can but they shouldn’t,” Thorin grumbled as he limped to the door. He’d be picking pebbles out of his soles all day. He wasted a moment patting his hair down, tucked in his shirt into his trousers as best he could without knocking his braces loose, and pushed open the door at eleven fifteen in the morning.

The neighborhoods of Hobbiton within a short walk from Bag End contained approximately three dozen various shops in which you could sit and drink any variety of liquid so long as they were quaffed in high volume. Thorin, over the last two weeks since his solo excursion to the market, had been to nearly all of them. Lily had sent him an invitation to lunch the day after they met, at which point she brought her twenty-seven grandchildren into the parlor and introduced Thorin to the lot of them. So on Monday, Susan and her husband Wright took Thorin over to the Rose and Thorn, after which he went over with them to meet Wright’s brother Gibbons at The Crowning Glory, and Gibbons told Thorin that his best friend had been working on a project with Dwalin, and did Thorin want to come around and see it, which is how Thorin ended his afternoon consulting upon a tiny rocking chair being carved for Gibbon’s friend’s sister’s newborn daughter, who had just turned one and kept trying to grab Thorin’s beard.

On his way home that evening, Thorin stopped in a shop and bought a schedule book. Suddenly, he had no shortage of appointments.

Most hobbits invited him to their homes, but they invited him out as well, and Thorin would sit at the kitchen table with Bilbo in the mornings reading through his list of meetings for the day. Bilbo would lean back in his chair and pass commentary. What made a hobbit a hobbit, it seemed, was not the feet or the ears or anything so prosaic as that: a hobbit was someone who knew the Shire with encyclopedic breadth and depth. Even the things Bilbo didn’t know, he knew. “I’ve never meet Myra Boffins,” he might say contemplatively, “but her mother is only a few years older than me, and she married Rollington Grocer, my former maths tutor when I was, oh, thirty or so, and considering Myra’s age, she must be a honeymoon baby, in the sense of the reason there was a honeymoon was because this baby was on the way, which is a neat solution to the problem they had since Minnie’s mother was dead set against her daughter marrying some shabby academic, the Boffins as a rule not trusting anyone who can read a three-syllable word. I would hope that has changed with Myra’s generation, but old habits die hard. Do try to figure out their general literacy.”

(“You could figure it out yourself,” Thorin would counter, “as they’ve invited you away.”

And Bilbo would wave that off. “Make excuses for me. They’ll have heard them all before, and expecting them.”)

There was no family Bilbo did not have some relation with; there was no location in which Bilbo had not been. Almost.

The Whitfoot Tea Room that rarest of exceptions: an establishment in the Shire that Bilbo didn’t know. It had opened the year after Bilbo left and was still regarded with suspicion. In a brief
conversations with Rose Chubb during one of Thorin’s now daily walks to the market, he’d learned that the inhabitants of Hobbiton still referred to the Tea Room as “that new place.” Looking around the sun-dappled parlor, Thorin didn’t see anyone particularly troubling at all, but the patrons sipping, chatting, and reading did have a different look about them than the hobbits Thorin had seen in the shops and restaurants that had been there so long they named the street they sat on. The hobbits in Whitfoot’s wore their hair in braids, left their waistcoats unbuttoned, dangled small bronze hoops from their ears. One man by the door had hair nearly down to his elbows. A woman sat in the window seat alone, reading a book with her sleeves rolled up and her skirt spread out around her. Two young ladies tucked away in a corner together were both wearing trousers, albeit ones so voluminous that they looked like dresses at the first glance. Thorin had been in the Shire long enough to realize that he should be shocked right now.

You had to be at least a little bohemian to come to the new place in the Shire, and so here were the Shire’s little bohemians.

Primula Brandybuck, in contrast to her surroundings, looked every bit the proper hobbit lass that Thorin had learned to recognize. Her hair was neatly down, her skirt was respectably long, and her light green shirt was so crisp that it could have stood up without her. But she sat with such ease in what amounted to a den of sin—by the Shire’s standards at least, who might have welcomed a brothel on their main street so long as it had been there for a decently long time—that her appearance seemed almost sarcastic. Respectability as a costume.

She saw him and waved. “You’re late,” she said, as Thorin came over to her table. “I ordered for us.”

“I apologize profusely,” Thorin said as he sat down.

“Don’t make a habit of it. Hobbits respect punctuality very much, we’re awful sticklers about it.” She poured Thorin’s tea. “Is it different for dwarves?”

“No, we respect being on time as well. I was being inconsiderate as an individual, not as a representative of my entire race.”

Primula didn’t smile. “I ask because your sister was always late to everything. I think it was because she liked to make a dramatic entrance. I saw you running down the street, by the way. The two of you have that in common. Sugar?”

“No, thank you,” said Thorin who could ever understand why anyone would need anything in tea besides tea. Primula handed him his cup which he took with thanks and sipped it even though tea was the last thing he wanted at this moment. His heart was still pounding from his run, and now that he was sitting down and the adrenaline was subsiding he could feel his sweat prickling in the shadowed coolness of the room. One drop in particular was rolling down his spine as he sat as straight as he could to try to stop the back of his shirt from getting damp. It was on this drop, and not the mention of his sister, that he placed the source of his discomfort.

“Dwalin wasn’t late much,” Primula continued. “Except when he and Dis started getting thick as thieves together, and then he’d be late with her. But mostly he turned up when he said he would, and if he hadn’t said he would, he’d be there anyway. He was a soldier, right? I’d never met a soldier before. Just the town constables which aren’t the same thing at all. They’re a bit less about showing up when they say they will and more about showing up when they’re sure all the trouble is over.”

“Now that’s not fair, Miss Brandybuck,” said an older gentleman at the next table over. “Our boys work hard.”
“That they may, but it ain’t at constabulating,” Primula replied.

“Excuse me,” said Thorin. “This is a private conversation.”

The man looked at him, confused. “Then why are you having it in public?”

At that moment, a woman shrouded in a faint cloud of flour appeared at their table with two plates in hand. Primula had ordered them both a slice of the dessert of the day, a white cake so saturated with the raspberry syrup drizzled on it that the plate looked like blood on the snow. It was, in the culinary style of the Shire, cloyingly sweet in a way that teetered between decadent and disgusting. Thorin had a theory that the desserts of the Shire were just a way to prepare the palate for yet more tea. It was a very neat closed loop of a cuisine that Thorin was sure he’d find tolerable someday.

Primula licked her fork clean. The raspberries had stained her lips and tongue red. “Thank you for meeting me today,” she said, not sounding that grateful.

“It’s my pleasure,” Thorin said, which had been true at least. He had wanted to come when he’d received her invitation in the mail, to speak to her as he’d hardly had the chance to when he’d first arrived in the Shire. Thorin had not had eyes for anyone except Bilbo, and the two other hobbits who’d been living in Bag End, recognizing that, kindly and promptly made themselves scarce.

Thorin had to admit that his first impressions had led Thorin to believe that Primula was a bit pleasanter than he was currently experiencing.

“It was your pleasure, but you were late.”

“I apologize again,” said Thorin. “I—I overslept.”

Primula sniffed like she wasn’t sure why someone would admit to a vice like that in public. She took another bite of cake. Thorin, not knowing what else to say, took another bite as well and quietly gagged.

“How are you?” he asked after a moment of strained silence.

“Very well,” she said stiffly. “And you?”

“Very well.”

“And Mister Baggins?”

Thorin paused. “He’s well as well.”

“Well.”

“Yes.”

They both took another bite.

In truth, Thorin was not exactly sure himself about the wellness of Bilbo, but he saw no need to say anything about that to this stern woman wearing an unpleasant grimace. Marriage was keeping another person’s secrets.

“Why did you want to speak with me today?” Thorin asked.

Primula looked a little affronted by the question. “Do you need a reason? I nursed your husband back to health, and no mean task considering both the illness and the patient. I didn’t think I had to
 earn an audience with the king, or if I did, which I wouldn’t have wanted to if I had known, I would have thought I’d well earned it already.”

“I meant no offense,” said Thorin rapidly. “I only wanted to know if you had something I could help you with, or if you sought payment for your work—”

“Payment!” Primula drew herself up. “If I needed payment, you would know, sir. I wouldn’t lure you to tea so I could blindside you with a bill in public like a common street seller. I can talk of money, Master Dwarf, but I’m not so low as to do it out loud. I am a Brandybuck.”

“Then what?” asked Thorin, who felt it clear that his attempts to assure his lack of intended offense was only causing it.

Primula glared at him. It was the kind of look that set you immediately thinking when the last time you’d eaten a proper vegetable and brushed your teeth. “Has it occurred to you that I might want to get to know the dwarf I heard so much about?” She cocked her head at him. “Hmm? I dedicated a winter of my life to the care of your husband, in the close company of your sister, and living with your friends, and in that time how could I not be curious about you? When those who loved you spoke so highly of you even as they were cursing you? And when they left back to their lives, to, to, to—” Primula swept her arms out and narrowly avoided backhanding the waiter who promptly went scuttling back away. “Went who knows where in the wide world and maybe never to be seen again, it was me and Drogo who waited with Mister Baggins. And when you returned, we knew it was our time to go and we were happy for it, but sir, four weeks you’ve been in Bag End. Four weeks, sir, and not an invitation issued. Not a kind word sent our way for the work we did. And no, I don’t mean money, sir, but it would be no problem on your part to say a thank you and mean it.”

She brought her hands back together, folded in her lap. She could have slipped very easily make into her picture of quiet respectability if not for the red in her cheeks. “That’s why I wanted to speak to you today.”

Thorin sat aghast. As did the rest of the Tea Room, although Thorin suspected their aghastment to be streaked with more delight than his. “Miss Brandybuck, I had no idea,” Thorin said. Primula sniffed and looked away. “I don’t know what to say. I do thank you and I mean it, truly. You saved Bilbo’s life. You stayed with him. That I haven’t made clear to you my deepest gratitude for your work is shameful on my part.”

“That’s pretty good,” Thorin heard one woman mutter.

“Could use more groveling,” another woman replied.

“Shush,” said Thorin. To his surprise, they shushed.

Primula pursed her lips. Thorin had great difficulty remembering that even as hobbits went, she was very young; she gave more the impression of an elderly matriarch who had been disappointed by at least three successive generations. “It wasn’t work,” she said.

“I’m sorry?” Thorin asked.

“It wasn’t work, Mister Oakenshield. Why I stayed with him. Nursed him as I did.” Primula sat in her ramrod straight in her chair. “It was friendship. On my part at least.” Then she looked down, and suddenly, yes, now Thorin could see that she was young indeed. “Then you come back and we’re gone without so much as a proper goodbye. Just get our stuff and go, we’re not needed anymore. A winter together, and now we’re strangers again.” After a moment, Primula shrugged, her mouth firm. “So I just thought I might meet the dwarf who made me and Drogo so unnecessary
to our friend.”

Thorin stood, the chair scraping in the silence. Primula’s eyes followed him. They widened when he offered her his arm. “My husband is a very strange man,” Thorin said solemnly. Primula’s mouth twitched, just for a moment. “Why don’t we discuss exactly how—” Thorin glanced around the room, leaning forward to listen—“in private?”

Thorin loved his husband, and Thorin knew his husband, which is why he could say with certainty that Bilbo had a knack for avoiding people who wanted to see him that was perhaps his strongest qualification for the position of burglar. For the first year in Erebor, Thorin remembered the running joke of the company was how they’d gotten to where they’d needed to go, but they’d somehow lost the burglar again. He was always where everyone else wasn’t, especially when strangers started to pour into the city. Bilbo helped where he could, often alongside Oin at the bedside or Ori in the library, but just as often you’d turn around to ask him something, and he’d be gone. It had been truly infuriating at first that Bilbo would wander off without telling anyone where in a city where half the artifices were crumbling and the other half had crumbled. And if you asked him where he had been, Bilbo would just smile and say he’d been off for a walk. Thorin picked a few fights about it that Thorin promptly lost. Bilbo was like a cat: half the time lolling about in whatever soft warm spot he could find, the other half of the time skulking through the night with his claws unsheathed, and there was no point trying to stop him from doing either as he pleased if you wanted to keep his affection.

Bofur, in particular, had complained of Bilbo’s disappearing acts. He’d been the closest of Bilbo’s friends among the company, the closest even as they settled into Erebor, but Thorin had ended many a meeting with the Toymakers Guild with Bofur admonishing him to stop keeping Bilbo all to himself. “We’d like to see him too, you know,” Bofur would say, and Thorin would protest something to the effect that if Bofur thought that Thorin had any control over the hobbit’s comings and goings, then Bofur very kindly overestimated his king. Then the next time Thorin would see Bilbo—which, with their schedules, could be the next hour or the next day—he would convey Bofur’s message, and Bilbo would wince and confess to dodging social calls with his good friend, and within the week he’d stop by Bofur’s quarters for dinner, and everything would be fine until six months later when Bofur would corner Thorin again.

Just about everyone who knew Bilbo had to learn to tolerate his absences. The company was always the most forgiving of it, perhaps because in the course of the quest they’d all heard Bilbo complain so often and bitterly of what he’d give to have this mad group of dwarves on the other side of a barricaded door that you could hardly be surprised when he locked people out. And on the other side, the people who never liked Bilbo, the dwarves who had raised not a hand to reclaim Erebor but thought they deserved some say in who lived in it, thought Bilbo’s demurral of invitations, his early exits of parties, and his general indifference towards society life as proof that he was nothing more than a hobbit who thought too highly of himself.

It wasn’t that Bilbo was a hermit. He’d made friends with new dwarves, he joined committees, he’d organized events, he eventually stopped using his magic ring when he went through the city so he wouldn’t have to risk small talk (or, on reflection, Bilbo had at least told Thorin he’d stopped doing that, but to be fair Thorin did generally believe him). But Thorin never got the sense that company came naturally to Bilbo; that when Bilbo was listing the pleasures of his life, friends and relations would come in as decidedly below books, his favorite armchair, and a pipe. Bilbo often walked away from conversations with a look on his face that said, that was very enjoyable, but on
the other hand, I could have been reading. Bilbo had once confessed to Thorin that the reason he enjoyed parties so much was that you could see everyone you liked in one go and get it over with.

It was a practical mindset, from a certain perspective.

From another perspective, it was a cold one.

“I don’t understand,” Primula said and threw another rock. This one skipped the pond four times before it sunk. It was her personal best. She gave him a smile with no shyness about its proudness. Thorin gave her a thumps up. “I mean, I do understand. Sort of. I’d heard all sorts of things about Mister Baggins before he left, but I never much paid attention to it. I thought him being a bit of a recluse was just part of the things people always said. How could he be, going off to the city like he did?”

Thorin tossed his rock contemplatively for a moment then let it fly. It skipped twelve times, terrorized a passing duck, and popped over straight onto the other side. Primula snorted. “The only way he lived in a city was that we tricked him into it,” Thorin said. “He certainly hadn’t been planning to move to Erebor—which was a ruin, I should remind you—when he joined up.”

“Still. He couldn’t be that standoffish. Not when you’ve got people everywhere.”

Thorin walked up the water a ways, keeping an eye out for good throwing rocks. He’d discovered this pond a week ago, on a very circuitous route home from Missus Earwort who’d invited him over for tea and to see if he could finish up the armoire that Dwalin had started for her. Dwalin had apparently started odd jobs for half the town, and Dwalin had cheerfully passed on Thorin’s name as the person who would finish all of them. Thorin couldn’t figure out if his friend had been trying to pave the way for Thorin to meet the town or inflicting some final revenge in the form of compulsory day labor for exacting old ladies.

The old ladies were all very nice. They asked when Thorin would bring his husband around. And Thorin would smile a terse smile and offer no answer at all.

When Thorin had brought Primula here, after a tense walk from Whitfoot’s, she’d told him that this used to be a popular fishing spot. But then a child wandered out one summer’s night. He’d made himself a raft and thought to sail. He’d drowned instead, and after that all the fish got blight and turned belly-up. No one fished here anymore.

When Thorin had asked her who the child was, Primula had replied that it was a Longtoes child. He’d drowned hundreds of years ago. But the Shire remembered.

“A city isn’t the same as a town,” Thorin said, after some thought—and indeed, he had been thinking about this since he’d arrived in the Shire, which he was now realizing was not a region inhabited by hobbits and characterized by pastoral beauties. Or rather, that was what the Shire was as drawn on a map and described by diplomats. But Thorin, it turned out, was not actually living in the Shire. You couldn’t live in the Shire, not the same way that you could live in Erebor where you joined the thousands around you in a teeming mass that, yes, divided itself into districts but still belonged to the city. There was no teeming mass that equaled the Shire. Instead, Thorin was living in Bag End and the neighborhoods of Hobbiton that intercepted it.

Primula was looking at him as if she was waiting for more, so Thorin said, “Do you know your neighbors?”

“Of course.”
“Not just the ones next door. I mean the ones across the street and down the street and around the way.”

“Of course,” Primula repeated, as if Thorin was being thick.

“Right,” said Thorin. “And you know their relatives?”

“Aye, as they know mine.”

“And you know their problems? Their personal lives? Their jobs, their hobbies, their favorite meals?”

“Ah.” Primula chewed her lip. “So you don’t be knowing of things like that in city?”

“You live with people,” Thorin said. “You live with quite a lot of people. But they don’t collectively make the same demands on you as the individuals of the small town do. Living here—it’s a lot like being a noble back home. You’re related to everyone, you all remember slights from twelve generations back, the property squabbles are never-ending, and half your cousins have tried to kill each other.”

“Or tried to sleep with each other, depending on which part of the Shire you’re talking about.” Primula smiled wryly. “Not our part, of course.” She tossed her rock at the water. “So in a city, you don’t matter. No one knows you so you can disappear. Is that what Bilbo liked?”

That wasn’t quite it, but Thorin wasn’t sure how to say such a thing to someone who had never in her life met a stranger. Primula had met people she hadn’t known, but someone she knew had known them and thus the family tree which comprised the entirety of her life had reached out its tendril to ensnare them. Even Thorin had never been a stranger to her. He was Bilbo’s husband, connected solidly to her world by a new black line drawn connecting their names.

“It turns out there’s no need to go invisible through the city,” Bilbo had exclaimed to Thorin once, overjoyed by his discover. “No one here makes small talk!”

The city was a world of strangers. In a city, you could be anything. You could be a burglar, if you kept up your antics. You could be the consort to a king, if you signed the paperwork. Even Bilbo, unavoidably marked by his race, could remake himself as he pleased—an apple plucked and flung quite far from the tree where it began. No one knew him and therefore he found his place just fine. No one had known what his place ought to have been, so when Bilbo made it, there was little objection. People may not have liked him, but they didn’t dispute him. They didn’t know who he was supposed to be.

The only person in Erebor whom everyone knew who he should be was Thorin. And that hadn’t seemed like a problem until it was.

“Bilbo takes breaks from people,” Thorin said in lieu of pursuing that train of thought. He held out to Primula a perfectly flat stone. “It’s best not to take it personally.”

Primula shook her head. “You skip it, it’d just be wasted on me.” She looked out at the water, her hands tucked into her skirt’s pockets. “I suppose I don’t need to take it personally, but it’s still very rude.”

Thorin turned the stone over in his hand and gave it a throw. It hit the water at a bad angle, skipped twice, and promptly sunk. “Yes, I suppose it is,” Thorin said.

“Does Dis live in a city too?” Primula asked.
He knelt and snatched up another rock. “A smaller one than Erebor.”

“She said you’d say something like that. Has she written you yet?”

“No,” said Thorin curtly. He hoped Primula interpreted it as worry, and then promptly hated himself. He wouldn’t lie, it seemed, but actively hoping people misinterpreted him was still apparently acceptable to his cowardly heart.

She crossed her arms and stared out at the water, in the way you do when you’re staring at nothing. “She hasn’t written me either.” It would have been easier if she’d sounded either sad or matter-of-fact. Instead she fell somewhere in between, a soft acceptance sculpted by an accent of grief. “Neither have Dwalin or Tauriel, and they said they would.”

He turned over the rock in his hands. “Have you written them?”

“Of course,” she said so easily that Thorin envied her. “I said I would, and so I did. Send my letters off once a week.”

“Mail always takes a long time to get to and from mountains.”

“Maybe.” She hesitated. “Dis had a raven. It flew back and forth quick as you please. I thought you might have one as well.”

Thorin had had a raven, the one that he had sent begging to the Eagles. It had come to the Shire with him. And then on the morning after his arrival, he’d taken out to the garden of Bag End and told it to wait for him in the field where the Eagles had dropped him off. To live there a while, until Thorin came for him. Bilbo had seen the raven take off and asked, “Sending news of your arrival to Erebor?”

And Thorin had said yes.

“My raven is away,” Thorin mumbled. Shame tasted like rotten fruit and choked him. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright,” she said with a gentle sigh. “I thought I’d ask.”

After a pause, Primula skipped another rock. It jumped off the surface six times before it too sank.

Lunch was nearly done when the smell of smoke made it all the way to the library. Thorin was just batting at a small grease fire in the pan when Bilbo came running out, saying, “Be careful, Thorin!”

“I know how to put fires out,” Thorin said as Bilbo smothered the flames.

“You certainly know how to start them as well,” Bilbo said. He leaned over the counter and opened the little vent in the kitchen wall that connected to the surface. He picked up a plate off the shelves and started fanning the smoke towards it.

Thorin took advantage of his husband’s presence to wrap an arm around him. “Technically, this isn’t my fire.”

“How is it not—”
“Did the buns burn?” Primula asked, running back into the kitchen with her apron full of stores from the pantry. “I think I forgot about—” She caught sight of Bilbo. “Oh.”

Bilbo froze, the plate mid-fanning. “Oh,” he replied.

Primula, her face slipping back into that coldness she’d worn when Thorin had first seen her this morning, dipped into a curtsy. “At you service, Mister Baggins. How fare you?”


“Quite well, sir,” Primula replied stiffly.

“I invited Primula for lunch,” Thorin said into the strained kitchen air.

Bilbo glanced down at the charred remains in the pan. “I see.” He seemed to remember that he was still holding up the plate. He put it down and clasped his hands behind him. “Well, then, I shan’t interrupt you anymore. Miss Brandybuck, always a pleasure to—”

“You’re joining us,” Thorin added.

“He doesn’t have—” Primula started.

“But he would like to,” Thorin looked at Bilbo pointedly. Thorin always forgot what it felt like to be annoyed at his husband when he wasn’t actively annoyed at his husband. He was remembering now.

Bilbo gave Thorin a confused look, and then glanced at Primula whose mouth was a straight line. Bilbo sighed. “Well. I am glad to see you.” He smiled at Primula, and if it was a tired smile, it at least seemed genuine. “Why don’t you two let me finish preparing lunch?”

“That sounds wonderful,” Thorin said. “Doesn’t it, Primula?”

Primula’s eyes were like flint. “I don’t want to impose,” she said coldly as she started to unload the food from her apron onto the counter. “And it ain’t for your sake, Mister Baggins, so much as mine.” She raised her chin. “I don’t enjoy being where I’m not wanted.”

“But didn’t Thorin invite you?” Bilbo asked, with what, Thorin had to say, was an uncharacteristic stupidity.


Bilbo kept staring at her.

“Really?” Thorin asked Bilbo.

“Really what?” Bilbo replied, absolutely baffled.

Primula crossed her arms. “Bilbo Baggins, after four weeks of waiting to hear how you were doing and if you were okay and whether your husband returning was everything you hoped, after waiting for you to remember that I lived in your home and sat by your side all through the winter because I thought we were—well. I can’t believe that it is Thorin who ends up inviting me back to Bag End.”

Bilbo continued his staring. “I don’t—”

And then, and much to Thorin’s horror, Primula burst into tears.
“Oh dear,” said Bilbo, rushing forward, his hands fluttering before settling on Primula’s shoulders. “My dear Primula, I didn’t realize, that is to say, I’ve been a—oh please, please stop crying—I’ve been a bit of a fool.” Bilbo pulled Primula into a hug the same way that someone who has never danced before might attempt a waltz. Over her shoulder, patting her back like sadness was something one could dislodge like a babe’s burp, Bilbo stared imploring at Thorin. Thorin shrugged helplessly back. “Er. There, there.”

Primula pulled away, her cheeks wet underneath eyes that still looked like they could have been dwarven carved, and punched Bilbo in the arm. Bilbo squawked, indignant and undignified which was really the only way you could squawk. “I’ll say you’ve been a fool, Mister Baggins,” Primula said. “And from you, of all people.”

Bilbo rubbed his arm. “I feel bad for Lobelia now,” he muttered. “Dwalin taught you bad habits.”

Primula put her fists on her hips and glared at him. “After all Mister Oakenshield put you through, I wouldn’t have thought you’d be so callous as to leave without a note.”

Bilbo snorted. “You should know better than anyone that I haven’t left,” he said with a bitterness that surprised Thorin. “I can’t go anywhere.”

“You know, at least Dis and Dwalin and Tauriel had an excuse. They left the Shire. You’re still right here. You think it’d be harder to leave people without leaving, but I see you’re clever enough to manage it.” Primula shook her head.

Silence followed. Bilbo’s face went still, and small.

“People come into your life and then they leave,” Primula said, almost to herself. “I just think that’s sad, is all.”

“I—I—oh dear,” Bilbo said eventually. “I just thought that after all this time you and Drogo were quite sick of me.”

“Fool,” Primula said plainly. “How would we ever be sick of you?”

When Thorin was still getting used to the idea of his nephew yoking his life to an elf, what finally made him love Tauriel was seeing how clearly she loved Kili. He hadn’t know before that you could love someone simply because they loved someone else. Thorin was glad he’d learned that before this moment. Otherwise, he would have had a very hard time identifying what it was that he was feeling.

And since it was now Bilbo’s turn to be without words, Thorin stepped forward and said, “Come. We can berate my husband over lunch.” He glanced in the pan. “I think the buns are still salvageable.”

“Nonsense,” Bilbo said instantly. “Nonsense. I’ll make something new. I’ll—well, with Drogo not here, I’ll finally have the chance to cook for you. In fact,” Bilbo added, wringing his hands, “I ought to properly cook for the both of you, if Drogo can restrain himself from the kitchen while he’s in Bag End. Do you like lamb? And are you free tomorrow evening? And is he?”

Primula laughed, and looked again her age, this time in the brightest sense of youth. “Yes to all three, Mister Baggins. And if he’s not free, I’ll make sure he is.”
“For the record,” Thorin said far later that evening, after Primula was fed and stories were shared and promises were made that they’d get together again soon, “I do want to remind you that I did leave a note.”

“Primula is the one who said it, not me.” Bilbo handed Thorin another plate to dry, and yawned. “Good heavens, is it really eight? I’m exhausted. I might go to bed early.”

“Bilbo Baggins in bed at a reasonable hour?” Thorin pressed his hand against Bilbo’s forehead. “Are you sick again?”

Bilbo laughed and batted Thorin’s hand away. “Just tired. I don’t normally have guests at Bag End.”

“Five people lived with you through the winter. Including Primula.”

“Those are roommates, not guests. Very different things. Roommates clean up after themselves, and when they eat your food, you get to yell at them.” Bilbo thought for a moment. “We did have Beorn as well, I always forget about him. But he lived in the garden. He was less of a guest and more of a wild animal we kept giving food to.”

Thorin grinned. “Are you saying that I was your last guest?”

Bilbo shook his head. “You and your dozen other miscreants, yes. Although on reflection, I might put the Company in the same category of Beorn.”

“You did invite us in.”

“Nonsense. I was raided, brutally impressed into service, and then thoughtlessly abandoned.” Bilbo handed Thorin the pot he’d been scrubbing. “It was a very emotional evening.”

“That it was,” Thorin said, making sure his fingers touched Bilbo’s as he took the pot.

“Don’t smile like that, you old softie.”

“Smile like what?”

“Like you’re thinking about how we fell in love that evening. Which I’ll remind you, was not the case.”

“But I did fall in love with you that evening. It simply took time for me to realize it.”

“You utter sap,” said Bilbo. “You didn’t think you loved me. You thought I was a useless burden that Gandalf was foisting upon you.”

“I’m a very clever dwarf. I can think two things at once.”

Bilbo flicked dishwater at him. Thorin swatted his husband with the towel. **This is perfect, Thorin** thought as Bilbo laughed again. **This is why I came here.**

“So you are out of practice with receiving guests in Bag End,” said Thorin cheerfully. “We’ll have to get you in practice. I have the whole of the Shire to meet, and no better place to meet them than in our home.”

Bilbo, still smiling, shook his head. “And invite the spies of the neighborhood to snoop through our lives? No, no, we’ll restrict the invitation list to Primula and Drogo. They’ve already done all the snooping they could please.”
“I have it on good authority that we’ll have to invite people over sooner or later,” Thorin said, starting to dry again. “Rothbert says—”

“**Rothbert.**”

“Yes, your childhood nemesis informs me that we’re expected to return any invitations we receive. And I must get on it. I’ve half a dozen teas with Dwalin’s brigade of old ladies that I need to repay already.”

Bilbo waved off the idea of politeness and mutual hospitality like it was a gnat. “You hardly need to reciprocate the attentions of hobbits who wished to gawk at you.”

The pot was beyond dry at this point, but Bilbo was still tackling the gristle of the pan and so if Thorin put aside what he now held, he would have nothing to look at except his husband. So Thorin kept drying the pan. “They do not gawk,” Thorin said in a measured voice. “Your neighbors have been very polite.”

“I imagine they were,” Bilbo replied. “They are until you’re gone, and then they methodically dissect you for their edification and entertainment. They need to know where you belong, after all, even if it’s clear you will never belong.”

“I know I am an oddity. I don’t mind if they think of me as such, so long as they are friendly about it. From the way you talk about your neighbors, I expected them to be barely literate bigots constantly brandishing pitchforks. They have been nothing of the sort.”

“Don’t defend my people to me. I know them, Thorin. I am them.”

“You have defended dwarves a thousand times to outsiders.” Thorin tossed down the towel on the counter. “Should I not return the favor?”

Bilbo kept his hands in the grey water, his sleeves rolled up and his hair flopping forward into his eyes. “I don’t like guests in my home,” he said eventually.

“Primula—”

“Doesn’t live here now. So she is a guest. She is a necessary guest. But still a guest.”

“Do you not like her?”

Bilbo’s stone face softened. Or maybe it weathered, the way the oldest statues along the parapet of Erebor weathered until the sternest brows turned sad. “Of course, I like her,” Bilbo said warily. “I like Drogo as well. He’s certainly my favorite relative, and not just by process of elimination. I like them, and I’m truly a lazy hobbit when I’m allowed to get away with it. I’m lazy and I’m cold and I’m a horrible recluse. I know that.” Bilbo sighed. “Yes. I like them. The thought that Primula will become a Baggins someday, if we’re lucky enough that they do marry, is one of the finest things that could happen to our sorry family. We could use that Brandybuck grit.”

“I never thought you were lacking in grit,” Thorin said softly.

Bilbo shot him a wry look, which was an improvement from the tersely irritated one he’d been wearing before. “You thought I was lacking in grit until we were on the far side of the Misty Mountains, Thorin Oakenshield. And in any case, the Baggins family is a very floppy, mealy one when we’re undiluted.” Bilbo handed Thorin the pan he’d been worrying as they spoke; it was scrubbed pristine. “We’re very boring left to our own devices.”
“Romantic sap or not,” Thorin said, “I don’t believe you’ve ever been boring.”

“That’s the Took part you’re talking too.” Bilbo spread his water-wrinkled hands. “And since Bag End is endowed upon the Baggins line, I’m afraid the Took part doesn’t live here.”

Thorin turned around and leaned back against the counter. “I’m talking to Bilbo who is, last I checked, just the one hobbit. Not two stitched together, taking turns at decision making based on their family lineages.”

Bilbo snorted. “Maybe in Erebor. I’m afraid everyone around here is a horrific chimera of the people they come from. We take our inheritance very seriously, and we never throw out anything.”

There was a little dish by the sink where Bilbo and Thorin put their rings while they washed. Thorin reached over and picked up his. “I know something of family inheritance.”

Bilbo watched Thorin finger his grandfather’s ring, and then held out his own hand. Thorin slid Bilbo’s ring—the simple band that Thorin had crafted himself—back onto Bilbo’s finger. “I don’t dispute it.” Bilbo took his hand back and began toweling it dry. “But I think perhaps it is different for us, your legacy being the greater but the singular, and mine split so thoroughly down two modest footpaths heading in entirely separate directions.”

Thorin raised an eyebrow. “Are you saying it is easier to be a son of the line of Durin than to be both a Baggins and a Took?”

“Oh no, no, not easier,” Bilbo demurred. “I’m saying yours is a death by drowning in the massive crush of your unerring destiny while mine is to be from being stretched on the rack.”

Thorin laughed. “Well put! Maybe I should have spilled my troubles to you in Erebor. You put it into words so well.”

Bilbo’s face had a neat trick. It could look like Bilbo had just taken a step away from you without moving at all. “Yes. That’s the reason why.”

“Bilbo—”

“That is the only reason why you should have confided your troubles to me.”

Thorin didn’t want to be annoyed. But he was. He very much was, not the least of which because Thorin’s discontent in Erebor was Thorin’s problem, and therefore there was no one more qualified to make jokes about it than Thorin, so if Bilbo would like to get that cold little snippy voice now because Thorin deigned to mention that time—

Thorin took a breath to calm himself. “You are one to talk.” The breath apparently had not worked. Thorin cocked his head. “What does that mean?”

“You have hardly been forthcoming yourself,” Thorin said. Bilbo rolled his eyes and turned his back on Thorin, resting his hands on the counter. Thorin narrowed his eyes at the juts of Bilbo’s shoulder blades and took another breath. It worked about as well as the last one. “And your lies of omission are not in the past. For the weeks that I have been here, you have not been yourself.”

Bilbo stiffened. Thorin stepped forward. “Every time I ask you what’s wrong, you say that you are fine. You retreat from me into your library, you retreat from your friends into your house, and I make excuses for you when I go into town, I pled your case to Primula today, but I don’t know what’s going on.”

The kitchen was silent. Water in the sink dripped. Outside, the wind picked up and the shutters beat against the walls. Bilbo ran his hands through his hair and did not look at Thorin. “And I am myself,” he said, his soft quieter but no softer. “This is who I am. If you ever thought otherwise, that is because you did not know me in my own soil.”

“That’s not true,” Thorin said. “The same hobbit I loved in Erebor stands before me now, and I still love him now, even if I now understand half the village keeps warning me not to.” Bilbo scoffed, and pure irritation shot a bolt up from Thorin’s churning gut. “I’m returning the invitations I have received. You don’t have to join me when our guests come, but you should.

“Why?” asked Bilbo caustically as he picked up the dishtowel once more, scrubbing the last of the water from his fingers. “Because to not would be rude?”

“No,” Thorin snapped. “Because it’s hurtful. Because these people open their homes to us and then you snub them.”

“I’m sorry if they get their feelings hurt because they cluttered my mailbox with invitations. Just because they make a claim on my time and home doesn’t mean they’re entitled to it.”

“Our time! Our home! Isn’t that what you said? Or am I an unwanted guest in your home as well?” Thorin held out his hands and waited for Bilbo’s answer. Bilbo did not deign to give him one. “I’ll invite them over myself.”

Bilbo’s look was ice cold as he wrung the towel’s towel around his hands. Unfortunately, Thorin was feeling red hot.

“We both live here now,” Thorin said.

“Bully for us,” Bilbo spat. He slapped the towel down on the counter and stalked away. Thorin clenched his fists and watched him go.

When Bilbo reached the door, he paused. He almost looked back. Thorin almost apologized. The problem was, Thorin wasn’t sure exactly what he would apologize for.

“We had two bedrooms back home in Erebor,” Bilbo said without turning around. “Why don’t we try that again tonight?”

He waited for an answer. When he realized he would not get one, Bilbo shook his head once more and left. Thorin heard the pounding of his footsteps marching away. The library door opened once more. This time when it shut, the sound of its lock echoed down the silent hallway.

After a very, very long moment, Thorin unclenched his shaking hands. He turned to the sink, the last dishes still waiting for them. Not knowing what else to do, Thorin picked up the rag and finished the wash.

“Do you plan on closing your eyes at any point tonight?” Bilbo asked. The candles were burnt out.
What lit the bedroom now was star shine. Silver never seemed so warm as when it hugged Bilbo. The light was alive as Thorin’s love. Bilbo’s eyes were bowed with sleep, and moonlight hung on his brows. Thorin had never seen this view of his husband, not in all their years. They had not shared a bedroll when they had been on the quest, and in Erebor there was no moonlight to cling lovingly to any warm cheeks. The closest Thorin had seen was Bilbo in repose in hospital, when illness and the skylight turned the evening sky into Bilbo’s shroud.

“No, no. I think I’ll stare at you a while longer.”

“Oh?”

“Until I die. Which is to be years and years and years before you.”

Bilbo reached out for Thorin’s hand. “Oh sure. Shift the grief my way then.”

“I did my share.”

“You utter nonce, have you forgotten Ravenhill?” Bilbo’s lips pressed to Thorin’s palm. “I saw you die there. If anything, it was your turn to watch me.”

“You knew I was still alive within the hour,” Thorin protested, his fingers curling against Bilbo’s cheek. “I, on the other hand, had to spend the longest winter of my life waiting to know if you had died.”

“Are you trying to argue that your death and resurrection was less emotional than mine?”

“I’m simply suggesting that if you had not tarried so long in illness—”

“Tarried!”

“Some of us are simply more efficient than others.”

Bilbo snorted, a laugh with a little censure hiding at the edges. “That’s the most ridiculous tripe I’ve ever heard in my life, my dear husband.”

“Then you haven’t listened to some of the things you yourself have said, my dear burglar.”

“I am intolerably treated by the one I love.”

“I’ll take no blame,” said Thorin. “I learned to love from you.”

There was nothing in Erebor that gleamed so beautifully as Bilbo’s eyes. There was nothing in Erebor that sounded so sweet as Bilbo’s laugh. There was nothing in Erebor that held so firm as Bilbo’s hand.

There was nothing that Thorin had left behind that could compare to what lay ahead.

“Ah, well,” Bilbo said softly, “I suppose that explains that, doesn’t it.”

Thorin could not remember ever before being so sleepy. Tired, yes, and weary, and bone-aching, all things he knew. But sleepy, like this, like Thorin was falling backwards without moving, like the bed underneath him managed to cradle a body that curled dense a star, like the world in fact was just this bed, this bed and this hobbit looking at him with moonlight eyes, and the heavy, heavy infinitude of sleep folding over Thorin like lava pouring forth, and the knowledge that he would not be burned nor buried but swaddled if he would merely let sleep swaddle him, and there was no reason not to because nothing waited for him on the other side of night but pleasure, but love, but
leisure, but rest, but Bilbo—

Sleepiness like that. It was very new.

Thorin, too sleepy to possible utter any of this, simply hummed. Bilbo’s fingers ghosted over Thorin’s cheeks. He could not manage the energy to speak the words, but he could whisper them. “And now you live again.”

“My remarkably inefficient resurrection.” Bilbo chuckled lowly. His laugh was soft. His skin was soft. His bed was soft. His world was soft. Thorin had never felt sleepier. It was a bit like being buried alive, but in the nicest way. “Imagine the looks of their faces when they see me again.”

The feeling that followed was a bit like being buried alive, but in the normal way. It was a bit like falling backwards too; Thorin’s stomach lurched accordingly. “When they see you again?”

“Yes! Well. Yes. I’ve been thinking about it, Thorin.” Bilbo sat up in bed, sleep shook loose and excitement like a volt running through him. Thorin, also not nearly as sleepy as he was a moment ago, drew back his hand for fear of electrocution. “I was talking to—well, astonishingly enough it was Lobelia who made me really think of it, but I wasn’t sick for a long time, was I? Five years before I noticed anything, six years before, well, you know.”

“That is not a long time,” Thorin said carefully.

Bilbo waved that off with a laugh, one that Thorin did not find so sweet sounding as the ones that had come before. “For a dwarf, maybe, but for a hobbit that’s a good chunk. And I think, I really do think, that I could be away from the Shire even longer. Primula and I have been thinking about it, about my illness, about what it means. We’ve half the librarians in the Shire pulling anything with a reference to hobbits that wander too far from home, and once we’ve used your raven to tell Erebor that you’re here, safe and alive, I thought we could send him to Rivendell. The elves know something or they may not, but Thranduil was the one who knew about the cause of my sickness so they likely know more about the magic of the land than us. And Primula isn’t even sure that it’s magic necessarily, or as she puts it, anything’s magic if you haven’t thought about it enough. Maybe there’s a food that only grows in the Shire that has some nutrient that my body desperately needs. Or maybe there’s spores around here that I’m adapted too and don’t grow anywhere else. Or maybe it really is just magic, but that doesn’t mean we can’t work with it. I mean, look at my ring. Which—did you bring it with you?”

Thorin shook his head silently.

Bilbo sighed. “That’s a shame. That’s very much a shame, I would love to hold it again. But then again, I can just grab it myself.”

Thorin rolled over on his back. The ceiling of Bilbo’s room had some very nice crown molding. What a lovely detail. Thorin would have to study it closer in the morning. “From Erebor.”

“Yes, silly, of course from Erebor.” Bilbo rose to his knees. He look almost as if he were in prayer. Or as if he had bested Thorin in combat and knelt now for the killing blow. “You gave up everything for me,” Bilbo said quietly. “I want to give Erebor back.”

Thorin slowly, incredulously, shook his head. “Bilbo, you cannot possibly return.”

“And I am telling you that possibly I can. We can, Thorin. You needn’t—”

“It’s insanity.”
Bilbo waved that off with the breeze of a hobbit who was never had to doubt his sanity. “It might involve some risk.”

“It’s a death sentence.”

Something passed over Bilbo’s face that Thorin didn’t understand. “There are different types of—listen. I am healthier now than I was when I left the first time. I’m stronger, I’m fitter, I’ve spent the last weeks doing nothing but wandering the Shire and sleeping outside so I can assure you that I’m ready for travel. And the problems of the first journey won’t be nearly so dire. The elves of Rivendell will welcome and replenish us. The Misty Mountains lost most of their goblin forces in the war, so it will be no great difficulty for two travelers to go undetected. Beorn promised me when he was here that we would be welcome in his home, or at least he’d let us stay there without much grumbling so that’s an option. And Mirkwood! Your nephew has mapped it all. Your niece helps command it. In Dale, we will meet our old friends, and I’ll see how tall Tilda has grown.” Bilbo grabbed at Thorin’s hand, and Thorin let him grab it, let his hand be grasped and moved as Thorin shut his eyes. “We can do this, Thorin. We can go home.”

“You said this was our home.”

“Yes, I—” Bilbo faltered.

Thorin sat up as well. “You can’t live in Erebor. It will kill you.”

“We’ll work around that.”

“We can’t. What happens then?”

“Then…”

“Then we come back to the Shire. And you recover. And then we leave for Erebor again.”

“You don’t have to come with me if you don’t want to.”

“Of course, I’d come with you. Do you want me to not?”

“No,” said Bilbo with a sigh. He sounded smaller. “But Thorin—”

“So we’d live here, waiting to see when we could go back to there. And we’d live there, waiting to see when we must come back here. And the rest of the time, we live nowhere, trying to get to the next place that we’re going to leave.”

Bilbo had no answer.

“I lived my life in exile,” Thorin said. “Do you remember that?”

“Of course I remember that,” Bilbo said. “As I recall, you were in exile from Erebor. I thought you would want to return. And I know they want you back. Thorin, everyone is so worried about you.”

Guilt was a physical thing, a rock that sat in the bottom of Thorin’s stomach, and shame was the fist around his throat that kept him from vomiting it up. Rage was nothing just a fire, a burn, hardly anything compared to the other too. The part of Thorin that had pulled him back from goldsickness knew this, knew the intoxication of anger because anger hurt less.

The rest of Thorin was just angry.

“Do you think that I am so weak and selfish that I do not wish to return to Erebor?” Thorin
rumbled. “Do you think that I want to cast aside my people, my land, everything that I worked for all my life?”

Yes, said a little voice inside Thorin before the fist closed around it and snuffed it out.

“The we’ll go back!” Bilbo cried.

“We cannot! There is no going back! There is no here and there, there is no new permanent exile. Erebor is reclaimed! Fili is king! I died as I ought to have died, and they will continue fine on without me.” Thorin almost reached for Bilbo, but he didn’t, not when he was angry like this, not even when all he wanted was to hold his husband’s hand and make him understand, because once upon a time the king was a wicked one, and though Thorin would not have blamed Bilbo, Thorin could not endure seeing him flinch away. “This is not exile,” Thorin said instead. “This is retirement.”

Bilbo shivered once in the summer wind slithering through the window. “They would be overjoyed to see you back again. All they would care about is that you were okay. No one would blame you for—”

It was very difficult ending a fight in bed with dignity, but Thorin thought he mustered as much of it as he could when he flopped backwards and pulled the blankets up to his chin. Bilbo fell silent. “We live here now.” Thorin said, half into the pillow. “I gave up Erebor for you, and I am happy with the bargain. We won’t discuss this again.”

Bilbo did not lie down. “I didn’t want you to give up your home forever for me. And furthermore, I don’t believe you have to.”

“What you believe doesn’t—” Thorin cut himself off. He stared off at the empty side of his bed, no table, no flowers, no books yet waiting for him at night. “Let’s go to sleep.”

Behind him, the bed shifted. Bilbo did not get under the covers with him, but he moved so that his back leaned against the headboard. “And then we’ll discuss this further in the morning?”

Thorin squeezed his eyes shut. “No. If you love me, you won’t discuss this with me again.” He pressed his face against the pillow and willed himself to feel its impossible softness again. “We live here now.”

Bilbo was silent for so long that someone who didn’t know him might think that the conversation was over. Thorin, in stillness and without calling it waiting, waited. “And what if I did not wish to live my life trapped in the home I ran away from?” Bilbo whispered, his voice cold as starlight.

Thorin said nothing. He feigned sleep, and knew that Bilbo knew it was feigned and thought him the rankest coward for it. Bilbo was not wrong. Thorin would not be here if he was not a coward. Thorin feigned sleep until the weariness returned, as it always did, and surrendering himself to a coward’s reprieve, Thorin feigned no longer.

He woke some hours later to feel Bilbo pressing against his back. Bilbo’s arms around his waist, Bilbo’s face pressed between his shoulders. Thorin held his husband’s hands and wept for the second time tonight. Dwalin said that Thorin was wretched without a quest. Dwalin was right. So here was the quest: Thorin would be happy in the Shire. He had lost Erebor, no matter what Bilbo in his courage believed. But here, Thorin would be stronger than misery. Thorin would never need to worry about Bilbo; Bilbo would never need to worry about Thorin. They would be so happy here at last, without Thorin (rudeness, goldsickness, weakness, unhappiness, unworthiness, every –ness you could pile on and then some, flaws beyond enumeration, vice without end) once more dragging
them down.

Thorin brought his husband’s hands to his lips and kissed his vow against them. We will be happy here. I will give you the life you deserve. I will be enough to make you happy here.
Drogo’s picnic was off to a marvelous start.

That was what everyone said to Thorin and he took their word for it. He’d never been to a picnic before. The idea of looking at your food and thinking, “Gee, wouldn’t this taste better if I was getting a sunburn while I ate it,” was not a particularly dwarven one. Nor was the pitch, “Like a normal meal but instead of a table, there’s your lap, and instead of chairs, you sit on a blanket, and instead of a ceiling and walls, ants.” He’d eaten outside on the ground, but that had never been a circumstance to celebrate. Mostly it meant that he was homeless. Picnics, Primula had assured him, were better than that. Thorin was still waiting to see how.

But a picnic was what Drogo was having for his birthday, and when Drogo had invited Bilbo, Bilbo had agreed to come, and for that, Thorin would don his big straw hat, slap off every ant that came his way, and fish the flies out of his beer.

The beer was thus far the best part. It certainly wasn’t Bilbo’s presence. It couldn’t be. Despite his promise, Bilbo was still not here.

What did Thorin expect, he wondered, and strained his drink through his teeth.

It had been an interesting week, in the same way that the Battle of Five Armies had been an interesting afternoon, or Smaug had been an interesting guest. It was five days since their fight, or maybe it was more accurate to say they were five days into their fight. On the Tuesday of Primula’s visit, Thorin had slept in the main bedroom—or rather, he had lain in bed staring up at the ceiling hoping and dreading that Bilbo would join him while also dreading and hoping that Bilbo would leave him alone. Bilbo had chosen the latter course of action. For a house that would apparently accept no guest, Bag End had plenty of guest beds. Bilbo made use of one. In the morning, Thorin had woken at dawn and found his way out to the kitchen. He made a pot of coffee and watched the sunrise. At eight, Bilbo was still asleep, or at least had not yet opened his bedroom door, so Thorin got dressed and left for his appointment with Missus and Mister Turnpot without saying goodbye.

He had a pleasant breakfast with the couple. They were both pushing a century, something Thorin normally had to remind himself was quite a feat for hobbits; looking at them, two hobbits who looked like they’d started out the size of Men before someone siphoned all the liquid out of them, Thorin remembered. They’d married seventy years ago, when Mister Turnpot had been so poor that he couldn’t afford a ring to put on his bride’s fingers. They were still that poor, but Dis had assured them that Thorin would be more than happy to forge them proper wedding rings. They held hands while they talked with him, they set each other for jokes and stories Thorin sensed were threadbare with years and use. Their relationship was so entrenched in them that there was nothing performative about it. Speaking with them was not like talking to two different people. It was like talking to one unit with two distinct parts.

"What your secret?" Thorin had asked, half teasing and half desperate.

"Good eating and vigorous lovenaking," Mister Turnpot replied instantly, which for Thorin and Bilbo’s relationship was only half a useful answer.

Missus Turnpot slapped his hand. "Communication," she said firmly instead. "You can't have too little of it."
"Shut up, you old biddy," Mister Turnpot said. "You'll make us look bad in front of the boy."

"Shut up yourself, you deaf bastard, you're shouting again."

It was worth considering, Thorin mused as he left them around ten, that divorce was not much of an option in the Shire. Dwarves rarely divorced themselves, but that was because so few of them married that they only did it if they were certain; if that certainty was wrong though, they’d worked out a divorce clause for a thousand contingencies before they’d wedded. In the Shire, you could end a marriage, assuming you had money, time, a dozen reasons that the mayor thought acceptable, and the force of will to endure the scandal. As a result, hobbits preferred to separate early and often before the exchange of any vows or irreversible offspring. The hobbit marriage contract was atrociously simple: my house is your house is my house, we're in this for life. It was a vow only possible because of what Thorin had discovered was somehow an appalling lack of both romanticism and pragmatism. Bilbo could say whatever he liked about the dwarven method (and Thorin would maintain that extensive contract negotiations could in fact be very romantic, thank you), but at least dwarves thought matters through. Hobbits seemed to glance at their watch and then whatever most fertile person was around and decide it was time to get hitched for life. You picked someone you thought would run a house well; to see if your hunch was true, you married them forever. And divorce being the slog that it was, separation meant that either you lived apart, unable to marry again because you'd already made your choice, or you died, which in Thorin's opinion seemed a fast way to guarantee unhappy spouses slipping arsenic into the available abundance of tea.

Yet there was something appealing about the idea of no exit. Surely it precluded second-guessing at least.

Thorin had tried not to pursue that thought. Unfortunately, the thought was pursuing him.

Thorin and Bilbo still had not discussed their initial fight. Thorin might have been fine with this, but unfortunately not discussing a fight was not the same as no longer fighting. If Dis’ rows with her husband had been siege warfare, then Bilbo and Thorin had settled into guerilla tactics. They mentioned nothing and remembered everything. Every silence sounded like judgment; every absence seemed like a rebuke. He had never imagined regretting being with Bilbo before. And he didn't regret it now, not really, not in the ways that it counted which were questions like "Do you love him?" and "Do you want to spend the rest of your life with him?" and "Was he worth more than Erebor?" The answers to those questions were all yes, albeit yes said in very different tones of voice and with very different amounts of pause in front of them that Thorin preferred to keep to himself. So on that level, he knew he had made the right choice, which was the only choice that he could ever had made.

And on another level, when the questions were things like "Is your husband being an unreasonable ass at the moment?" and "Is he demonstrating the full range of his passive-aggression?" and "Would it kill him to just put in a little effort here, like come on, you aren't asking much, just say hi to the neighbors now and then, endure a tea party, stop locking yourself in the library writing about the place you left for him like he has more of a right to sulk than you about leaving your ancestral home, and by the way, what does it say that Bilbo seems to miss Erebor more than you do, and why are you pretending you don't miss Erebor because you do except you don't except if you think about it so long, the hands of everyone you abandoned seem to wrap around your throat, but at least Bilbo isn't asking you anymore if you've written to your sister and friends yet, but you think that's because Bilbo knows you haven't and just doesn’t care, but you can't ask him if he knows without knowing if he knows because if he didn't know then now he knows, and if he didn’t know and now he knew then he’d want to talk about it, which Thorin doesn’t want to do and doesn’t see why he should have to, and anyway you wouldn’t have to be thinking about any of this if he would just
stop be so unreasonable Mahal preserve me—"

None of that was the point. Thorin wouldn’t linger on that. No. No lingering. When the letters from the mountain finally arrived, if they would ever arrive, Thorin would have to linger. But still no letters, which was causing a great deal of consternation amongst the hobbits in his life. He was used to that. Most things that benefited Thorin hurt his friends.

He was still lingering, he noticed, and took another drink to stop himself.

Anyway. This, all this—that is, all this information about hobbit marriages because he was pointedly not thinking about anything else—Thorin had learned over the last few weeks. Hobbit marriages was one of the first things it seemed you learned from hobbits, marriages being so central to the society that their conditions made up a good majority of the conversations. Though in truth, to call it what it really was, hobbits delighted in gossiping about the states of other people’s marriages so much that Thorin rarely found himself introduced to someone without being later told by someone else about what that person’s husband had done last winter, or how his drinking was driving his wife crazy, or how they said something was wrong with him medically, not to speculate or anything so crass, but for a newlywed, she sure is shopping around. Or worst of all after a certain age, that the person he’d been speaking to had not been married at all. This statement was usually accompanied by a meaningful look, if the singleton in question was a man, and or a shudder of horror, in the case of the women.

“Your Mister Baggins was a bachelor himself quite a while, wasn’t he?” someone would periodically add, and then there would be so many meaningful looks understood by every hobbit present that Thorin was often convinced the race was telepathic and only used words to humor him.

That would at least explain Bilbo’s recent silences.

Thorin last Wednesday had been escorting Miss Pettibell (the women of Hobbiton always said that he was escorting them as though they were not the only people who knew where they were going) when they ran into an acquaintance of hers, a Miss Maria Robin, who was considerably older than the average Miss in the Shire and suffered from the demographical misalignment of being very, very pretty by dwarven standards. Miss Pettibell had introduced them, and Miss Robin had curtsied and told Thorin that she was wondering when she’d meet the famous new tenant of Bag End.

“Mind you,” she had said, “there’s been plenty of those recently.” Then Miss Robin patted her hair which was, in a word, abundant. “Have you, er. Heard anything from. Say. Any of them?”

“No,” Thorin said, more curtly than he’d intended.

Miss Robin had wilted. “Oh, of course, didn’t mean to intrude, not at all,” she said sadly.

The conversation consisted of a few more volleys of polite exchange before Miss Pettibell made their excuses. She and Dwalin walked on, her arm in looped through his and tugging him in the right direction when he got the mad idea that he could lead them. “It’s tragic, you know, it really is,” Miss Pettibell had said after a moment. “She was just wild about your Mister Dwalin while he was here, when it was clear as day that the gentleman didn’t think anything of her. But the dear had her heart set on him. She’s far past her season, she’d take anyone kind to her, and poor Mister Dwalin didn’t know that she’d take politeness as encouragement. I don’t wonder if he had to have stern words with her about his intentions.” She glanced sideways at Thorin as if he, perhaps, had wondered the same and in pursuing that wonder had any concrete information to offer.

“Hmm,” was all Thorin offered, his jaw still tight.
Miss Pettibell sighed. “You don’t want to be rude, but you do have to wonder why she thought that he might return her affections when Dwalin was so clearly sweet on your sister. I mean, I heard they were friends from your childhoods, and that they’d always liked each other, but she had to marry some lord for the sake of politics. Them finding each other like this in the Shire, it’s really a miracle if you think about it. It’s just a shame that not everyone can recognize it as such. I was talking to Mister Dwalin myself when he was waiting for you and—”

“Miss Pettibell,” Thorin had said, stiff as rigor mortis, “I have no desire to discuss my family or my friends from Erebor.”

Her hand rose to her mouth. “Oh dear,” she said. “Oh dear, of course. I can’t imagine how painful it must be, just missing them. I told Lady Dis personally, I said, ‘My dear Dis, you simply must stay a while longer, think how hurt your brother will be when he arrives and you are gone,’ but oh you dwarves and duty. I shan’t ever understand it.”

That Thorin had missed his visitors, that he did not have to ever see them eye-to-eye, was in fact the miracle that had happened in the Shire, but Miss Pettibell’s version sounded better in his ear. Thorin nodded. “Please,” he said. “I…miss them so much. I cannot bear to hear about them.”

“I understand entirely,” she replied earnestly. “What you have sacrificed to be here staggerst me. Mister Baggins must know that he is a very lucky man.”

“I’m the lucky one,” Thorin had said quietly, and Miss Pettibell had smiled the way you do upon hearing what you think a polite lie.

“You’re brooding, Mister Oakenshield,” Primula announced by way of greeting as she plopped down on the blanket beside Thorin, her skirt fanning around her. Thorin shook his head and came back to the world of the present, the world of the picnic and several dozen small children running screaming around him while the fathers drank and the mothers corralled. Primula had a daisy tucked behind her ear, a sweet tinge to her cheeks, and a mug of ale in her hand. Thorin, recognizing the easy contentment of the tipsy, smiled and raised his glass to her. She clinked her mug against it and said firmly, “No brooding at the birthday party.”

“I’m thinking.”

“Thinking alone is brooding.” She looked around. “Where’s Bilbo? You should be thinking with him.”

_We had a fight this morning, he didn’t say. Again. Except it wasn’t a fight because we don’t know how to fight, because we never used to fight except for the times we did fight, but usually those fights were things like, “You shouldn’t have come on this journey with us,” and, “You are suffering from goldsickness, please address that,” and for those kinds of fights, you could rely on some extraordinary circumstance to intervene to end it. A goblin attack usually did the trick. But there are no goblins around here ready to make things better, and maybe what living in the Shire means is that there aren’t any extraordinary circumstances. There’s just us in a house together, and we can’t stop making each other mad. So we have petty arguments and say petty things and are petty people, and I know I should be better, but so should he, and I know it’s the pettiness talking, but why should I have to be better first?_ 

“He’s just finishing up some work,” Thorin said. “He said he would come over separately when the chapter was done.”

Primula sighed. “He works too hard. It’s not right, a gentlehobbit like him. He’ll make himself sick all over again.” She squinted at him. “Has he told you about what we were working on? With his
sickness and all, and getting better?”

“He mentioned it.”

Primula, thankfully, was too deep in her next swallow of ale to catch his tone. “I think we’ve got something. Never you doubt it, Mister Thorin. Medicine is just magic that we haven’t thought about. Wait. No, the other way around. Medicine is just magic about which got a thinking.” She looked down. “My cup is empty. Is your cup empty?”

Thorin drained his cup and handed it to her silently.

“Brilliant, yes, very good. You’re much nicer than your sister, did you know that?” Primula leaned forward, her hand half raised to cup her mouth. “Don’t tell her I said that.”

“I won’t say tell her a word,” Thorin said. And seeing Primula’s face bearing the telltale signs of crumpling that Bilbo had warned him she was prone to when she remembered Dis, he said urgently, “What about those drinks then?”

“Right.” She nodded to herself. “Right.” She hoisted herself to her feet with aplomb, her skirts poofing up around her. She spun around, seemingly just to make them do it again, and ran off to the refreshments table by way of directly through the children’s football match. Thorin somewhat doubted he’d ever see that cup again.

This morning, for the record, the argument had been about gifts. Specifically, that Thorin was bringing one.

“Drogo will give us gifts for his birthday,” Bilbo had said, in that tone he had developed that instantly crawled under Thorin’s skin. “You’re not supposed to give him one.”

“I don’t see anything wrong with generosity,” Thorin had said back in the exact same tone, because he was annoyed and therefore Bilbo should be annoyed too, and yes, it was petty, but Bilbo had started it.

Bilbo had rolled his eyes. “Yes, of course, I’m the stingy unreasonable one.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“You didn’t need to say the words.”

“I think I do need to say the words to receive censure for having said them. I don’t see what’s wrong with giving Drogo a gift.”

Bilbo had thrown up his hands. “Because it’s not done, Thorin. That’s not what we do.”

“Listen to yourself,” Thorin had said. “You sound like the hobbit that fainted in Bag End.”

“I am that hobbit! You wanted to live in the Shire, Thorin. This is me living in the Shire.”

Thorin had finished wrapping his gift, a hand carved model of a Shire lark with its wings expanded as if it would fly off at any moment. Thorin privately thought it his most beautiful carving yet. It practically trembled when you looked at it, as though it really would flee if you moved too fast. Even when he’d been placing it in the box, Thorin found himself holding it as he would a real bird, his hands barely cupped around it. He’d felt a tremor of guilt as he closed the lid. It was a bird too wild for any cage.
Any other day, Thorin might have told this to Bilbo. But today, he was afraid that Bilbo might laugh at him for his pride; the worry made Thorin sick, and the sickness made Thorin angry.

“I will risk my reputation to give a man I would like to know better a token of my appreciation for helping keep you alive,” Thorin had snapped. “If you wish to stand beside me and disown my actions as I do them lest anyone suspect you of doing something that isn’t done, then I welcome you to.”

Bilbo had laughed humorlessly, his hands on his hips. “No,” he said. “No, please. Give your gift. Everyone will love it. They’ll be so charmed by you and your strange foreign ways.”

“Maybe hobbits are simply less rigid that you accuse them of being.”

Bilbo snorted. “Don’t lecture me about my neighbors when you have known them for a month. They don’t like you because you’re an outsider. They like you because you’re an outsider trying to be a hobbit. And that makes perfect sense to them because who wouldn’t want to be a hobbit? Me, I’m a hobbit trying to be an outsider. So forgive me if I see things differently.”

Thorin had put a bow on his gift. Bilbo had gone back to his library. Thorin had left for the party. Bilbo had stayed. And three hours later, Bilbo had still not arrived.

If he doesn’t come, I won’t lie for him. Bilbo is an adult. He makes his own choices.

Thorin touched the little gift box he had tucked in his pocket, and wished Primula would come back with his drink. He felt like drinking.

Which was probably a good sign that he shouldn’t be.

Which wasn’t a very dwarven thought, now was it?

Which would matter if Thorin was a proper dwarf. But Bilbo had said it himself: Thorin wasn’t no dwarf anymore. After all, what was a dwarf if not his people, his culture, his land? So Thorin wasn’t a dwarf. Bilbo saw that so plainly he thought nothing of casually fobbing that line out.

This was probably what Primula meant by brooding, was it?

Thorin stood with a groan and wondered how hobbits were possibly limber enough to sprawl on the ground as recreation. If Bilbo didn’t want to come

(but Thorin wanted Bilbo here, Thorin wanted him on the blanket beside him, Thorin wanted Bilbo leaning against his side and telling him stories about the parties this hill had seen, telling him about the people here and how they knew Bilbo before Thorin ever did, telling Thorin about all the little things that Bilbo thought Thorin would like to hear which had always been everything, all of it, every word that Bilbo could offer, Thorin wanted to sit next to his husband without worry, that was all he had wanted in this land, and he didn’t understand how that had become something he didn’t expect)

then Bilbo didn’t have to come. It didn’t mean that Thorin needed to waste his worrying about it energy on it. Nothing to be gained from brooding.

Drogo’s cake was as tall as he was, and once his family hoisted it up onto the table, it towered over
the crowd. “That’s quite a confection,” Thorin told Drogo, who smiled embarrassedly.

“I did argue for something a bit more modest. But Mum says she only gets to spoil her children so much now that we’re grown, and she’s miserable for weeks if we don’t indulge her.”

“She must love you very much.”

“She certainly loves baking, Master Dwarf, of that much I’m at least sure of.”

Thorin glanced around discreetly, but at the moment he seemed to have the man of the hour to himself. “Er, Drogo. About the gifts.”

“Oh! Don’t you worry!” Drogo quickly exclaimed. “Don’t think you came too late to get something. I’ve been working on something for you all winter!”

Thorin raised his hands and shook his head. “No, no, that’s not what I... wait, really?”

“Of course,” Drogo said, as if there was never any possibility of anything else. “But you’ll have to wait like everyone else, I’m not giving anything out until the cake is cut.” He looked around, scanning the crowd. “You think that will be enough time for Bilbo to get here? Primula said he was working.”

A lifetime of politics and five years of kinging kept Thorin’s face carefully neutral. “I’m sure he’ll come whenever he feels he can.” Bilbo’s warning had nearly put Thorin off his plan; Drogo’s blithe assurance that Bilbo would show up put Thorin back on it. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the little box. “I know you are to give the gifts and we are to receive them,” Thorin said as Drogo’s eyes widened, “but we do things differently in Erebor. I hope you won’t be offended if I offer you my gift for your birthday.”

“Oh, Master Dwarf,” Drogo said, beaming bright as the sun as he wrapped his hands around the package, “I don’t believe there’s ever been a gift what offended a hobbit just for the giving. Bless you, sir, I didn’t expect this in the slightest. Should I open it now?”

“If you like,” said Thorin, smiling himself. He couldn’t help it in the face of Drogo’s open and obvious joy; happiness of such an unabashed sort was a bit like an infectious disease.

“Drogo, darling, what’s that? You said we were holding off on the exchange until your cousin got here.” A woman came up to Drogo’s side, glancing between Drogo and the dwarf looming over him. She had brown hair and brown eyes and a worried face that looked quite a bit like Drogo’s, which in turn looked quite a bit like Bilbo’s, in her quick glance towards Thorin, he got the impression that she had ascertained everything about him from age to shoe size, and although she had no immediate judgments to pass upon them, she was cataloguing that information for later.

“Mum, this is the dwarf we’ve heard so much about!” Drogo said excitedly, resting his hand on his mother’s arm and extending his reach towards Thorin like a magician making his grand reveal. “Thorin Oakenshield, this is—”

“Missus Baggins, thank you,” Missus Baggins thank you said. “You are the new occupant of Bag End?”

“One of them, yes,” Thorin said, bowing his head slightly. “You must be related to my husband.”

“Belladonna always assured us so.” Missus Baggins’ eyes darted up and down once more. “Husband. Well. Isn’t that a surprise.”
“Mum…” Drogo warned.

She silenced her son with a look. “I was saying nothing rude, Drogo, don’t use that tone against me. I was just remarking that I did not know what was more a surprise: that our Bilbo married or that our Bilbo married—” She jerked her head towards Thorin. “Him.”

Thorin supposed himself lucky that she hadn’t referred to him as a *that*. He smiled politely, which is to say coldly. “I was surprised myself that Bilbo would have me, a hobbit of such inestimable quality. But I did wait to propose to him until I was king. Perhaps that helped.”

Missus Baggins looked like she wasn’t sure if he was joking.

“Mister Oakenshield gave me gift,” Drogo said rapidly. He thrust the little box in his mother’s line of sight. “It’s a custom back in dwarf land, isn’t that right, Thorin? When it’s your birthday, *you* get the gifts. Isn’t that strange, no offense intended, Mister Oakenshield, but we do get far more presents our way, if that’s the kind of thing you’re interested in.”

It was diplomacy by tidal wave. If nothing else, Drogo’s ability to pack words in precluded anyone else from offering a sniping. Drogo shook the box a little, raising his eyebrow and grinning at Thorin. “It’s a bottle of wine, isn’t it?” He lifted the top of the box off and rewarded Thorin with a gasp. “Oh dear,” said Drogo as he lifted the Shire lark up with delicate fingers. “Would you look at that?”

Even Missus Baggins was without words. Perhaps that meant she could not think of anything to critique.

“Blimey.” Drogo ran his finger along the bill, open wide in silent song. “And here I just made you some socks.”

That startled a laugh out of Thorin. “I didn’t think you could make those around here.”

“We can make anything we need,” Missus Baggins said primly, but a little less so than before. She cast an appraising eye over Thorin’s work and nodded to herself.

“Your sister taught me,” Drogo said. “It’s a shame she left when she did, for many reasons, of course, including that fact that you two *just* missed each other by, oh, five weeks or so, which is hardly anything in the grand scheme of it all, but in this case because she said she’d teach me how to make socks with toes. Can you imagine? She said she’d send me instructions by mail but…” Drogo sighed. “Well, maybe we’ll just learn on our own.”

Thorin smiled tightly.

Drogo looked around and leaned forward conspiratorially. “Mind you, I did try them on when I was done.”

His mother gasped. “Drogo! You don’t know where those socks have been!”

“I do know, Mum, I knitted them. And between the three of us, I have to say—” He glanced theatrically to make sure no one was listening, which was a quick way of getting other hobbits to pay attention to you. “They were very comfortable on my toes.”

Missus Baggins’ scandalized laugh brought over three other women Thorin didn’t recognize, who were introduced to him in rapid succession, and whose names he would be expected to remember forever. Drogo showed them Thorin’s carving, and they too gasped appreciatively.
“You made that?” asked one of them, and Thorin replied yes.

“And gave it to our Mister Drogo?” asked another one, and Thorin replied yes again.

“Is that a foreign thing?” asked the third, and after a moment’s thought, Thorin was forced to concede a yes to that one as well.

“I say,” said the first, having snatched the bird from Drogo’s hand to study it closer. “That’s something new, isn’t it.”

“Beautiful,” said the second one. “You ought to be proud, Master Dwarf.”

“Funny thing to be proud of,” said the third. “Seems like a waste of a perfect good bird to me.”

There was a short pause, and then Missus Baggins said, “Ginny, he didn’t dunk a lark in paint, he carved it himself.”

“Look at them feathers.” The third woman pointed. “You think he could make those out of wood?”

“Well, yes, I do think he could,” said Missus Baggins. “One would think that was rather the point of the whole endeavor.”

The third woman remained unconvinced. The bird was passed back to Drogo with sufficient praise, and then three woman left. A few moments later, Thorin heard the distinct phrase *bird murderer* floating back to him on the wind.

“That’s Genevieve Grubb for you. Bless her,” Drogo said. If there was any irony in that last statement, it was so well hidden that Thorin doubted even Drogo was aware of it. “She tried to set Bilbo on fire once, you know.”

“What?”

“Don’t be spreading viciousness, Drogo,” Missus Baggins said. “We **all** were thinking of lighting up a pyre that day.”

“What?”

Drogo patted Thorin on the arm. “Bilbo’s funeral. It’s a funny story really, er. Depending on your perspective.”

Thorin was still processing that when Drogo looked past his shoulder and beamed. “But hey, you can hear about it from the horse’s mouth himself, though maybe on reflection, just thinking about it, the horse might now the least about what was going on at the races, you know?”

Thorin thought for a moment. “No?”

“He’s saying your Bilbo has finally shown up, and not a moment too soon.” As she turned to cut the cake, Missus Baggins muttered, “Several moments too late, I’d say.”

And the picnic went silent.

No, not silent exactly. The children kept screaming, the birds kept tweeting, the band kept warming up, all that continued. But there was a strange lull, as if Thorin’s head had ducked underwater. It was a group pause, the same as had followed Thorin on his first day at market, when Bilbo escorted him. And now, standing at one end of the picnic as Bilbo arrived on the other, it occurred to Thorin for the first time that perhaps it had not been the dwarf the hobbits had been
gawping at that day.

Bilbo walked through the crowd with a bag slung over his shoulder and his head held high. The people in front of him ignored him, until he passed by. Then they turned to staring. They nudged each other and whispered, their eyes tracing Bilbo when he could not see. A few nodded greetings. Most sized him up, or cut him dead.

And Thorin could not help but think back to the Whitfoot Tea Room where he had met Primula on Tuesday morning before the evening turned disastrous. He thought of the hobbits he’d seen there, in such disreputable styles as pigtails, doing such wild activities as sitting alone. He thought about how, except for Primula, none of them were here at the picnic today. And he’d seen none of them in the parlors of the hobbits who opened their homes to him. And when he saw them on the street while arm in arm with some proper young lady or fine young gent, he was never introduced to him. The proper and fine hobbits of the Shire led Thorin neatly past their village rebels, and Thorin had thought nothing of it. He was from cities, his own and the ones he wandered through in exile; he never expected to be introduced to everybody on the street. And because he hadn’t expected that, it hadn’t occurred to him to notice in particular what introductions he never got. So far, he’d just been thinking about how grateful he was for the ones he got.

“Just like Bilbo Baggins to make a scene,” said one of the woman who not moments ago had been so graciously admiring Thorin’s handiwork. “Just like his mother, isn’t he?”

She wasn’t speaking to him. Thorin didn’t care. He turned around and said, “He’s just walking.”

The woman looked at him, stunned. “You have a very low standard for scenes, if you think he’s causing one.”

“Master Dwarf, this is a private conversation,” replied the woman.

Thorin cocked his head. “Then why are you having it in public?”

“Mister Oakenshield,” said Missus Baggins sternly, and all the sterner for still having her knife in hand. “Manners.”

“I am not the rude one here,” Thorin said. “Or is it custom in the Shire to allow guests at your gathering to insult their fellows unchallenged?”

She put a slice of cake on a plate and held it out to him. Thorin had to hand it to her: that was a very elegant way of offering to glue his mouth shut. He shook his head and turned away from both women. His heart pounded.

And what if I did not wish to live my life trapped, Bilbo had said.

“Poor breeding,” someone muttered, low enough that they could pretend that it wasn’t meant to Thorin to hear. “You can see why he married Mad Baggins.”

“Ignore them,” Drogo said lowly. “It’s the only way to live around here. You ignore them or you are them, and I know which one is worse.” He patted Thorin on the arm. Then he held his hand to his mouth and shouted, “Oi! Mister Bilbo! Over here!” Drogo waved Bilbo over and nudged Thorin. “Look at that bag he’s got.” He gave Thorin a grin no less enthusiastic for being slightly embarrassed. “Would you judge me if I hoped he was bringing a gift too?”

I wouldn’t count on it, Thorin almost said, but he bit it back. “Maybe he is,” he said instead, watching Bilbo stroll through a field of stares as if they were so many daisies. When Bilbo’s eyes found him, Thorin smiled. He couldn’t help it. It was always what he wanted to do when he looked
Bilbo didn’t smile back. Instead, he twisted the bag on his shoulder so that he could reach inside as he walked. Thorin’s smiled wavered, and then it froze.

Horror is sometimes the lightning to bad news’ thunder; they’re the same thing, but one comes first. Before Thorin knew what Bilbo had, he knew what Bilbo had.

What Bilbo pulled out of the bag were letters.

There was a crossroads out east a ways that was notable for nothing except being a location where at one point multiple road designers had inadvertently crossed their paths. When you walked one way, you ended up in Bree. When you walked the other way, you ended up everywhere. It was not an important road to the wide world. It was not even an important road to most hobbits, who tended to especially appreciate the things the wide world didn’t. It was really only important to a very, very small subset of the Shire’s population: people who knew people Elsewhere. Because this tiny, minor, not particularly important crossroads was the hub through which every mail truck headed towards the Shire.

As it happened, the winter snowmelt and the spring rains had done something awful to the road.

“The river flooded out there, it’s been nearly impossible to get through. That’s what the postman said at least,” Bilbo was saying as Drogo and Primula sorted through the envelopes he’d come bearing in his arms. A few other hobbits were hanging around on the periphery, always interested in whatever new thing was going on, but most were occupied with Little Phillip Brownfoot’s band, which was just kicking off the dancing. Gossip, as delicious as hobbits found it, could wait; dancing never did. “I was heading out to come to the picnic when the postman came lugging a particularly battered box of mail. I’m afraid I got caught up reading a few and rather lost track of time. Apparently outgoing mail travels along a different route because they get picked up by dwarven traders heading where we need them to go, and dwarves will ford anything anytime to get where they need to be, but the return mail is the trickier bit. No traders ever come our way. So any replies to us come along the Porterfield route, which means they’ve been getting bogged down in horrendous swamp land for the last few months. It’s supposed to be abysmal going.”

“Ha!” Primula said, sifting through her letters with gleeful giddiness. “More like the carts didn’t want to risk the mud for our sake and just tossed off the letters for someone else to deal with.”

“We are very new customers to the business of international postage,” Drogo said cheerfully, forgiving every negligent postman in the world with a breezy smile. “We can’t be a profitable venture.”

“The world isn’t about profits,” Primula said, with all the assurance of a woman who’d grown up rich. “There’s plain decency as well. Oh, Drogo, look!” She’d ripped open a letter addressed to her, sealed (not that Primula would recognize it) with the royal crest of the line of Durin. She held out the paper. “‘My dear Primula, we are astonishingly alive, despite the misery of winter travel.’ Right there, written on the page. She did write!”

Drogo held out a few more envelopes, all with Dis’ neat hand and all addressed to Primula. She scooped them all up with an exuberant whoop. “I’m counting these as your gift for me,” she told Drogo, “because this is the greatest thing you could have passed over to me.”
Drogo, who had spent a great many hours over the last few months crocheting a new shawl for her, looked like he was trying to figure out how he felt about this exclamation when Primula flung her arms around him and planted a kiss on his cheek. Drogo promptly turned the color of a cherry tomato. Primula bounced back and grinned. “I’m reading these right now,” she announced, her cheeks a little red themselves, and scampered away towards the dancing.

Drogo straightened a cravat that in no way was ruffled and said, “Ah. Ahem. Well. Ain’t that just. Well.” He coughed again, placed his hands on his hips, and regard his party like a man who knew that the day had just reached its pinnacle. “Good for the mail,” he said brightly. “Mister Thorin, did you get anything?”

It was an innocent question. It was an obvious question. It was a question that should have had an innocent, obvious answer. Yes, Thorin should have said, and shown Drogo’s the letters that he had received from his sister in Ered Luin, from his nephews and friends in Erebor. But Thorin could not say that and could not do that. Thorin had no letters addressed to him. No one knew that he was here to address them to.

And Bilbo knew. Bilbo had not known that Thorin hadn’t written anyone before. But Bilbo knew now.

Bilbo did not look at Thorin when he lied numbly, “Yes. I’ll read them at home.”

Drogo nodded happily, evidently satisfied. He turned his bundle of letters over in his hands.

“You’ve arrived in quite the dwarven fashion, haven’t you? Bearing gifts!”

“Thorin aims to make it the new fashion in the Shire, doesn’t he?” Bilbo said, still without a glance Thorin’s way. “I’ll admit I fussed at him about it this morning.”

Revisionist history if ever Thorin heard it.

Any moment now Bilbo would say something about hypocrites who espoused the need to maintain new relationships while ruthlessly ignoring the old, and Thorin would ask something like wasn’t Bilbo tired of these passive aggressive jabs, to which Bilbo would reply something about this wasn’t passive aggression, this was civility, and Thorin would laugh bitterly and ask what Bilbo knew about civility when for the last five days he’d been sulking in his library because Thorin asked him to maybe say hi to other people, and Bilbo would get that cold, cold look in his eyes because they both knew that wasn’t what this was about, and Thorin would wonder why he said anything at all, why he couldn’t say anything right, why he couldn’t reach out right now and say that he understood now why Bilbo could find the Shire inhospitable, but Thorin wouldn’t say any of it, and Bilbo wouldn’t say anything either, and it would be one more spat, just series of barbs jabbed in each other’s soft spots, and they’d wait to see if they’d learned how to fight yet.

But Bilbo said nothing of the sort. Instead he shrugged and smiled and said, “I was being ridiculous, of course.”

“Oh, I’ll say!” Drogo exclaimed by Thorin faltered. Drogo pulled out the little carving from his breast pocket as if it were a real bird, cupped as carefully in his hands as if it would fly away at any moment. Too tight a grip would crush it forever, too loose a grip and it would still be gone. Drogo’s care said more to Thorin than a thousand compliments on his craftsmanship. “Who could fuss about a thing like this?”

Drogo held the bird out to Bilbo, who opened his mouth before he looked at it. Then Bilbo looked at it. And his mouth shut. And for the first time, Bilbo truly saw it. Thorin had worked on it for the last two weeks, whittling and thinking and not thinking and whittling, and Bilbo, especially after
their fight, didn’t cast Thorin’s work a second look. Were this some other week, Thorin would
have shown him. But if Bilbo wasn’t going to look, then Thorin wasn’t going to make him, and
then Bilbo kept not looking, and Thorin kept not making him, and it got to the point that every
moment that Bilbo wasn’t looking was a direct snub. That was the way the last few days had
festered, obviously irrational and no less bitter for it—if they’d been sharing the same bed at night,
Thorin no doubt would have lain awake while Bilbo slept, fuming about how Bilbo was currently
ignoring him. Bilbo wasn’t ignoring him now. He was looking at Thorin’s work with a strange
softness in his eyes. He almost but not quite brushed his fingers against the Shire lark’s wings,
before he curled his hand back. “It is a work of wonder,” Bilbo murmured. “I’ve always loved
these birds.”

“Just like your mother before you,” Drogo said.

Bilbo looked up at him, confused, but then the expression parted like clouds and he said, “Yes,
they were. I’d quite forgotten.”

“I remember her telling me about them one family reunion,” Drogo said. “Your dad was off with
his siblings and your mum was trying to escape the whole thing. You were there too, I imagine,
with your father, I think. I was out in the garden, sulking about something, you know, being a little
one and all that, with no shortage of things to sulk about surrounded by all those adults talking
about people I’d never met and didn’t care about.” He laughed. “It was fresh spring then. And I
stumbled across your mum on her walk, and she must have taken pity on me or else she was just
bored by herself, but she took her with her through the fields behind our gran’s house and talked to
me the way she always talked to us kids when no one else was around.”

“And which way was that?” Bilbo asked.

“Well, you know how sometimes she’d start saying a sentence that you just knew was going to end
someplace so interesting you that you couldn’t even guess what it would be, and then one aunt or
another would say something like, ‘Belladonna, really’? When no one else was around, your mum
got to finish her sentences. And she said to me—well, a lot of things that day, but I remember the
larks were singing for the first time in the year, and she said to me, ‘D’you know about them? The
larks are the first to leave for the winter and the last to return. That’s why we don’t say that
spring’s sprung until we hear the larks. That means everyone’s come home. And they bring gifts
back. Wherever they go, they learn songs they then carry with them. Listen,’ she said, and then as
we listened, a lark began to sing.” Drogo closed his eyes, frowned in thought, and whistled a short
melody. He shrugged awkwardly. “It was something like that anyway. Your mother would have
known.”

“She would have,” Bilbo said. “She memorized the lark songs every year. She liked to hum them
all through the year, until the larks came back in the spring again and brought her new songs from
far away.” His voice was old cloth, worn soft at the edges. “She said it was her reminder that there
was a whole world out there, and that the Shire was a part of it, no matter how much we pretend
that we can ignore it and be ignored.”

Drogo smiled broadly. “Aye, that’s what she told me.”

“It was my father’s favorite bird as well. Because it always came home again.”

“Your mother told me that as well.” Drogo glanced at Thorin, who quickly conspired to find the
trees to his left very interesting. “This bird is mine now?” he asked. And without waiting for an
answer, “Yes, it is. Thorin gave it to me for my birthday.” Then he pressed the carving into Bilbo’s
hands. “So since it is mine, now this is my birthday gift to you.”
Bilbo started, but his hands closed reflexively around the little bird. “Oh, I can’t accept this!”

“Oh, that’s not how birthdays work around here, Mister Baggins said cheerfully. “You’ll offend me horribly if you don’t accept my gift. I might go around telling everyone that Bilbo Baggins is an ungrateful so-and-so.”

Bilbo smiled wryly. “Blackmail me with the truth, will you?”

Drogo laughed and said, a little louder, “Now I really hope I won’t be offending you, Mister Thorin, but you did say that it was mine to do with as I please, and I imagine a craftsman like yourself understands that the most pleasing thing you can do is to give someone you care about something you think they’ll like. That’s the whole point of birthdays, isn’t it?”

“Are we doing gifts, Drogo?” someone called from back around the cake. “I saw you giving something to the other Mister Baggins, does that mean it’s time for gifts.”

“Calm down, you greedy bastard,” Primula shouted from the blanket she sprawled on, her head resting in another woman’s lap, letters open all around her. Thorin’s cup, he noticed, was tossed down about her feet.

“Yes, yes, it’s time for gifts!” Drogo shouted back, his voice heavy with laughter. “Form a line over by Mum, I’ll be getting my things.”

Drogo turned back to Bilbo with a helpless shrug, and Bilbo said, “Go, go. Your mob awaits.” He brought the bird close against his chest; he too held it like a living thing. “And thank you.”

Drogo tipped his hat to his cousin, and then to Thorin who returned the gesture with a smile that hopefully (but not realistically) contained none of his nerves. Then Drogo left, and what remained were two people standing close enough that they ought to acknowledge each other but far enough away that they were clearly not together. Thorin could not remember the last time he hadn’t clearly been Bilbo’s.

Bilbo was watching the bird in his hands as it would take off. He wore his thinking face, the one Thorin had seen a thousand times over the last five years, usually in response to some problem that wasn’t even Bilbo’s. It was the face of Bilbo thinking on behalf of Thorin. After a moment, Bilbo reached up and tugged the knot out of his cravat. He wrapped the bird in silk, tucked the bird in his pocket, and took three steps forward. It closed the distance between them enough to transform them from strangers into a couple. Bilbo stepped close enough to Thorin to hold his hand. Thorin raised his chin; when Bilbo stood too closely and Thorin stood too proudly, it was easy to avoid eye contact.

He waited for the scolding. He braced for the fight.

“Have you seen Dragon Creek yet?” Bilbo asked instead.

Thorin, who was ready for a great many things that Bilbo might spit at him (mostly because Thorin had already spat them all at himself, having spent the last few hours fighting fights that hadn’t happened yet), had no counterattack prepared for this. Quickly, he tried to improvise and came up with, “Um. No.”

Bilbo jerked his head towards the east, on the other side of the swell of land. “Come on. I’ll show you.” And misunderstanding the look on Thorin’s face—or perhaps just choosing to—he said, “Don’t worry, it’s just a few minutes’ walk. We’ll be back in time for Drogo to bequest upon you his socks. But it’s a bit more private a place to talk.” Bilbo reached out and tangled his fingers in
Thorin’s. Thorin froze. “Er. Don’t tell him I told you that you’re getting socks.”

“Do not worry,” said Thorin, shock like some strange bird beating frantic wings in his chest. Bilbo’s hand was clammy from sweat. He was nervous too, and strangely that calmed Thorin. He felt less alone. “He already told me.”

“Oh course he did.” Bilbo said, not as lightly as he was clearly trying to sound, but not at all the strained politeness that he’d been offering before. “He’s very proud of them, you know. You’ll have to tell him how much you like them. I think they’re the first socks ever constructed in the Shire. At least legitimately, but who knows, there are weirdos hiding everywhere.”

“I’m sure they’ll be wonderful,” Thorin said. “Maybe I will start a new trend in the Shire.”

“Maybe.” Bilbo seemed to be seriously considering the possibility. “Foreign seeds are always a difficult plant around here. But it has been done.”

Dragon Creek was just a short walk east of the party, and they made the walk in silence. Bilbo walked a little ahead and tugged Thorin along. Thorin allowed himself to be tugged along. It was almost easy between them right now: almost easy words, almost easy touch, almost easy looks, almost easy breaths. Dragon Creek, in turn, was almost a creek. Dragon Trickle would have been a fairer name. Thorin could block it up with a few rocks.

“Then don’t put down any rocks,” Bilbo replied. He left Thorin on one bank with one hand still tingling from his grasp and, with one moderate step, crossed over to the other. He patted a stone primarily notable for being the only one around and announced, “The titular dragon.”

The rock came up to Bilbo’s chest and had two indentations that he explained were the eyes. Underneath them was a protrusion that was the snout, and underneath that was the crack that—obviously—had to be the mouth. The stones on the bank were the dragon’s scales, which Thorin thought was a clever touch.

“So you see,” Bilbo said, patting the rock’s hump as he would the nose of a pony, “We too have a dragon.”

Not at all sure what he was supposed to say to this non sequitur, Thorin offered, “It’s very frightening.”

“Oh yes, it is. All the children know that it comes to life during thunderstorms. That’s when you can hear its teeth gnashing.”

“Your hometown still has a friendlier relationship with your neighborhood dragon that mine.”

Bilbo shrugged, a little sheepishly. “Well, we’ve never had any of them. No risk, no chance of seeing one in person. There are a great many hobbits in the Shire who didn’t know dragons were real before our friends went traipsing through town talking about them. And a good many still think we’re lying.” Bilbo patted the snout again with such obvious affection that Thorin felt momentarily jealous. “I played out here often when I was young. I was an only child—a true oddity in the Shire, I assure you—and I wasn’t very good at making friends.” He paused. “I’m still not, now I think of it. But I didn’t mind. I liked going on adventures, just like my mother. Or imagining them at least. I think that I slayed this rock a dozen times.”

The image of a young Bilbo, high as Thorin’s knees with gap-tooth grinned and a homemade sword, was the sort of thought that made Thorin understand a little why some people chose to have children: it was a sort of way to see the person you loved growing up when you hadn’t been around
to see the actual thing. Thorin could have given just about anything in that moment to see Bilbo the wild child, terror of the Shire dragons. “Gandalf never told me you had that much experience. You truly were uniquely qualified.”

Bilbo laughed easy as the creek flowed; and of course once he’d conceived that comparison, Thorin was struck remembering how easily the creek could be dammed forever. As far as similes went, that one did make a body compelled to tread carefully. “All the experience, perhaps, but no qualifications,” Bilbo said. “Just look. The dragon still stands.” He shrugged a shoulder, a strange wistfulness in his eyes. “It stood for my mother and my father, and their mothers and their fathers, and so on and so forth until we go back in time enough to see when the damn rock ended up here in the first place, and someone got around to naming it. It’s not mine to properly slay. The next generation deserved their whack at it.”

They stood by the creek, the light of the early afternoon sliced into ribbons by the leaves above them, the water tumbling between them. In the not so distant distance, the party babbled, laughed, cheered, danced, sang. Bilbo tilted his head back and closed his eyes. The sunlight dappled him. He looked like a statue—no. He looked like a muse. Thorin’s fingers itched for a knife and a good piece of wood.

“I have to say something,” Bilbo said.

Thorin’s mouth was dry. “Then say it.”

“I don’t want to say it.”

“You must.”

Bilbo smiled. It didn’t reach his eyes, but it wasn’t an unfriendly one. It was a step above a grimace at least, and several steps above a scowl. “No, I rather don’t, now that I think about it. I was going to yell at you. You know about what.”

Thorin did not flinch, but only because he’d been bracing himself. “The letters.”

“I got letters from both Erebor and Ered Luin today. Both mountains seemed surprised to hear from me that you were in the Shire. You haven’t written them, have you?”

Thorin took a deep breath. “No. I haven’t.”

Bilbo nodded, as if confirming. “Ah well,” he said. As if that was it. As if that was all that he needed to say.

Thorin steeled himself and began confession, “I know I should have. I know I lied to you. I know I hurt them. That I am currently hurting them.”

Bilbo waved that off. “Oh, it’s not so dire as that. You do have the built in excuse of distance. And our mail is atrocious. We can always pretend your letters got lost, if you like.”

Thorin stared at him, trying to process what Bilbo had said. “I’ve been letting my friends and family continue to believe that I am missing when I am in fact alive,” he said slowly, in case Bilbo had just not understood. “I sent my raven away so that you would not suspect.”

“Good heavens, really? That’s hardly kind to your raven.”

“I have abandoned the people who love me!” Thorin exclaimed.
“Are you trying to start a fight?” Bilbo asked, an edge of warning to his voice. “I would have thought you were as tired of that as I am.”

“I—” Thorin did not know how to end that sentence. He was exhausted of fighting. He deserved to be fought. He knew without needing to say it aloud that Bilbo would disagree with the second sentiment.

Then Bilbo held up a palm, and took the decision of whether to talk from Thorin by requesting his silence. Thorin was happy to oblige.

Bilbo bit his lip and scrunched his nose up. He looked like a rabbit in emotional distress. Thorin couldn’t help but smile. Bilbo caught sight of it and huffed a little. “Thorin,” he said, and then paused so long in thought that Thorin felt compelled to make a little go on gesture with his hands. Bilbo sighed, and started again. “You were unhappy in Erebor,” he said at last, “and I didn’t notice. I didn’t notice it as anything in particular. I was too wrapped up in my own adventure. I was too tricked by your deflections. Then you left and brought me here, and I know you did it to save my life, but I know you also did it for other reasons. To save your own. So all through the winter as I waited to see if you were alive or dead or just gone, I thought about you. And how poorly I had seen you. And I promised myself that I would never be so oblivious to you again.

“And, and, and then you came here, and I was so blissfully happy, and so blissfully ignorant once more. I promised myself which means I hadn’t promised you which means the only person who was to hold myself accountable. And I was too—” Bilbo bit the words off. He rested his hand on the dragon’s skull; his fingers flexed and splayed. “My mother traveled. Did I ever tell you about that?”

“Not very much.” Thorin said, momentarily thrown by the shift. Before they’d come to the Shire, Bilbo had mentioned his mother very little. He invoked the Tooks far more often than the woman who connected him to them.

“You should have tried to reclaim Erebor a decade earlier. You could have met her, and I would have been younger and more dashing and better fit for all the damn walking we did.”

“You were—”

“Plenty dashing,” Bilbo finished, with a smile. “I knew you were going to say that, you flatterer.”

Relieved for a moment in the conversation where he felt he could just breathe, Thorin smiled and shrugged.

The breather didn’t last. Bilbo shook his head. “My mother traveled,” he said. “And then she stopped. Dad asked her to stop. He couldn’t bear her wandering and him not knowing if she was alive or dead or just gone. They fought about it when I was young, very young. I didn’t hear all their arguments, but I heard enough. Then one day, I didn’t hear any more, and Mum didn’t travel ever again. Not outside the Shire. She restricted her explorations to within its borders and always within a day of home. I thought Dad won. Those were the two options, weren’t they? He wins, or she wins. She stays or she goes. People used to say that my mother finally settled. I always wondered which way they meant that. So I swore to myself that I wouldn’t be the kind of person who had adventures and then just...stopped. The king of person who lived for a few short years and then spent the rest of their life living on whatever stories they’d collected when they’d been wild.” Bilbo shrugged. “Then I became a very respectable adult and never had any adventures ever. It was hardly true to the spirit of my vow, but I supposed it fulfilled the letter.”

“Then you met me?” asked Thorin.
“Then I met Gandalf, you egotist.” Bilbo wrung his hands. “And he was right, damn it. An adventure was good for me. And then I lived in Erebor and the adventure never really ended. I thought—” Bilbo laughed bitterly. “I thought I might even keep traveling at some point. You were always so busy, it didn’t seem like I would be abandoning you at home so much as keeping myself occupied. But there was always so much to do, and I was so tired, and I kept thinking, well, no rush. I can go off exploring when I feel better.” Bilbo laughed sadly, his eyes downcast. “I always thought I would die in the Shire. I just never wanted to come back and live in it.”

“Bilbo,” Thorin said, stepping forward. The creek was such a minor thing that Thorin could ford it in a step. He took Bilbo’s hands and stopped them from choking each other by holding them in his own. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me. It’s not your fault I’m trapped here. And I love the Shire with all my heart, I do, I truly do, when I was away I missed it so much I could hardly breathe for homesickness. It’s just—” He laughed again, every bit as sadly as before. “I think I’d love it better if I could leave it whenever I want.” Bilbo shook his head, his eyes wet, but his mouth set. “But it doesn’t matter. I should be the one apologizing to you.”

“You don’t have to,” Thorin said softly, “not at all.”

“But I will,” Bilbo said, with a mulish lift to his chin. “And I do. Thorin, I thought so hard about what I wanted and I assumed that I knew what you wanted. I fretted so long on ills I suffered and ignored everyone else’s. I knew what I thought I didn’t want and that was all that mattered.” He sighed again. Thorin brought his hands to his lips. “I never had siblings before you. My family network was one of polite obligation from people who knew my parents and felt they must know me as well. In truth, before Gandalf bothered me across the world, I did not even have any friends to speak off. I had acquaintances I dodged and my books. Now that I have an abundance of people with whom to share my life, I am still unlearning my selfishness.”

“It is not selfishness,” Thorin protested. “You are selective with your time and company, not mean.”

“Sweet but untrue, dear. I hoard everything—my time, my company, my problems, my joys. I assume you know I love you only because I know I love you, and therefore I see no reason to act to show you.”

“I know you love me.”

“Only because I just told you now.”

“Because of this week I know you love me,” Thorin said wryly, “because I know you, and I know you would not let me into your life as you do if you didn’t love me.”

Bilbo didn’t look amused. “That’s not good enough. I shouldn’t simply get points for effort.”

Thorin raised an eyebrow. “Why not?”

“Because!” Bilbo threw up his hands. He had to wretch them free from Thorin’s first. “Because I’m trying to apologize and I’m still getting myself all wrapped up in, in, in myself!”

“What are you apologizing for?” Thorin asked.

“For being a blind selfish idiot.”

“I would never accept an apology from a man who talked about my beloved husband in such a
“I’m not the husband you ought to have.”

“You’re the only husband I ever wanted.”

“That’s because—” Bilbo cut himself off.

“You were about to say, that’s because you have bad taste, weren’t you?”

“I admit nothing.”

Thorin grinned. “You’re getting much better at apologizing. Swallowing your insults and everything.”

Bilbo sighed. “I should hope I’m improving, considering the state I’ve been in. I can’t believe I got angry at you this morning for wanting to bring a gift.”

“To be fair,” Thorin said solemnly, “I know how much you care about your respectability.” Bilbo huffed, and Thorin laughed, encircled his husband in his arms. After a moment Bilbo relaxed, sighing once more as his weight settled against Thorin. His hands rose and hooked themselves in Thorin’s braces. They breathed together a while, Thorin resting his chin on the top of Bilbo’s head.

“Dis needs to know that you’re alive,” Bilbo said. “She can tell everyone else.”

Thorin closed his eyes. He nestled his cheek into Bilbo’s hair. “I don’t know what to say.” It was easier to say while holding him.

“You can start with just the facts. That you’re here, you’re well, you’re quite popular with all the widows in the neighborhood. We’ll work from there.” Bilbo pulled back and met Thorin’s eye.

Thorin looked away. “I can write it, if you like.”

Thorin shook his head before he could process the temptation. “It’s mine to do. She’s my sister. My family. My friends. I have to do it.”

“And you said yourself that you were fine for years,” Thorin pressed.

Bilbo raised his eyebrow. “And you said yourself that all that meant was that I would eventually get sick again.”

“Are you sure?” asked Bilbo carefully. “Because the thing about marriage, as I understand it, is that your family becomes my family. And vice versa. I’m sure that’s somewhere in that massive contract you had drafted. So I rather think it’s our family, our friends, our sister.” He squeezed Thorin’s hands. “Our letter. I’ll write it, you read it, and we’ll sign it together. Isn’t that what the disgustingly domestic couples do?”

Thorin closed his eyes again, and swallowed around the lump in his throat. “Or we could go back,” he offered so quietly he couldn’t be sure if the words existed as more than thought. But then Bilbo stiffened, and Thorin was sure.

Bilbo stayed silent so long that Thorin had to look. His husband watched him with eyes like feather down, soft and fluttering. He wasn’t crying, but it looked like he’d considered it. “Thank you,” Bilbo said with such a gentle smile that Thorin grew fearful for it in such a harsh world. “But no, we couldn’t, love. You said yourself. It’s a death sentence.”

“And you said yourself that you were fine for years,” Thorin pressed.

Bilbo raised his eyebrow. “And you said yourself that all that meant was that I would eventually get sick again.”
“And you said yourself that you and Primula had theories about that.”

“Theories that we hadn’t tested and nothing has come of.”

The thought of returning to Erebor felt like gold did: it made Thorin so sick with want and fear that he knew he was better off avoiding it altogether. For the good of everyone. But prudence and cowardice were always so hard for Thorin to tell apart. “Still.”

“Still nothing, Thorin. We’d spend our time getting to Erebor, and then we’d just have to turn around. You were right, that’s no way to live.”

“If you wanted to try—”

“I won’t cast you into another exile, Thorin,” Bilbo said. “I won’t.”

In answer, Thorin leaned down and kissed his husband.

He’d read love poetry and its bawdier cousin; he knew what poets said of kissing. Nonsense about stars colliding and heat pooling and the promise of something more. The first time that Thorin and Bilbo kissed, they’d agreed there was none of that. It wasn’t like being struck by lightning, it wasn’t like blood turning to fire. It was nothing like pain. Kissing Bilbo was like holding his hand, just for the pleasure of feeling his hand because the skin of the person you love is the softest you will ever touch. It was like sleeping in the same bed and memorizing the pattern of his snores against your neck. It was like a promise, yes, just like the poets said, a promise of something more. A promise of tomorrow. A promise you would see the other again in the morning, and you’d have another day to live.

Thorin loved Bilbo’s body as Thorin loved Bilbo, because Thorin loved the eloquence of flesh. Bilbo was the writer; Thorin got his meaning across in the stroke of his fingers across Bilbo’s cheek.

I love you, he meant.

I know you love me.

We are going to be fine.

Touch was a two-way street. As Thorin kissed that last sentiment against Bilbo’s skin, Bilbo convinced Thorin of its truth. Life had changed. They were different people in different places. And they were going to be fine.

One way or another.

“The picnic is ending,” Thorin said.

Bilbo dozing on the blanket beside Thorin, sighed and rolled over until he half curled around Thorin’s leg. One hand came down to rest on the top of Thorin’s brand new socks. They were very purple. “We should leave then,” he mumbled reluctantly. “Before they ask us to help clean up.”

Thorin tousled Bilbo’s hair, and left his hands in the curls. “You horrible grouch. But you’re
“Absolutely right, I think Drogo’s mother is impressing volunteers.”

“It’d be a good way to get in her good graces, I suppose,” Bilbo said without making any effort to move. “She knows a great many reputable hobbits we’d have to invite over to tea.”

“I’m not interested in that,” Thorin said firmly.

Bilbo raised an eyebrow. “No?”

“I’m plan to start cultivating some relationships with the disreputable hobbits. The reputable ones are, well.” Thorin cast about for the right word. “Judgmental.”

Bilbo grinned. He didn’t say I told you so, but mostly because the grin said it well enough. “A good time to retreat then,” he replied, and kept lying down. Thorin nudged him. Bilbo flopped the other way. Thorin scratched Bilbo under the chin, ignoring his husband’s groan of disapproval. “I’m getting up, I’m getting up. Just give me a moment.”

This was why it had taken so long to tell that Bilbo had been sick. The hobbit just loved sleeping.

“You had your moment. Come on, you grab the blanket and I’ll lead the way,” Thorin said.

Without opening his eyes, Bilbo replied, “Why don’t you grab the blanket and I’ll lead the way. Drogo told me you got lost on the way to the field, which is an impressive feat considering that there is only the one field in the area with a gathering of a hundred hobbits.”

“You road system was poorly engineered.”

Bilbo stretched and yawned. It was such a feline gesture that Thorin only just stopped himself from rubbing Bilbo’s stomach. “To be fair to hobbit engineering, they are just goat roads we made official. True, goats are very bad at grid layouts, but they’re very good at finding the most convenient paths between, say, a pond for drinking water and a nice tree to sit underneath. You’ll get used to them.”

“To live with hobbits, you must think like a goat.”

“Something like that.”

Thorin leaned down over his husband, who cracked an eye open at him when Thorin’s shadow cut across his face. “Come on. I’ll bet I’ve found a few shortcuts back to Bag End that will add at least a couple hours to the journey by the time I’m done mangling them. Let’s take the long way home. We’ll see if we can’t find anything surprising and new along the way.”

“This close to Bag End?” Bilbo weighed the odds. “It’s a longshot.”

“I specialize in longshots.”

“You specialize in mad plans, you mean.”

“Isn’t that what I said?”

Bilbo laughed and held out his hand. Thorin pulled him up. “Alright then, lead on, brave captain. Just don’t be disappointed when I tell you I’ve seen it all before.”

“But you’ve never seen it with me,” Thorin pointed out.

Bilbo almost said something. And then he paused, his head cocked. “Very true,” said Bilbo. “And
perhaps it is the company that matters, far more than the place itself. After all, getting lost on a long walk with you has led to the best parts of my life.”

“I never got us lost,” Thorin said, his chest warm as a hearth fire and his heart fluttering like a bird (which—taking a moment to think about it—was not a very good situation for the bird were this simile to be made literally, but maybe it was concerns like this that made Bilbo the poet of their relationship). “I got us to Erebor precisely on time.”

Bilbo scooped up the blanket and tossed it over his shoulder. “Those are two different things. And Missus Baggins is looking at us.”

“Oh boys!” Drogo’s mother called. “Come lend a hand with the tables!”

“We’re far enough away that we can pretend we didn’t hear her,” Thorin said.

“Oh, I love you,” Bilbo said.

It would be wrong to say that they ran. Hobbits, after all, did not run, and Thorin was getting much better at being a hobbit. Bilbo was too, when he felt like it. But they did amble at a glorious pace, Thorin’s long legs ambling just a little faster as he tugged Bilbo along by the hand. And Bilbo behind him, laughing. And the sunlight above them, streaming. And Thorin a little bit away, watching himself and his husband rapidly meander home by way of the opposite direction there, a route that would take them down by the market and out through the fields and across over a stream and up past the meadows, which are fields with their hair let down, and Thorin would, in fact, pluck a daisy to stick behind his husband’s ear. He’d never realized a dream so quickly after conceiving it. It helped that his dreams were smaller these days. They were, in fact, hobbit sized.

They slept together in the same bedroom that night. They wouldn’t always, Thorin knew that. Thorin snored and Bilbo kicked, all while waging a never-ending war of attrition for bed space. Bilbo normally went to bed only a few hours before Thorin normally woke up. Thorin had nightmares best experienced alone, nightmares that came whether or not he slept beside Bilbo, and always he worried about flailing out in his sleep, striking out against the body that tried to comfort him. Bilbo had nightmares of his own, and Bilbo preferred to keep his nightmares private. Thorin suspected they were about him, in his worst moments; Bilbo told him it was exactly this martyr complex that made Bilbo hesitant to confess the specifics of his dreams to his husband, lest Thorin find a way that a vision of Bilbo wandering naked through the main street of Hobbiton as his teeth fell out was somehow a hidden indictment of how Thorin never should have sent Bilbo in to speak to Smaug alone. In Erebor, they had had separate bedrooms. That had not inherently been a bad idea.

But that didn’t mean they didn’t enjoy the nights they did share, warts and all. The inconvenience of sharing your bed could even in a way be a point. The person you loved was this sweltering lump taking up two-thirds of the bed, and they eve managed to love you as you snored so loudly the rafters threatened a cave-in.

Thorin was dressed in the nightgown his sister had sewn for him, had left at Bag End lovingly waiting for him. As Bilbo cooked dinner tonight, Thorin had written her. For an hour he labored over a letter that ended up being about four lines long; the words “thank you” and “I love you”
didn’t take up too much space. As far as sentiments went, they were so overdue that Thorin didn’t think he’d earned the right to disguise them in anything else. There was so much more that Thorin needed to say that he didn’t even bother. If he tried to say everything, he would say nothing. Some things would have to wait.

Thorin ended his letter to his sister with an invitation to return to the Shire whenever she was able. He would be happy to accept her abuse in person.

As Thorin climbed into bed, the letter to Dwalin was still unfinished. Thorin had never actually written a letter to Dwalin that wasn’t strictly related to business, politics, or war. Everything they’d needed to say to each other, they said in person. And usually they didn’t end up saying anything at all. Thorin had asked Bilbo what he ought to write to his best friend, and Bilbo had rolled his eyes lovingly and said, “Why don’t you just write what’s happened that you think Dwalin would be interested in? You can start there.” Thorin had started there, and he’d written five pages before Bilbo told him that he was going to bed. It turned out when Thorin sat down and thought about it, there was a lot in Thorin’s new life that would interest Dwalin.

The letter to his nephews was still unstarted. That would take longer. Words would always be inadequate there. He’d abandoned them to responsibility they ought to have grown into. They would be well within their rights to never forgive him for that.

They would, of course, Bilbo had assured him, if they hadn’t already; Thorin conceded that he knew that as well, which somehow only made him more annoyed on their behalf. But still. Bilbo would help him write that letter tomorrow.

And tomorrow Thorin would head over to the farmland where he had released his raven. He’d woo him back. He’d apologize profusely to the farmers for inflicting this dwarven hellbeast upon their crops. Then he’d send what he had. Maybe one of Primula’s or Drogo’s letters as well. Maybe he’d ask Erebor if they could spare another raven for his friends. They were good people, and deserved to bypass a postal system that seemed as reliable for long-distance messages as tossing your mail into a stiff breeze heading the right direction.

Maybe Erebor could spare a couple ravens. After all, as Bilbo had pointed out, if they wanted to keep up their relationships with their loved ones in Erebor, they were going to need to send a hell of a lot of letters.

It was ten o’clock in bed, and Bilbo was half-asleep, curled away from Thorin as Thorin read by the light of a candle on the bedside table that he’d bought in town last week. Bilbo’s manuscript for his next edition of *A Hobbit’s Tale* was spread in Thorin’s lap. It had a new title, or an old title depending on how you looked at it. Bilbo was going back to his original idea: *There and Back Again*, with an expanded appendix on the rebuilding of Erebor. “I gave up on trying to make the rebuilding part of the narrative itself,” Bilbo had said to Thorin earlier this evening when he’d handed over the nearly completed draft. “It didn’t work with the narrative structure. The story never seemed to end.”

“Yes, that is rather what it felt like,” Thorin had replied. “Being king through the reconstruction did in fact feel like being the main character of a textbook’s endnotes.”

“You know, if you’d said a few more things like that while it was actually happening, and then gone ‘no really, Bilbo, I truly mean it,,’” said Bilbo, “we might have avoided quite a lot of this fuss in the first place.”

The first half of the book was more or less the same (although the section with him finding the ring was a little different. Thorin had asked, frowning, “Did you rob this poor creature of its prized
possession? I thought he gave it to you,” to which Bilbo had replied, “Please do not take his side, he was going to eat me.”). It was the second half of the book where the new material truly began. There was appendix on Erebor, yes, that consigned the work of years into neat paragraphs that bemoaned their own dullness. But then there was the other section. The one that Bilbo said he wasn’t sure what he’d do with. If he’d keep it or leave it out. It was the story of Bilbo’s waiting, from the moment he awoke in the Shire, lost out of time and sure that the quest had not even begun, through Thorin’s arrival. “When did you write this last part?” Thorin had asked, the ecstasy of the words so humbling he could hardly read them.

“Over the last week.” Bilbo had smiled. “I may have been cross at you, but that doesn’t mean I don’t remember the sheer joy of seeing you again. I don’t think I could ever forget that.”

Bilbo wrote about Dis, Bilbo wrote about Dwalin, Bilbo wrote about Tauriel who told him about Kili who told him about Erebor. Thorin read it all, lying there in bed next to him. When his hands shook turning the pages, Bilbo reached over without looking up from his own book to squeeze Thorin’s arm—comfort and privacy all in one gesture.

The book was good. The book was very good. It had been good in its first edition, and it was good in its second. It was a horrible history, an account written by a fiction writer who never saw much reason not to say it was a dark and rainy night if that was clearly the setting that ought to have been if the universe would have just been on its game. But it was a fantastic novel. And what was more, Thorin enjoyed reading it. He couldn’t have said that about the first time through, a year into his reign in Erebor, a year into the realization that he still wasn’t satisfied. Back then, Bilbo’s book seemed almost like a taunt. Look at everything you did to get here. And you don’t even want it.

But lying in his marriage bed, his husband dozing beside him, Thorin read the tale of his own quest and didn’t recognize any of it (and not just because of Bilbo’s liberal approach to the facts). Thorin read the tale of someone else. It wasn’t him. The Thorin in the book had Thorin’s name, had Thorin’s history, had Thorin’s family, but he wasn’t the same Thorin who read his exploits today. The Thorin he read about never could have lived in the Shire. The Thorin he read about never could have married. It was strange, to know that you have changed so much that the person you once were would neither recognize nor like you. It was strange, but it wasn’t bad. The Thorin Bilbo had met had been angry, wrathful, bitter, ashamed. And the Thorin today carried his old self with him, but he didn’t wear that skin anymore.

Loving Thorin had made Bilbo the kind of person who could live in Erebor. Loving Bilbo had made Thorin the kind of person who could live in the Shire. That seemed right. That seemed unfair.

But then again, I always wanted a home at the end of exile. And Bilbo, always running off for adventure, had just been waiting for something to push him out the door. Maybe loving each other didn’t change us at all. Maybe it just brought us back to the place where we started, before we complicated our lives so much we forgot the shape of our own desires.

Thorin closed up the book and put it on the table. He leaned over to blow out the candle. Then he stopped. The candle flickered from his breath as he thought. He thought the kind of sudden fancy that never grew so fast nor seized so hard as it did at the dark times of the night when there was no possibility of the immediate acting upon it. The fancy being, at the moment, unrealizable, it flourished. Dreams grow best in the hazy moments before sleep; some strike so powerfully that sleep gets banished.

Thorin thought, and thought, and thought. His thoughts looked something like:

*No.*
But—

No.

However—

It’s impossible.

So was reclaiming Erebor, if we’re going to argue impossibilities.

And see how well that went.

It went very well, thank you, or is there not a kingdom under the mountain once more?

What triumph you had in Erebor, you destroyed by leaving, so is that really the case study you want to use here?

Yes, actually, I do, because damn it, I did get the mountain back, and I ruled it for five years, and that was more than anyone said I could ever do, and when I was done with that, I saved the life of the person I love the most, and none of that is something I ought to be ashamed of.

But you are ashamed of it.

Well, yes, but that doesn’t mean I should be.

Go to sleep, you daft idiot. When you wake up in the morning, you’ll see this passing fancy for the nonsense that it is.

That’s precisely why I don’t want to sleep.

Thorin—

Don’t “Thorin” me, we’re both Thorin. I come up with the mad plans, you tell me not to do them, we do them anyway, and you yell at me when I’m done, yes. But I’d like to point out that it’s my mad plans that get things done.

Yes. They get many things done. Shall I name the many things you have certainly got done.

No need, the long list of shame is already running in the background.

I hate that list.

I do too, but at least it’s far, far quieter than it used to be. We can do this.

But do we want to do this?

The question is if Bilbo wants to do this.

No, actually. I think the question is, do we?

“You purse your lips and blow,” Bilbo murmured from his side of the bed.

Thorin twisted his head towards his husband. “Sorry, what?”
“To extinguish the candle flame.” Bilbo had only one eye open, and only barely now, squinting at Thorin in the dimness of the room. “I thought you’d forget, since you’ve been staring at it for the part few minutes.

Thorin looked back at the candle. Then he looked back at Bilbo. Then back at the candle. Then Thorin leaned back against the headboard of the bed, the flame still flickering. “I want to talk to you.”

Bilbo, both eyes closed now, smiled ruefully into his pillow. “Because that is what our day has lacked.” But he shook himself and rose somewhat, his head propped up on his fist like he couldn’t support it on his own. “Is there…something else you’ve thought about? Something else that’s been worrying you?”

*That I’ve been worrying you with,* went unsaid but understood, and Thorin shook his head vigorously. “No, no, not at all. No more forgiveness.” When Bilbo looked at him stunned, Thorin quickly clarified, “And no more apologies. Neither of us need offer either simply because we feel we are not happy as we ought to be. Bilbo—I’ve been thinking. Right now. And this might be nothing more but another in a long string of mad plans I ought not to have done, but there is no one more qualified to handle my bouts of planning than you.”

Bilbo sat up a little higher in bed at that. “Thorin, what on earth is it?”

For a second, Thorin thought about thinking this through. Fortunately, his mouth worked faster than his brain. “We can go back to Erebor.”

Bilbo stared at him the same way, well, the same way he’d stared at Thorin the first time he’d been in Bag End and proposed a journey to Erebor. “Did you…miss every conversation that we had this afternoon?”

“That wasn’t a conversation.” Thorin puffed himself up. “That was fatal defeatism. We do not broke with such things. Who are we, Bilbo? We are kings of the mountain!” Bilbo kept staring at him. Thorin begrudgingly added, “Metaphorically, these days. But still.”

Thorin was one of those abominable people who refused to remember that *bemused* did not actually mean *confused amusement.* Bilbo was bemused in the classical sense right now, while Thorin found himself bemused in the correct sense. He was confused. He was amused. He didn’t know exactly what he was saying, but he was having a great time. There was no giddiness on earth like that of the late night life-changing inspiration.

Thorin laughed, drunk on moonshine streaming in through the window. His years in Erebor, he had missed the moon terribly. “We’ll go back to Erebor. And we’ll go every other place as well.”

Bilbo tilted his head, a question in his eyes. Or maybe several questions in his eyes. A lot more questions that you might think would fit in reasonable sized eyes.

Thorin grabbed Bilbo’s thigh—which, Bilbo was right, did have some good walking muscle on there. He did feel healthy. He did feel strong. “We go to Erebor until you are too sick to stay and then we hurry back to the Shire,” Thorin said. “We wait in the Shire until you are well, then we hurry back to Erebor. That was the plan. But what if—look.” And Thorin hopped to his feet and ran out the bedroom.

He’d grabbed what he needed in the study when he turned around and saw Bilbo standing in the doorway, wrapped in the blanket. Thorin raised the map he’d come for. “I was heading back to bed.”
“Oh yes, you made that very clear when you dashed out.” Bilbo had brought the candle with him, and he went around lighting the lamps around the study. The bay windows behind the table looked out into the blackness of night; the dark made the glass a mirror, and Thorin watched Bilbo’s reflection sow firelight like seeds. Thorin put the map back on the table and smoothed it flat. The distance between the Shire and Erebor was traversed in one pass on his hand. The journey was nothing. Too short even to be interesting.

Bilbo could walk with true silence when he wanted. Thorin neither heard nor saw Bilbo arrive just behind his shoulder. He knew his husband was there when he leaned his cheek against Thorin’s arm.

“This was our path,” Thorin said, tracing the long months of journey with one finger. “We took it because it was the fastest way for a small troupe to get from here to there.”

“And because half the forces of evil in this world chased us onto our route.”

“Yes, true, there was some necessary compensation in our route to account for events. But it is overall a direct route. We saw truly very little of what Middle-earth has to offer. You know this. That’s why you wanted to see more of it.”

Bilbo leaned over the map, wrapping the blanket tighter around him. “I did also want to take a more leisurely stroll through the places we sprinted through, but yes, I did want to see more as well.” He couldn’t keep the interest from his voice, even as he shot Thorin a worried look.

“So we’ll see more,” Thorin traced his finger north from the Shire, then south, then west, south, north, east, a zigzag through the cartography. “If the commute to Erebor is a hitch in the plan, then we won’t make it a commute. It will be a journey, a journey on which Erebor is one of any number of things that we will see. What do you want to see?”

Bilbo stared at him.

“Fangorn Forest? It’s there, we can go, if you’ve such a dreadful desire. Or do you want to see Minas Tirith, the white city of Gondor? I went there with my father when we were seeking out a refuge for our people. I know the way. Have you any interest in other dwarven kingdoms? Moria awaits, and they’d receive you with the honor you are due.” Thorin thought a moment and conceded, “Elves exist as well, I suppose. But the world is large, vaster than you can imagine, Bilbo.”

Bilbo tore his eyes from the map; they found Thorin, staring into him with a strange fire. His brow furrowed. “But you don’t want to wander?” Thorin did not think that Bilbo had intended it to come out as a question.

“You traveled the Shire anew when you came back,” Thorin said. “And even though the familiarity of it was the antithesis of what you wanted, you still found it beautiful. Familiar and strange all at once, and you said you could love it without reservation if you only knew that this wasn’t going to be the only wonder you got to see for all your days. If being here hadn’t meant that you’d had your adventure, and now it was time to settle.

“Bilbo, I spend my life in exile, trying to get home, and in exile the land around me was nothing except what I didn’t want to see. It was never very beautiful. It was never familiar. It was always just a reminder of the duty I owed my people. I did not travel; I endured. And I did not wander; I trudged, from one place I needed to be to another. I thought—I thought I would never want to leave Erebor.” Regret flickered through Thorin. He let it flicker, and then did his best to let it go. “And then I thought, well, alright, I did want to leave Erebor, but I’ll never want to leave the Shire.” He
shook his head. “And to tell the truth, I don’t want to leave the Shire. This land, its people—Bilbo, for all the flaws I know you see, that I know exist, the Shire is so beautiful that I don’t understand how such a place can be.” Thorin reached up and stroked Bilbo’s chin with a quiet smile. “But love, I’ve never seen the world,” he said solemnly. “I walked through it, but I never saw it. And I think if I showed it you, I’d see it too.”

In the soft candlelight of the room, Bilbo glowed. He was beautiful, every bit as beautiful as the Shire; Thorin could hardly stand to look at him. And he stared at Thorin as if Thorin were mad. Thorin laughed, which probably didn’t help his case. But he couldn’t help it. The plan was mad, Thorin knew that—mad, ridiculous, impossible. Maybe that was why it felt so right.

“And—and Erebor?” Bilbo asked.

That punctured his joy. But just for a moment. Thorin looked at the desk where he had written his letter this evening, the pages still spread for the ink to dry. He read his own words, his own missives and explanations and apologies to the people on this earth he held most dear. His sister ruled in one mountain, his nephew ruled in another, and his people lived divided between the two, and standing here above the lines of shame that he had finally bled out, Thorin missed them. He missed them terribly, and he missed them all.

“Maybe you were right,” Thorin said, and turned around to face Bilbo, who watched him with careful eyes and careful hope. “Maybe I am the dramatic one in this relationship.” Thorin shrugged carelessly. “I suppose it is a tad hysterical to abandon Erebor forever just for the sake of a neat ending.”

Bilbo burst into laughter. “Yes, heavens, yes, you daft fool,” he said as Thorin grinned and pulled him close. “Yes it is.” Bilbo kept laughing as he wrapped his arms around Thorin, the blanket hanging off him like wings. “The mountain and the adventure and the hearth and the home,” he said. “I suppose Lobelia was right. I am selfish enough to want it all.”

“Then we’ll have it all,” Thorin said, and Bilbo kissed him.

They’d talk about it more in the morning. That was what they agreed, conscious of the giddiness like alcohol that ran through them, conscious that perhaps this is the sort of thing that ought to be discussed in detail. There was the matter of when for one: if they were to leave, then when?

“Tomorrow,” Thorin said as they climbed into bed.

“Next year,” Bilbo rebutted, lying down beside him. He nestled so deeply in that Thorin remembered that he’d nearly been asleep before Thorin dragged him up.

“Next year? But we’ve so much to see.”

“I know, and I want to leave instantly to see it. But you don’t.”

And Thorin didn’t.

“Next year,” Bilbo sleepily concluded. “It’ll be no hardship to stay while we make plans. The Shire’s the most wonderful land in the world, after all.”

“Oh, is it now?” Thorin said with a grin. “Is talking about leaving all it takes to make you love it
again? Maybe we’ll never have to leave.”

Bilbo grunted into his pillow.

Thorin kissed his husband on his forehead. His skin was warm, not flushed, and his sleep was gentle, not unshakeable. Thorin kissed him again and said a prayer that their gamble was right. That wandering wouldn’t kill him and therefore them both.

But suffocation would too. And stagnation was its own torture.

Tomorrow, then. They’d figure it all out tomorrow.

“And we’ll invite Rothbert over for dinner tomorrow,” Thorin said. “So long as we’re staying.”

Bilbo groaned into his pillow. “Never mind, we leave the Shire now.”

“My grumpy hermit husband, how will you endure?” Thorin teased. “Come now, I’m willingly throwing myself into homelessness again. I think you’ll find yourself capable of small talk.”

Bilbo, nearly set sails into the waters of sleep, found it in himself to stick his oar in the beach a moment longer to snort derisively. “Please. You’re hardly committing to homelessness,” Bilbo said. “My sacrifice is far greater.”

Thorin laughed and this time kissed Bilbo’s cheek. “I commit myself to a life of exile for you—”

“You just gave me a speech about how you wanted this as well—”

“And this is the thanks I get. I see how it is, master burglar. I see how it is.”

“Oh so do I, Thorin. A life of exile! Ha! Erebor is your home, and Bag End is your home. You’ll never be in exile anymore because you’re always where you belong. You’re never leaving anywhere; whenever you step out the door, you’re always heading home.” Bilbo nestled deeper into his pillow. “And I suppose the road could be a home as well, if we made it one. I can’t imagine it wouldn’t be one, if we traveled it together.”

On his side of the bed, Thorin sat very still

Bilbo reached up to tug on Thorin’s beard. “Go to sleep, dear” he said softly. “The world and our neighbors wait for us tomorrow.”

Thorin let himself be tugged until his head lay cradled in the pillow, close enough to Bilbo that their noses brushed. He could see the moment Bilbo fell asleep. The hobbit twitched, a little tremor from head to toe, and when he settled his body was stiller than it ever was before. His mouth drooped open. There was a good chance of drool that Thorin found comforting. Bilbo had never drooled when he was sick. He’d never kicked either. In many ways, Bilbo had been an easier bedmate when he’d been dying. Thorin could have watched him all night. Or he thought he could have anyway. As it was, he lasted about five minutes. The bed was soft. The world was soft. The world was waiting, and theirs, and home.

It was the kind of wild thought you could only think in the moments before sleep, in the dark where everything was possible. But he thought that it might just stand up to sunlight.

Thorin closed his eyes and let Bilbo lead him on his way once more.
Durin’s Day fell on a Thursday this year, which meant an extra-long weekend in Erebor and precisely nothing in Dale. Outside the mountain, the chill crisp of late summer on the lake gave the day its first bite of the season. In the city of Dale, mothers wrestled children into sweaters and coaxed to life the great fires that they’d spend the rest of autumn and winter chasing those sweater-clad children away from. Out on the water, fishers shivered despite their exertion and dreamed of pints by the fire. It was not cold yet, not as the land would be in no time at all when the autumn began in earnest. But for the first time this year since the land ceased to be cold, the land had ceased to be hot. The people of Dale, formerly of Lake-town, were well accustomed to the cold weather, but not-hot weather was trickier to handle. Harder to dress for, for one. And for another, blimey, they’d just gotten used to sweltering, hadn’t they?

“I tell you, sirs, summer’s shorter each year,” Sigurd said as he steered his barge back from the woodland kingdom. He’d not talked much this trip, an unusual occurrence for Sigurd whom it was said of in Dale got the job of bargeman because on still nights, he could produce enough hot air to fill any sails. Today, however, the barge was more overweight than usual, and getting it to go in the right direction had taken some fine tuning. The barrels of wine he picked up were this day disconcertingly full: donations of the elf king to the happy couple for the wedding.

“More like so Thranduil can make sure there’s something at the bar he’ll want to drink,” one of Sigurd’s passengers had muttered when Sigurd told him this, and the other passenger had elbowed his fellow in the ribs and said, “You hush, dear, you said you’d be nice.” This was how Sigurd figured out they were married.

Sigurd had picked up the passengers from the elf king too. He took it they were for the wedding as well.

“I suppose we are,” the shorter of the two passengers had replied, the funny looking hairless dwarf who didn’t believe in footwear. “We weren’t going to come down this way until next year, but Kili and Tauriel’s invitation finally found us while we were down in Dimrill Dale, and we knew we had to be here.”

“Is that right?” Sigurd had said, having absolutely no idea what Dimrill Dale was.

Now they were all headed together up the Forest River towards the Long Lake and Dale beyond. The passengers chatted amongst themselves of their plans. They seemed to be under the impression that they were going to be meeting with King Bard, like the king of Dale would meet with whatever random dwarf strolled his way. Sigurd shook his head. Tourists.

“I wonder if Tilda is taller than me yet,” the shorter one said.

“She’s always been taller than you,” the taller one replied. “She was born taller than you.”

“Are you insulting me or the ridiculous heights of Men?”

“I can do both.”

The two laughed. They’d introduced themselves when they’d boarded, flanked by several unusually inebriated elven guards who it appeared had started celebrating for the wedding early,
but Sigurd knew the names he’d given them were fake. One said his name was the same as that mad king that’d buggered off three years ago. The other said his name was Bingo or something. Obviously neither were real, but their gold was, and never let it be said that Sigurd discriminated against good money.

Around the end of the Forest River, the pair fell quiet, thankfully. Sigurd needed all the attention he could keep, what with the mist rolling in from the lake. You could hardly see ten feet in front of you, and Sigurd had a feeling that the wine he was freighting cost more than he’d ever see in his life. He pushed forward along the hushed waters.

Leaning at the front of the boat, the shorter one said, soft as the mist, “Don’t be nervous.”

Sigurd almost replied that he’d be as nervous as he liked, thank you, unless the little hairless dwarf had enough gold to cover an accident as well as their passage when the taller one replied, “I’m not nervous.”

“Thorin, of course you’re nervous.”

There was nothing said back to that. As the barge slid silently through the silver curtain, the two passengers stood pressed together, waiting. Their hands rested on the railing. They peered into the shroud. Sigurd knew their type. He’d seen them dozens of times before, working with the dwarf merchants pouring in from the west and south. Every dwarf looked the same as they waited to see the mountain. Every dwarf waited the same as they looked towards their old home.

“Now did you flee in the hubbub,” Sigurd asked, curious despite himself, “or is this your first time?”

The taller dwarf didn’t turn around as he asked, “The hubbub?”

“With the dragon,” Sigurd offered helpfully. “The first hubbub with the dragon, I mean, when it came to stay. You’ve got the looker of returners. We’ve plenty of those coming through—not as much as we had in those first years when everyone under five feet was rushing here, but still a fair stream. Dwarves coming home, and all that.” Sigurd paused for a moment to steer them around a rock he’d just remembered was there and would kill them all. “So is old Sigurd right? You fellows coming home? Just visiting?”

They didn’t answer him. Sigurd wouldn’t have expected it. For as he’d finished asking, the wind had blown and the sun had shone and the curtain had parted and there she was. The Lonely Mountain jutted up on the horizon like a beacon. He supposed she must look something like a lighthouse to dwarves trying to find their way to the rocky shore.

The shorter one reached over and held his fellow’s hand. The taller one brought his hand to his mouth. Then they embraced, so tight you couldn’t tell which one of them was doing the shaking and which was doing the comforting.

Sigurd nodded to himself. He was always right.

“Are you ready?” the shorter one asked, as the boat came within sight of the shore. With the fog, that was a scant hundred meters.

“No,” said the other quietly. “Yes. I don’t know. Maybe we should have headed on to Rohan like we planned. I don’t even know how the damn raven managed to find us. I was very much looking forward to Rohan, especially after our time in Dunland. Has Erebor always loomed like that?”

The shorter one rested his head on the taller one’s shoulder. “You will be fine.”
“You cannot know that.”

“I assure you, Thorin,” his husband said as the boat bumped against the dock. “I do.”

Sigurd lost track of the two fellows shortly after that, what with the fuss of the market and docking and getting a baker’s dozen kegs of wine up to the mountain before the reception tomorrow. He went home that evening and kissed his own husband, told him how he’d ferried the weirdest looking dwarf today, and was reminded of the existence of hobbits.

“Come now, Siggy,” Delling said, exasperated. “We had one who used to visit Dale all the time. He was married to the mad king, remember?”

“Huh,” Sigurd said. “Right. Forgot about that little guy. Whatever happened to him? He died, right?”

Delling shrugged. “Not what the mountain says. They claim the mad king rushed off with his love in the night to save him from a curse or something. Mind you, I remember hearing about how the king dangled that same hobbit off a parapet just for crossing him. I wouldn’t be surprised to learn he’d finally offed him and then ran off to avoid being caught.”

Sigurd scratched his chin. A memory replayed. The passengers undocking. The taller one wavering. The shorter one taking his hand. They took hands a lot in the short time they’d been on his boat. They’d laughed together a lot too, that way people laugh when they’ve spent nothing but time together, and you start hearing your joy coming out of their mouth.

Sigurd remembered too the shouting that started the second they stepped foot onto the docks. He’d heard that sound dozens of times too. It wasn’t just the dwarves coming home prone to get weepy-eyed. The dwarves greeting them bawled just the same. Sometimes they’d get so jumbled up, whooping and cheering and crying and hugging on the docks that you couldn’t tell who was arriving and who was recieving. Everyone looked like they were coming home. On the docks this afternoon, a fierce looking dwarf, bald and with a hell of a beard to make up for it, came sprinting up when Sigurd docked. His armor clanked at a frequency armor didn’t normally clank at except when a battle was going very, very wrong, that was how fast that dwarf was running towards them. And the taller of Sigurd’s passengers froze just in time to get tackled.

Rooky mistake, freezing up like that. You gotta stay limber when you get hit.

The new dwarf nearly knocked the other one clean into the water before the hobbit grabbed the new dwarf’s clock and held. “Dwalin!” he’d chided. “Don’t kill Thorin yet, you just got him back.”

“I ain’t killing anyone,” the dwarf called Dwalin said back, with a grin like a bear. The dwarves pulled themselves up without letting each other go. Then, and without even a moment’s pause, they smashed their foreheads into each other.

Sigurd had shared a look with the hobbit that he could now identify as, Dwarves. Honestly.

Then the two dwarves were embracing so tight you couldn’t have gotten a finger between them, taking turns picking the other up and spinning them around, laughing, roaring, crying in that way where they’d both probably deny it later. Dwalin broke away for a moment long enough to make a grab at the hobbit, who jumped back and said, “I’ll wait till you two are done, thank you. My skull is far, far softer.”

Sigurd remember the hobbit standing on the docks, crossing his arms and smiling. It was a quieter
joy than the one that the dwarves were bellowing at each other. It looked like it burned just as hot. “I told you,” was the last thing that Sigurd heard the hobbit say to his fellow as they headed into town.

“I know,” said the dwarf who leaned down and kissed his husband. “I know.”

“Welcome home, you vagabonds!” Dwalin cried and scooped them both up in his arms.

And then there was the wine to be unpacked. Sigurd had easily turned away from the scene. After all, he’d seen dozens like them.

“Nah,” he told his husband as they sat together by the hearth, putting up what fight they could against the first chill of autumn. “I bet the mad king and his burglar are living happily ever after.”

“Yeah?” Delling asked, getting up to set the table.

“Sure, as much as anyone does,” said Sigurd, who was leaning forward to check what was on the boil for dinner. “Yeah, why not? All things considered, I reckon they’re doing just fine.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, I cannot believe that it is actually done. As my initial author's note suggests, I never anticipated it would be this long. I guess you could call it (my dignity: please don't do this) AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY.

Sorry.

Thank you all for sticking with my story and leaving such wonderful, wonderful comments. Truly, you guys have been so amazing and I've read many an amazing comment to whoever's around, usually while shrieking a little. And in that vein, I'd like to that Ias/curmudgeony so, so, so much for helping me through this story. Homesick has no beta (as is, I'm sure, evident by all those typos I'm gonna go back and fix...any day now), but it does have the world's best cheerleader, sounding board, and midwife that I could have ever hoped for.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!