That wasn't part of the Plan

by mad_fairy

Summary

What would have happened had the Company discovered the One Ring while on the quest and understood the implications it had for the world?
Messing with canon for fun. A light-hearted romp through Middle Earth, while the dwarves and their hobbit burglar completely ruin Eru Illuvatar's plan for the world.
Bilbo Baggins sank to the ground with a sigh of relief. While he was grateful—very grateful—to the giant eagles, and their most excellent timing, it really would have been nice if they had left them on the ground, rather than forcing them to climb down a cliff while they were all injured, exhausted and hungry.

"Shame on you, Bilbo Baggins! You're just being churlish, even if only in your own thoughts! We'd likely all be dead if not for their intervention. A bit of inconvenience is a small price to pay for our lives."

Even knowing that, it was hard not to be at least a little cranky about everything. In the past… goodness! He wasn't even sure how long it had been! One day? Two? Longer? It felt like longer… In the last however-long-it-actually-was, he'd nearly been killed by battling stone giants, by tumbling off the mountain, and then nearly been killed by a goblin that tried to choke the life out of him!

That would have been bad enough, but oh no! He'd then nearly been killed again by tumbling off another cliff-- and falling what seemed to be the entire length of the mountain--and then nearly been killed again by that horrid creature (with his strangely large feet, who knew all the popular riddles told in the Shire since time immemorial, who became murderous when talking about his 'birthday present'…)

It wasn't known outside the Shire, but there was an actual reason hobbits gave presents rather than received them on their birthdays, as everyone else seemed to.

"I must be more tired than I thought. Thinking of that old story… It could hardly be the same being. For one, it was hundreds of years ago. No hobbit ever lived so long. Secondly, he looks like a deranged, bulging eyed slug, or some other unpleasant thing. Not hobbity in the least. Now…what was I thinking on before my little tangent… oh yes, I remember now. The many, many ways I've nearly been killed over the last few days."

After leaving the creature's lair, he and the company had run afoul of a pack of orcs on wargs, including one especially unpleasant fellow that had tried to kill Thorin…and had very nearly succeeded.

"And you, you ninny. You went running off to save him, which was a good thing…couldn't let him be beheaded, after all. But really, Bilbo Baggins, what were you thinking? It's a miracle you weren't killed! Although…the alternative would have been to let Thorin die, and then likely tumble off the cliff when that tree we were all hiding in finally lost its grip. Thank goodness for the eagles! But still… the last few days have been ridiculous! That's…hmm, six, or seven near death experiences if you count the trees, over the course of two or three or four days…with not a lick of sleep or a single meal in between! It's no wonder I feel like something trampled by a herd of deer, chewed up by dogs and spit out!"

His gaze fell on Thorin, who was trying without much success to find a comfortable way to lean against the stone he was resting against while Oin examined him. He could feel his cheeks starting to warm remembering that unexpected hug that Thorin had graced him with.

"Hmm… uh, what was I thinking about again? Oh! Right… Thorin's change of heart, or whatever that was. That was the only good thing that's happened to me anytime recently."
He shook himself out of his musings and realized he had been staring at Thorin while lost in his thoughts. That wasn't the worst part though. Thorin had caught him at it and was now staring back, looking puzzled and weary and slightly pained. Bilbo flashed a quick smile at him and looked away.

He looked around to see what everyone else was doing while he'd been spaced out. Bombur was sorting through the few of their supplies that had remained with them--a worryisomely small amount of things, all told. Gloin, Dwalin, Bifur and Bofur were looking over the weapons that had remained with them. Those at least they still had; everyone had been busy fighting for their lives the whole time, and had kept them in hand. Ori was carefully going through his notebook and checking that all his notes on the journey had survived. Dori and Nori were checking everyone's gear. Oin was moving from person to person doing what he could for injuries. The boys were out scouting the area, and Kili was likely looking for birds, deer or rabbits for dinner. Thorin, Balin and Gandalf were quietly talking.

Well. It seemed he was the only one not doing anything useful! He really didn't want to move, but he could at least take a look around and see if there were any useful plants about to supplement Oin's lost supplies, or any mushrooms or nuts or anything to add to what was likely to be a very scarce dinner.

He slipped away into the nearby forest and began looking around, taking careful note of where he was and listening intently for any sign of dangerous animals, or heaven forbid, orcs. He'd had quite enough of orcs, goblins and wargs to last a lifetime, thank you very much. He found a couple of smooth rocks that fit nicely into his hand and pocketed them before setting off to see what sort of useful stuff he could scrounge up.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been gone from the campsite when he heard a godawful racket heading towards him. Bilbo darted into the bushes nearby and made himself as small and quiet as he could--and as he was a hobbit, that was very small and quiet indeed. He waited there, his little heart pounding, visions of the pale orc dancing in his head, only to nearly collapse in relief when he saw it wasn't a monster headed towards him, it was just the boys.

"You two sound like a herd of wild oliphants walking around! I do hope there's nothing dangerous hereabouts, as you've likely told everything in a five-mile radius exactly where we are!"

"M-mr. Boggins! Where'd you…"

"I was over there." Bilbo waved a hand dismissively.

He took note of how downtrodden they both looked and forgot his ire just that quickly.

"What's gotten into you?"

"Well, on top of you giving us a fright…"

"Yeah. Maybe you can actually sneak up on a dragon…"

"…we weren't able to find anything for dinner."

"Really? I found lots."
"You did?"

"You did?"

Bilbo nodded and reached into the bush he'd been hiding in and withdrew his jacket which he'd made a bundle from and two fat game birds. They weren't much weighed against fourteen empty stomachs, fifteen if you counted Gandalf, though he'd never seen him eat, but it was better than nothing.

Kili looked at the birds in dismay and then turned wounded eyes towards his bow as though it had betrayed him somehow.

Fili eyed the birds in interest. "Not bad. How'd you bring those down?"

"I threw a rock at them and then broke their necks while they were dazed."

The boys looked at him with identical stupefied expressions.

"What?"

"You threw a rock at them?"

"You broke their necks?"

"Yes and yes. The Shire is a community of farmers and small game hunters, I'll have you know." He hefted his birds nonchalantly. "Any child in the Shire could have done as much."

Fili laughed as Kili began spluttering indignantly.

"We'd best head back, I guess, since our burglar burgled us some dinner."

Kili's spluttering turned to a pout as they headed back towards camp. "No fair. Uncle's going to give me majestically disappointed look number eight!"

"Which one was number eight again?"

"You've given names to your uncle's disappointed looks?"

"Eight is 'you've been shown up by a not-dwarf'"

"A not-dwarf? What on..."

"Anyone who's not a dwarf. It used to be elf, but not-dwarf covers more eventualities."

Bilbo snorted, but was somehow unsurprised. "What are one through seven?"

"Well, number one is 'it's been a long day and you are both too noisy, and unappreciative of how majestically I provide for this family'."

When Bilbo frowned the boys were quick to defend their grumpy uncle.

"He worked long days at the forge, usually for a tiny fraction of the price we could have commanded before Erebor fell...but the men knew we were desperate and offered their payment accordingly."

Fili admitted quietly. "We're doing alright now...we're not starving more often than not, but it was a long road to get there. I know he went without a lot of times in the early days to make sure Kee and I
ate well. I didn't at the time, but looking back…"

"He just wanted some quiet when he first got home, a chance to sit and stare at the walls before dinner. Once he had that, once dinner was over, he would play with us or tell us stories, or just listen when we told him about what we did that day… but yeah, when he first got home, we'd see that look a lot."

"What's number two then?" Bilbo asked cheerfully, though he had a small lump in his throat once they'd finished their story.

"That one is 'you are a man, and therefore an idiot and don't know the first thing about smithing, or minerals, or weapons, or gold…or anything of use really.'"

"Yeah." Kili laughed. "Balin started going with him when he'd work in man villages to take the orders because that look came out often enough he started losing business. Not a lot, most still wanted dwarven crafts enough they were willing to put up with being glared at, but the ones that did leave usually gathered a group of their friends and would try to ambush him later for being 'uppity'."

Bilbo gasped in horror, but the boys laughed.

"No one was ever dumb enough to try that twice in the same town."

They were in sight of the camp now, and left off storytelling when they realized everyone was on their feet and seemed agitated. All three traded a grim, worried look and hurried to join everyone.

"Please don't be more orcs" Bilbo prayed fervently. "At least let me sleep and get a few good meals before sending more orcs!"

To their relief, there did not in fact seem to be any orcs…or wargs, goblins, trolls or stone giants, which was good. The three of them looked around, trying to figure out what was wrong when Bofur spotted them and sighed in relief.

"Bilbo! There you are! You gave us all quite a fright!"

Bilbo now found himself the center of attention and tried not to fidget under their combined regard. "Uh…what?"

Thorin turned and glared down at him imperiously. "In the future, Mr. Baggins, if you are going to wander off, let someone know before you do so."

"Oh. Um…sorry?"

"Number five" Kili murmured quietly beside him.

Thorin stared him down a moment longer.

"What in the hell possessed you to go wandering off in the first place?" Dwalin demanded.

"Oh…well…um…I got dinner?" Bilbo held up his bundle and the birds hopefully.

Thorin stared at them for a moment before transferring his look to Kili.

Kili hunched his shoulders and pouted. "Number eight. Told you."

"Well, let's see what you've brought me then!" Bombur interjected, already readying his one remaining pot.
The rest of the dwarves cheered. The idea of spending another night without eating had weighed on them all heavily. Thorin settled himself back down against his rock and Gandalf nursed his pipe and just watched them all from his own seat on a nearby tree-stump. The morose atmosphere disappeared as the rest gathered around the fire to wait for the promised food. Dwarves were rather like hobbits in this, Bilbo had discovered; a good meal erased a variety of ills.

"He asleep?"

"Yeah. Poor little mite's all tuckered out."

The gathered dwarves peered at Bilbo, who had eaten the strange stew that had resulted from his foraging efforts with gusto, and then curled up in a little ball and fallen directly asleep.

"So, how'd he end up with you two anyway? I didn't think he'd left with you. Could've sworn he was still here after you'd gone."

"He didn't leave with us. I'm not sure how long after us he left, he didn't say. We didn't see him until he was suddenly right in front of us, fussing at us for being too noisy!"

"Too noisy? You two? You're experienced hunters and scouts. You're probably the quietest in the company."

"Nah, that title goes to Bilbo, definitely. He hid in a bush when he heard us coming. We didn't see or hear a thing--not when he hid, not when he came out. He was just there and scolding us. Took a year off my life, he did." Fili snorted, glancing down at the hobbit fondly.

"Those birds he caught? He hit them with stones the size of his hands. He had to have been right on top of them before throwing them so he could grab them and kill them while they were still dazed. You know how fluttery those kinds of birds are. They fly off if the breeze blows or the leaves rattle and make a big commotion. They never saw him coming." Kili added, his eyes wide.

"You know, I was thinking about that. We only saw a couple of hobbits, like two or three, the whole time we were in the Shire, and they were all folks on the road with wagons full of vegetables. They wouldn't have been able to hide easily."

"You think there were wee hobbits hiding around us? Bah. We'd have seen them."

"I don't think we would have. There were all those bushes alongside the roads, all those little valleys between their wee hills. From what Bilbo's told us of the Shire, there's hundreds of the little buggers all over that place, but we never saw but three of them."

"So they were in bed or something."

"No, it was too early for that by the time we arrived. Think about it. Even the most peaceful folks have someone that keeps order, right? There must be warrior hobbits, even if they don't quite match up with our idea of what a warrior is. Bilbo, who's not a warrior, not violent, who fusses over his doilies and the state of his too-fancy for traveling coat tackled an orc and stabbed the heck out of it. That orc, and the warg he rode on never saw him coming. He get can right on top of fussy, fluttery birds and kill them before they realize there's a hunter nearby. He can pop in and out of bushes right next to us and get right within our reach before we've had a chance to register his presence. All that from a soft, pampered hobbit-lord."

"Hobbit lord?"
"You saw how big his house was. He keeps saying he's THE Baggins."

"His cousin is the Thain of the Shire. Before that it was his uncle and his grandfather." Ori interjected. "And he's the head of the Baggins Family."

"What's a Thain?"

"Well, he's their king, but Bilbo insists he not. He's in charge of the military and settles disputes and has to clear traders that want to do business with the Shire though."

"So he's their king."

"Well, yes, pretty much."

"So he's a prince?"

"A soft, pampered hobbit prince, and yet, in the right circumstances he's dangerous. What are the hobbits that are actually trained as warriors like?"

"We were probably being watched all through the Shire. If we'd made a move they didn't like, they probably would have knocked us silly with stones, leapt out and tackled us and stabbed us with our own knives!"

"Hobbit assassins!"

"There were probably dozens of the little buggers hiding in plain sight!"

"Why didn't we get one of them to come with us?"

"I like Mr. Boggins!"

"If you like him so much, why do you still not get his name right?"

"Because it annoys him, mostly."

"It's still a fair question though. Why didn't you get a hobbit warrior to accompany us?" Dori wondered.

"They would not have come. Hobbits are tied to their homeland much the way dwarves are to their mountains. They don't leave if they can help it."

"Bilbo did though."

"Bilbo is half-Took. That makes a difference. That, and I believe the Shire hasn't seemed as homely since his parents died." Gandalf admitted.

"What's a Took and how can you be half of one?"

"The family from which the Thains hail are the Tooks. His mother Belladonna was the eldest of the three daughters of the family."

"Three daughters!"

"And nine sons. Hobbits tend to have large families, but twelve children is a lot even for them."
"TWELVE." the dwarves all whispered in awe.

"Indeed. The Tooks are known for being adventurous, curious about the world, a bit more open-minded… and trouble-making, than the usual hobbit. The Baggins side of his family are more typical hobbits. They don't believe in adventures. They find wanting to know about the world outside the Shire to be a bit suspect. They believe in manners, propriety and things of that ilk. When he fusses about those things, that's the Baggins in him coming out. When he runs off spur of the moment to go on an adventure, tackles orcs and things of that ilk, that is most certainly the Took in him."

"So why didn't you find someone all Took then if they're so adventurous?"

"The rest of the Took clan are all either too old or too young. You see, unlike all the rest of his kin, he isn't married, and has no small children to look after. While the Tooks are adventurous, they're as home-bound as the stuffiest Baggins while raising their children. None of them would have gone. Looking back over the adventure so far though, I think a half-Took, half-Baggins hobbit was just what was needed. Had he been all one or the other, he'd either have never left home or he'd have little in the way of common sense. There's quite enough of that on this journey already."

The dwarves nodded thoughtfully, until they realized they'd been insulted, at which point they glared at Gandalf irritably. Gandalf just grinned at them and relit his pipe.

In the morning, everyone woke to a cold camp. They'd eaten everything Bilbo had gathered the night before, and sadly, Kili hadn't been able to bring down anything else come morning. Breakfast was a crab apple apiece, and what water each of them was able to gulp down from the nearby stream before they set off walking again.

"So, which way are we headed now?" Bilbo asked curiously as they started off.

"Some friend of Gandalf's. He said we could stay with him and rest for a bit."

"We can? We are? Who is he?"

"I dunno. Someone." Gloin shrugged indifferently.

Bilbo did his best not to sigh in annoyance. Obviously, if he wanted to know anything he needed to go to the source. With that in mind he hurried forward until he was walking even with Gandalf. When he got there, he found that Thorin and Balin were already asking the questions he wanted answered.

"Tell me more about this so-called friend of yours. Who is he and why should we trust him?"

"He's not precisely a friend, he's more someone I've heard of. We should reach him before nightfall. No harm will come to you while on his lands. You will be able to rest, heal and re-provision before tackling the next part of your journey."

"You make it sound like you're not coming with us." Bilbo interjected warily.

"I am not, I am afraid I have to make a side trip to deal with some unexpected business. Never fear. I will be leaving once you're all settled at Beorn's home, but I will return to check on you before you head into the elven lands."

The dwarves grumbled, but were mollified to know they weren't to be simply abandoned without any warning. Bilbo was less easily cheered. It could not be doubted that Gandalf had helped them
out of several jams already. They likely wouldn't have made it as far as they had without his aid. He felt much safer knowing he was with them. Gandalf leaving before they entered the forest of the very elves that made Thorin and his kin hate all elves so very much seemed like a recipe for disaster to his mind.

"You still haven't told us who this person is." Thorin grumbled suspiciously.

"As I said, his name is Beorn. He's a skinchanger. That means he's sometimes a bear. I should warn you not to do any hunting while you're a guest on his lands. He will not take it well. You've all enough enemies already without adding another."

The dwarves and Bilbo sighed and kept walking. They were still tired, hungry, without provisions, and injured. A safe resting spot where they could all recuperate was welcome, even if it was in the home of a man-bear...or was it a bear-man?

"Is he a man-bear or a bear-man?" Kili suddenly asked.

Bilbo was cheered to find he wasn't the only one wondering. The interested faces of the other dwarves proved it was a question they'd all been wondering at.

Gandalf simply huffed at all of them and stomped ahead. "He is neither. He is a skinchanger."

"Well, that was profoundly unhelpful."

"What's he griping about? It's important!"

"Yeah. It would mean the difference between him wanting to eat us and wanting to short-change us for work!" Kili chirped before laughing like he'd just said the funniest thing ever.

Fili snorted and muttered 'good one, Kee.'

Thorin sighed and wondered, not for the first time, what was going to become of his people when it was time for Fili to take the throne. His nephews, he loved them, but they weren't exactly the sharpest knives in the drawer.

They walked for most of the day and the land around them began to change, becoming greener and more fertile. Flowers began to appear in the grass, at first a few, then bunches, and then fields worth. There were bees the size of a fist happily buzzing around them. Gandalf halted before they crossed the gate that finally appeared along the path they'd been following.

"Ah, here we are. Like I said, this is a good place for all of you to rest but..."

"But?" Thorin asked flatly.

"He's not particularly fond of dwarves."

Gandalf held up his hands when the dwarves, naturally, began to object to being brought to such a place.

"He is a good person, on this all tales agree. I have also been told that he loves a good story. I believe if we arouse his interest we can find lodgings here until you're all ready to move on again. So, given the size of our party, I believe it would be best to break in the idea gently. Bilbo and I will go first. Come in pairs five minutes apart. Before he knows it, you'll all be inside!"
"Hmmm. Play this trick a lot, do you?" Bilbo asked, his smile just a bit feral. "Because goodness if this doesn't sound strangely familiar."

The elderly wizard didn't even have the decency to look slightly shamefaced.

"Come along. Time is wasting." he breezed before stomping off towards the large cabin in the distance.

Bilbo, grumbling, stomped after him.

At the end of the path sat the largest man Bilbo had ever seen. He was seated on a tree stump and carving a piece of wood in his hand. He focused on Gandalf as they approached, though he quickly turned to look down at Bilbo when he squeaked at the sight of him.

"Well! Look what we have here! It's a little bunny!"

"I'm not a bunny! I'm a hobbit!"

Bilbo squeaked again, this time in distress, when he was suddenly lifted off his feet and held up in front of Beorn's face.

"I've not seen someone like you before! What brings you here?"

Gandalf was quick to draw Beorn's attention back, introducing the both of them and launching into a story of their travels so far and the many difficulties that had beset them. Bilbo, much to his dismay, wasn't put back down on the ground, he was propped on Beorn's knee like a child. He couldn't seem to help himself; he kept poking at Bilbo's belly and feet, playing with the curls on his head, even as he listened with increasing interest to Gandalf's tale. At the five minute mark Fili and Kili meandered down the pathway. Beorn looked at the two of them and frowned, but Gandalf smoothly added them into the story and praised their valiant defense of Bilbo as he was held aloft by trolls, about to be torn limb from limb. Beorn subsided and continued listening, though he muttered about trolls as he did so.

Dori and Ori came next after five more minutes passed. Gandalf, without missing a beat, made introductions and continued his storytelling, embellishing their run from the orcs and wargs. Beorn frowned at the mention of the evil creatures and muttered some more, but he was well and truly listening now. Gandalf spun out the tale of their frantic run, Radagast's attempt to draw them off, the near misses they suffered. As he spun out the tale of their mishap with the stone giants and the escape from the goblin tunnels three more pairs of dwarves appeared and introduced themselves and then sat quietly with the rest who were all torn between listening to the tale of their adventure thus far and staring dumbfounded at the sight of their burglar held fast in the large man's arms and unable to escape. He had finally stopped squirming and was now submitting to the petting with a sort of resigned embarrassment that made the dwarves all grind their teeth in annoyance. Thorin, Dwalin and Bombur all came at once, and practically on the heels of the pair before them. Gandalf cast them a reproving look even as he continued his story.

Beorn seemed to notice all at once just how many dwarves had come calling at his home and he huffed at Gandalf, sounding both exasperated and amused at once. He seemed then not to know which to focus on—the wizard and his very entertaining story, or the dwarves who were all eyeing him, and his small friend, in affront.

Curious now, he set the little bunny on his feet while the old man continued his story. Bunny scurried to the dwarves, and the young ones latched on to him on either side as though to protect him. Bald and grumpy relaxed a tad. Long haired and grumpy did as well, though he looked no less annoyed that the little bunny was still being cuddled. Beorn gave long-haired and grumpy a pitying
glance before turning his full attention back to the old man's story.

If long-haired and grumpy would just cuddle the little bunny himself he would probably be far less grumpy. A little fellow like that was made for cuddling!

"…the eagles were kind enough to leave us at the Carrock. That is how we came to be here now."
Gandalf concluded with a flourish. Beorn smacked his knee.

"Well! That is quite a tale indeed, friend, and you tell it well. I'm not sure I completely believe you though. I will, of course, be investigating your story for my own satisfaction. Orcs and other fell creatures in such numbers? That is ill news indeed if it be true. For now, be welcome in my hall. My friends will see to your needs. Make yourselves at home. I ask only that you stay within once nightfall comes. The creatures in these parts know me, but it will not be safe for all of you."

"Our thanks, Master Beorn. Your welcome hospitality will be a great relief after the troubles we've seen."

"Yes, yes, come along."

Beorn's house was, of course, made to accommodate someone of his stature. Bilbo had always felt perfectly sized while in the Shire. It had been rather daunting when he discovered upon leaving that the rest of the world was so very big compared to him. Even the dwarves, who had all seemed so impossibly large and fearsome while at Bag End seemed smaller out in the big, dangerous world. No place they'd been yet had made him feel as small as he did right now. Beorn's table loomed high overhead and the rafters disappeared into the shadows far above. Outside was no better--honeybees as big as his head, flowers he could use as an umbrella! The world outside the safe confines of the Shire had been made for men and elves, and everything was sized accordingly.

Beorn left to go investigate their back trail, assuring them he'd be back in a few days.

Once he was gone, Gandalf announced that he too would be leaving for a few days as he had some things to investigate himself. The double blow of having both their host and their wizard disappear so soon after they arrived was soon driven from Bilbo's mind when a host of animals that walked on their hind legs like men appeared with food and drink aplenty for the weary travelers. Warm loaves of bread fresh from the oven, filled with berries and nuts, soft cheeses and milk, crocks of golden honey, vegetables aplenty, and golden mead to wash it all down. Though no meat touched Beorn's table, none of the dwarves could bring themselves to object--especially with all the strangely intelligent animals all around them serving up the food and taking their soiled clothing to be washed.

It was fully night by the time they finished eating, and though everyone itched to investigate their surroundings more fully, the soft hay piled up at the one side of the hall, and the warm blankets the dogs brought them proved too strong a lure for anyone to resist. For all the strangeness around them, Bilbo could not deny he felt warm, comfortable, full and safe for the first time since they'd left Rivendell.

He fell asleep almost as soon as he laid down.
The strange history of hobbits

Chapter Summary

While resting at Beorn's, the dwarves learn a bit more about their burglar, and Thorin discovers something that may change the future.

Bzzzzzzz.

Bilbo wrinkled his nose and waved a hand sluggishly at his head.

Bzzzzzzz.

He burrowed deeper into his covers. It was so warm and comfy…

Bzzzzzzz.

Irritated now, his eyes snapped open and he froze at spotting one of the giant bees buzzing around his head. Getting stung by a regular bee was no picnic, but given the size of these monsters it could very well kill him! He very carefully wriggled out of his blankets and was halfway across the room in an instant. The bee drifted off to bother someone else. That was when Bilbo noticed the sheep and horses from the night before were bringing food.

Balin, who had been sitting quietly nearby enjoying a pipe, blinked in astonishment when the hobbit seemed to vanish in place, only to reappear at the table, ready to eat. Seeing this, he thought it prudent to wake the rest of the company. Bilbo Baggins was tiny, it was true, but they had seen how much he could put away given half a chance. There might not be anything left for the rest of them. The rest of the company was rather grumpy to be awakened, but they soon perked up upon seeing more food being laid out. Breakfast was more warm loaves of bread, porridge topped with cream and honey, with bits of apple mixed in for flavor and plenty of fresh milk for everyone. Bilbo matched Bombur for the amount of food he put away. They were the last two at the table. Bilbo finally pushed himself away from the table, looking satisfied and a bit sleepy, and wandered outside to look around.

Except for everything being giant-sized, Beorn's lands reminded him of the Shire. Everything was green and the fields were filled with squash, the trees with apples, the fields still held flowers. Feeling full for the first time in far too long, he decided to find a nice sunny spot to curl up in and enjoy a pipe—probably his last for a while, unless Beorn grew pipeweed. He would have to ask when he got the chance. He was still in the process of gathering his pipe and weed when a shadow fell over him.

"Get a move on, hobbit. We've a lot of work to do."

"I beg your pardon?" Dwalin just scowled at him impatiently and handed him his sword.

"Get yer letter opener and get on yer feet. You were lucky last time. Ye might not be so lucky the next."

Bewildered, and yet with a sinking feeling that he knew exactly where Dwalin's uncharacteristic interest in him was leading, Bilbo slowly climbed to his feet and took his sword gingerly.
"Alright. Come at me."

"This really isn't...EEEP!" Bilbo cringed and covered his head with his arms—his sword was still in its scabbard.

He waited a moment, eyes closed, but when no pain came he mustered up the will to peek. He found Dwalin standing over him with his axe an inch from his crossed arms, looking utterly disgusted.

"What in Mahal's name was that? Get yer weapon out! Are ye a hobbit or a mouse!"

"I've done well enough so far. I don't think you need to bother, really."

"Weapon out." Bilbo sighed and got his little sword out. Apparently Dwalin was not to be dissuaded. He looked back at his pipe and mostly-empty pouch longingly as he followed Dwalin out further into the field. It seemed he was getting sword lessons whether he wanted them or not.

"Was that your idea?" Thorin asked Balin.

They were on the porch, enjoying the sunshine and lack of things trying to kill them, and watching Dwalin's impromptu sword lesson with Bilbo.

"No. His. He was impressed with his daring, if not his technique. He no longer doubts his bravery, or ability to get things done. He figures now with a bit of training he might even make a proper, if tiny, warrior of him. I think he also feels guilty."

"About what?"

"You'd have been beheaded if not for Mr. Baggins' bravery. Had he not acted, you'd have died right in front of him and he'd have been unable to stop it. Had he and the others not arrived when they did, Mr. Baggins likely would have died." Thorin winced and looked away. "I've held my tongue until now, but honestly! Thorin, what were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that we were trapped with no way out. Either we'd have tumbled to our deaths from the cliff, or the fire would have spread and consumed us all. I was thinking that if I could kill Azog, even if I died, at least I would do so while taking that monster with me. I was thinking that, if I succeeded, the others would flee once they saw we were no easy prey, and that at the very least you and the others would be safe. Fili, my heir, could complete the quest in my stead."

"Do you think he'd have either the heart or the desire to if he'd just seen you cut down before his eyes before we'd even gotten halfway to our goal?"

"He knows what duty is."

"He does, and if the quest took his uncle, his king, before getting anywhere near our goal, he might have decided that duty lay in keeping our people safe where they already live and prosper rather than continuing on a quest that was a longshot to begin with!"

"You still have doubts."

"I do, but I have sworn my loyalty and I will follow you where you lead."

"I lead us to Erebor. That has always been my goal. No hardship in our path will sway me."

"I know, lad, I know." Balin sighed.
"What're you up to over there?" Bofur asked his cousin curiously. Bifur held up what he'd been carving to show him.

"A button?" Bifur simply nodded and continued.

"What do you need buttons for?" Bifur shook his head and pointed.

Bofur turned his head and looked and saw Bilbo facing off against Dwalin, waving his little pig sticker and looking right on the verge of bolting. His red jacket, which looked much less pretty after weeks on the road, was flapping open as he scurried around the field trying to avoid Dwalin's axe.

"That's right thoughtful of you."

Bifur rambled on at length in ancient Khuzdul, the language of their people, given to them by their creator, Mahal. It was the only language he was able to speak, after the war, which had resulted in an orcish axe being imbedded in his skull. Sadly, these days most people didn't speak ancient dwarvish. Bofur only understood as much as he did from long exposure.

"Yes, he did save our king. I always figured there was more to the little fellow than met the eye, but I wasn't expecting that."

Bifur nodded and spoke for a while longer.

"I don't know about him being our new queen. I mean, yeah, Thorin hugged him and all, but he's not really done much else…or has he? They sneak off for some romance while we were all sleeping?"

"Did who sneak off for romance?" Nori asked as he wandered towards them. He flopped down nearby, looking tired and out of sorts.

"What's with you?"

"Answer my question first."

"Ah…. Dori fussing at you?" Bofur guessed. There were two people who easily got under Nori's skin without apparent effort, and Dwalin was busy giving Bilbo sword lessons.

"When is he not?" Nori scoffed.

Bifur looked up and met Nori's eyes. Nori narrowed them at him, but couldn't hold his stare and flopped down on his back to look at the sky as nonchalantly as he could manage. Bifur snorted and went back to carving. Bofur looked between them and glanced at Bifur questioningly, but he just shook his head. Bofur filled his pipe and made that he'd not noticed the byplay and continued on as if there'd been no interruption.

"I suppose when he's fussing over Ori instead. Just means he cares."

Nori looked sad for a split second. The look was there and gone again so fast, Bofur wondered if he'd actually seen it, but then he just looked irritated again.

"Enough of all that. I don't want to talk about Dori. What's going on over here?"

"Bifur thinks Bilbo's going to be our new queen."

"Really? Romance is in the air?"

Bofur shrugged and sucked contemplatively at his pipe "I don't see it myself, and he said that no,
"they didn't sneak off together at any point that he knows of, he just has a feeling about it."

"A strong enough feeling to bet on it?"

"Dunno. Do you, cuz?"

Bifur nodded and dug out a few coins. He'd had everything he couldn't do without on his person, so the loss of his pack didn't trouble him overmuch. He still had his money, his carving knives, his weapons, a talisman his niece had given him before he left on the quest. Everything else was just baggage… though it wouldn't be pleasant sleeping outdoors without a bedroll as the nights grew cooler. No matter though, he was a survivor.

"We're making bets? What on, and how do I get in on it?" Gloin asked as he ambled over to join them. He had a preternatural ability to know if money was being discussed anywhere within a mile of himself.

"On whether or not our esteemed Burglar Mr. Baggins will be our new queen."

"What's this then? They're courting?"

"Not so we've heard. Bifur has a feeling."

"Is that so? I wonder what the portents have to say on the matter? OIN! COME HERE FOR A MOMENT, WOULD YOU?"

The rest all winced as Gloin's bellow echoed across the grounds.

"Maybe we should all take a walk through yonder fields while we discuss things? Thorin and Balin are showing entirely too much interest in what we're discussing." Nori suggested.

The rest of them glanced over, and sure enough Thorin and Balin were eyeing them curiously, as were the two princes, who had climbed atop the house to get a better look at the area. Bifur waved them off. He had buttons to finish while he had the peace and leisure to do them. Bofur, Nori and Gloin shrugged and headed off without him, gathering up Oin on the way.

"Lads. Do you have a moment?" Fili and Kili looked down at Balin from their perch on the roof.

"Yeah. We're just having a look around."

"Go see what they're up to would you?" he gestured vaguely towards the group that could be seen wandering out into the fields a fair distance from the rest of them.

"Sure thing." The boys dropped down lightly from the roof one after the other and made their way towards the group in the field.

"Was that necessary?" "Gloin's a hothead, Nori and Bofur have little sense between them and Oin is practically deaf. It just seems a bad combination to my mind."

"Fair enough. Do you think we should call Dwalin off? Our burglar is looking a bit worse for wear."

"It will be good for him."

"Training, yes, exhausting himself when we're all supposed to be resting up for the next leg of our journey not so much."
"A bit of toughening can only do him good, and besides, I fear you do my brother a disservice. Dwalin is well aware that Mr. Baggins is a hobbit, not a dwarf and will temper his lesson accordingly. He's entrusted with training up the young'uns for a reason. He has a good sense for knowing how far to push a beginner to maximize their training and minimize harm."

Thorin just grunted in return and tried to find a more comfortable position. A commotion in the far field caught his eye and he stared for a moment before grunting again.

"Whatever idiocy that lot was involved in was just made worse I fear, rather than better, by your intervention."

The whole group, including Fili and Kili were gesticulating wildly and arguing with one another, then money changed hands as Nori began writing in his book.

"Looks like a new round of betting has just been started. I wonder what the subject is?"

Thorin just grunted again. He never took part in the betting, though Balin knew he often wanted to. He had decided it was a sign of weakness for a king or prince to be regularly losing money to his subjects, or bilking them out of it if luck was with him. He tended to avoid the subject altogether as not being able to take part made him surly.

"Go ahead. I know you want to. I'm unlikely to expire in the time you are gone."

"Don't joke about things like that."

"I am not joking. I am bruised and stiff but I am well. Run along."

Dwalin eyed up the hobbit, noted the heaviness of his breathing, the sweat he kept trying to blink out of his eyes, and the faint tremble in the hand that held his sword aloft. He hadn't dropped his guard, he was still braced and ready for a sudden attack, for all that he looked moments away from keeling over. Well, at least he had accomplished that much. He let his own axe drop and relaxed his stance and nodded to the hobbit to do the same.

"Ye'll do. For now."

"Oh. Well, good."

"Same time tomorrow. We'll see what ye remember."

"Oh, I'm sure I'll remember just fi…"

"Same time tomorrow."

"That's really not…"

Dwalin frowned

"… Fine. Yes. More pig sticking. I'm sure it will be great fun."

Dwalin grunted— in irritation or approval he couldn't guess, before wandering off into the field of flowers nearby, where it seemed a meeting…or an argument? Was taking place. He was curious, but at the same time he'd had quite enough of dwarves for the moment. He very nearly changed his mind.
when Dwalin spoke for a bit with the crowd and then turned to look at him for several long moments before turning back around. Whatever were they up to over there? No. He needed a break from dwarves, he reminded himself. He gathered up his pipe and pouch and set off to take a look around, far from dwarven drama.

He puffed for a bit on his pipe to relax himself and settle his nerves and then began to wander wherever his feet took him. Beorn's lands were beautiful. It really was very like the Shire--the same profusion of greenery, the same sense of peace that had been missing from many of the places they'd crossed in their travels. It was full of hidden treasures as well- he'd have to get Oin to take a look, Bombur too. He'd already seen several things good for healing as well as savory herbs for cooking. Having some of each would certainly make the remainder of their quest more enjoyable. His stomach began to grumble as he imagined herb-crusted rabbit cooked over a campfire. Luckily, there was fruit in abundance to be found along his wanderings, and he quite happily gorged himself as he walked. No offense to his dwarven companions, but three meals a day--not that they'd even had that lately--really wasn't enough to keep a hobbit comfortably round.

He ran into Oin as he was wandering back towards the house and veered towards him so their paths would intersect.

"Hullo, Oin. I see you've noticed all the medicinal plants hereabouts." he pitched his voice to carry.

Oin noticed movement before he heard him even still and held up his ear horn. "What was that?"

"The medicinal plants. I see you found them."

"Yeah. If those animals will give me room to work I could have most of my ointments topped off and replace the ones that went missing before we leave."

"Do you need some help? Just tell me what you need."

"I've been out gathering for a while already. All I still need is willow bark and some more of this." he held up the leafy plant in his hands.

"Kingsfoil? Dwarves use that as well?"

"Hobbits know about this too?"

"Well, I know about it because I have several Elvish texts that I translated. They call it *athelas*. They claim that if it is added to other ingredients in a healing balm it makes everything stronger and more potent, and that by itself in the right hands it can cure most ills. Some sort of Elvish healing magic. Oh! And the name kingsfoil actually arose because it's said that the old kings of men had a healing touch, and *athelas* in the hands of a true king can drive away sickness and wounds of the spirit. It isn't used that way much in the Shire, for healing I mean. We haven't any kings…or any elvish magic for that matter. It does get used as tea and the greens get added to salads, and it's also used as animal feed. It grows like a weed everywhere it appears, so there's always plenty to mix with the more usual stuff. Everyone in the Shire tends to be pretty healthy and hardy, so there may be something to the elves' claims."

"I don't know about no elvish healing magic, but I do know if wounds go sour, if you get to them soon enough and slap some kingsfoil paste on it that it'll draw out the poison, same with orc wounds. They like to put filth on their weapons sometimes. Hopefully it'll work to kill any filth in a warg's mouth too."
"Warg's… Are Thorin's wounds infected?"

"Not so far, Mahal be praised. I think the wizard did something, frankly. Given how that warg shook him about he should have been in far worse shape than he is. As it stands, his ribs are tender and he's bruised, but that seems to be all. I'm still going to make some paste from this and coat him in it whether he likes it or not."

"Make him take a bath first." Bilbo looked down at himself, sniffed and grimaced. "In fact, I think I may well take my own advice."

He left Oin in the field gathering kingsfoil after helping him gather some willow bark, then headed back towards the house. First things first. He was going to see if he had a clean change of clothing, and then he was going to bathe. He smelled like orcs and wargs and fire and blood, and unsavory goblins and strange creatures that lived in dark places, not to mention sweat, he was sick of it. Yes. A bath. That was just the thing.

Ori was seated within by the fire scribbling madly in his book. He debated for a moment going over to say hello, but he was filthy and sweaty and could not abide it for so much as another moment now that it was on his mind. Luckily, he spotted one of the sheep trotting by with a pile of clean laundry, which it helpfully left near where the packs that remained with them were lined up. Bilbo dug through and found a clean change of clothing for himself. Though clean and fresh smelling once more, his poor trousers and shirt had certainly seen better days. The hems were frayed, his shirt had a general grey tinge to it now. Back in the Shire, he likely wouldn't have considered either fit even for the rag bag. His priorities had changed a great deal during their travels.

"I say… I don't suppose…there's a chance of a hot bath?" Bilbo asked the sheep hesitantly.

The sheep bleated and started towards the back of the house. Bilbo scrambled to follow. It led him down a longish hallway, past the kitchen, where he could see Dori and Bombur trying to communicate with the animals within, and then outside across a covered walkway to another large room. There was indeed a tub within, already filled with hot water, possibly from some sort of underground spring? Or was it proper plumbing with a heating system? He didn't know, and honestly didn't care at the moment. The hot water beckoned. He practically tore off his soiled clothing and dove in, for once not caring that it was a large pool of water and hobbits were prone to drowning. He couldn't abide his own stench even a moment longer. The sheep gathered up his discarded clothing--hopefully for another round of laundry, if he was lucky.

He was relieved to find there was a shelf of sorts that ran around the edge of the pool that he could stand on. It was probably meant as a seat for Beorn, but it worked well enough as a no-drowning platform for himself, though just barely, as the water came right up to his chin. He held on to the side and ducked under, wetting his hair, then grabbed the bar of honey smelling soap from nearby and began lathering up his hair. He climbed out to soap up the rest of himself properly, lathering until he was nearly hidden behind a veritable cloud of soap bubbles, before dunking back in, then did the whole thing a second time. He found a giant comb when he climbed out, as well as a towel that could have fit a dozen of him. He dried off as best he could with the blanket sized towel and did his best to use the giant comb to put his hair in order. Wet as it was, the normally tight curls hung down past his shoulders as he unsnarled them. He really needed a haircut--he'd be the scandal of the Shire with hair so long! But there was little he could do about that at the moment, beyond combing the lot back off his face and hoping it wouldn't be too frizzy and unmanageable when it dried. He gave the hair on his feet a quick seeing-to as well, though really, Beorn's comb was much too big to make a proper job of it.

In fresh clothes once more he felt reborn. The bruises on top of bruises he sported all over his body
had been soothed by the hot water, and his skin was so clean it squeaked. He almost felt like a proper hobbit again! Movement by the door drew his attention. He jumped slightly and turned to face the dwarf that had just entered the bathing room.

"Mr. Baggins. I did not realize anyone was within." Thorin Oakenshield said gruffly as he spotted him.

"Oh, no problem. I was just finishing up, really. It's all yours." Thorin grimaced slightly and tried to peer at the water beyond.

"The water is perfectly clean, I assure you. There's a rather cunning draining system to one side and a pipe that feeds fresh water on the other. The water is being constantly cycled out and replaced with fresh. In the time it took me to finish my bath, all the grime and soap suds disappeared and I had clear water to rinse off in."

Thorin nodded and moved closer to the bench to begin removing his own clothing and armor in preparation for his own bath, but he was distracted on the way. Bilbo's hair, which had been hanging surprisingly long about his shoulders was slowly shortening as he watched and puffing about his head. He grabbed one of his curls and stretched it out then let go to see it start spiraling up and shortening again on its own.

"My hair is very curly. I've not gotten it cut in a while, so it's rather longer than it appears. Unfortunately, or fortunately depending on your point of view, curly hair grows outward for quite a while before lengthening.

"So that is why you've begun to resemble a mutton cloud lately?" Thorin mused.

"A what?"

"Mutton cloud. I do not know what name your own people give them. We have no real word for the things except based on what it is being used for at the moment--meat, wool… I saw them in a field once when I was young. They looked like clouds with faces walking around on the ground. My mother told me they were mutton."

"Sheep. They're called sheep." Bilbo replied, trying not to laugh.

Thorin nodded gravely and began removing his fur coat, though he seemed to be having some difficulty.

"Oh, here, let me help"

"That will not be necessary, Mr. Baggins"

"Oh stop it, you old grump" Bilbo huffed, blithely ignoring the indignant scowl he got for his trouble.

"It is no sign of weakness to have assistance when you're hurting! Now hush and let me help you."

Thorin grumbled and scowled the entire time, but he could admit, privately at least, that it was a much less painful ordeal with help. When he was down to his trousers and boots, Bilbo gave him a quick smile and excused himself.

"You can handle the last bit yourself, I trust. I mean if you really need… Oh, hold on. Let me unlatch your boots at least. I daresay Oin would rip me a new one if I let you puncture a lung trying to undo them yourself… not to mention Dwalin. I've had quite enough of him for one day, thank you. Not
that I'm not grateful…but yeah. I'm a hobbit. We're not really swordsmen."

"No, you are tiny ninja assassins, according to my nephews at least." Thorin snickered.

"Ninja assassins?" Bilbo repeated dubiously. "Why would they think that?"

"They seemed to think there were hobbits hiding in the bushes watching us while we were in your Shire."

"Oh. That was probably the Bounders."

Thorin blinked, having expected Bilbo to laugh at the very idea.

"Bounders?"

"They patrol the borders, keep watch on things. They and the shiriffs keep the peace…not that there's usually all that much to do, really. We hobbits are peaceful folk. We do get the occasional big person blundering about though, so they're not completely unneeded… What?"

Thorin shook his head and mustered up a somewhat sickly smile. It seemed his nephews had known better than he thought.

Bilbo spotted Fili and Kili whispering and giggling together in the corner when he came back. He stopped in front of them, hands on his hips and gave them his best exasperated frown.

"Ninja assassins? Really? I honestly don't know what goes through your heads sometimes."

The boys shrugged, but then Fili's gaze sharpened on Bilbo's wet hair.

"You took a bath?"

"Of course. If you don't mind, I would suggest the rest of you do so as well."

The boys exchanged a look he couldn't decipher and then turned back to him.

"Is there two tubs back there?"

"No, just one very large one."

"Really. You were back there awhile, huh?"

"I was very dirty."

"Uh huh. Excuse me. I need to talk to Nori." Kili announced.

"O-kay?" Kili nodded and scurried off to talk to the red-haired thief.

Bilbo watched him go and turned back to Fili who was shaking his head at his brother.

"He should know better really. He's never going to let him change."

"Who isn't?"

"Nori."
"He wants him to remain dirty and smelly?"

"Huh?"

"..."

Fili and Bilbo frowned at each other in confusion.

"Nevermind."

Oin was near the fire, busily making ointments from the bounty he'd gathered earlier.

"Ah, Bilbo. Do me a favor. Let this steep a few more minutes and then hand out a measure to anyone that needs it. I want to catch Thorin before he tries getting dressed again. Set some aside for him before you hand out the rest. He needs it the most."

"Oh. Sure thing."

Bilbo peered into the pot and saw he was making willow bark tea. He felt miles better after his bath, but he would probably have a bit himself. There were some flowers from the kingsfoil Oin had gathered earlier left sitting on the side where he'd separated them out before making a paste from the rest. He scooped up a few and tossed them in with the willow bark. It would make it taste a bit better, and if the elves were right, make it work a bit better as well. It would also help if there was in fact any 'warg filth' in Thorin's system. If kingsfoil paste on the outside would help, a bit of kingsfoil tea on the inside would be even better.

He looked around to see who all was present. Balin was there, laid out on the hay they'd made their beds on last night. He could see Dwalin through the window, sharpening his axe, as was Gloin who had joined him. Oin was in the bathhouse with Thorin. Kili was back with Fili and they were whispering together again. Ori was still writing and trying to ignore Dori who was hovering nearby, in case he got a papercut.

Bilbo frowned at himself internally. That was a bit mean. Dori meant well. It seemed he'd all but raised Ori, and he tended to be a bit of a mother hen. He was only on the quest because Ori had signed up. Nori was off to the side by himself, watching them unobtrusively. His one leg was stretched out straight in front of him. Bilbo was pretty sure he'd banged it up during their flight from the goblin caves. He'd seemed fine when they were being chased when their lives were in danger, but once they were safe he'd seemed to notice it. He'd caught him wincing a time or two when he thought himself unobserved.

Ori irritably waved Dori off so he could finish what he was doing. He seemed to be drawing something. Dori frowned at the boy and stomped over to see what Bilbo was doing.

"What's all this then?"

"Willow bark tea, for anyone still hurting."

Bilbo explained as he poured some out to cool and set it aside for Thorin before filling the rest of the mugs Oin had gathered.

"Actually, it's good you're here. Could you see that Nori drinks some? Once it cools down a bit, of course. His poor leg seems to be paining him still." he added quietly.
"Leg?!” Dori murmured, turning to look searchingly at his brother. He just happened to catch him rubbing at his knee absenty, then fretfully stretching as though his back pained him. For a moment Dori looked bereft, but his expression was soon back to 'nagging mother hen mode'. He snatched the tea from Bilbo and marched over to his brother.

Bilbo nodded to himself in satisfaction. Now Nori would get the fussing he secretly wanted but was far too proud to ever admit to, Dori would have an outlet for all his pent up fear and frustration, and Ori would get a break for a bit. Everyone wins!

He looked up to see Oin and Thorin making their way back. Thorin was moving less stiffly than he had been, Bilbo was happy to see. He grabbed the tea he'd set aside to cool and took it to him.

Thorin sniffed the air and grimaced irritably. Oin glared at him and crossed his arms as though daring him to refuse. He sighed then, took the tea and downed it quickly, grimacing anew at the taste. He glanced down at the other mug Bilbo was carrying when he had finished and then eyed him questioningly.

"Were you injured as well?"

"Bruises, mostly, which are already greatly helped by my bath earlier. No, I was going to take this one out to Bifur."

"Mmm. Good. He got lucky that damned axe head didn't get jarred loose with all the tumbling about we did." Oin grunted approvingly.

"Who else has had a dose?"

"I sent Dori to give Nori his."

Oin grinned briefly and patted Bilbo on the shoulder. "I'll see to the rest. Mind you take a dose as well if you need it."

"In fact, why don't you do so now?" Thorin interjected, narrowing his eyes when Bilbo looked ready to object.

"Bombur."

"Yes, Thorin?"

"Take one of those and see your cousin gets it." he ordered.

Bombur nodded and grabbed one of the filled mugs and bustled off without further questioning.

Bilbo opened his mouth to object, but Thorin just raised an eyebrow and stood there looking pleased with himself. Oin looked between the two of them and wandered off muttering something about portents under his breath, snagging another mug to give to Balin and Dwalin.

Bilbo glared at Thorin to make sure he understood he wasn't best pleased with his interference, but he drank the tea nonetheless. He did feel much better after his bath but there was still plenty of room for improvement, to his mind.

"We're bored." Kili whined as he and Fili wandered closer. Thorin sighed, but Bilbo just gave them both a flat look.

"More terrifying words have never been spoken."
"You're one to talk. None of us set birds loose on the elves… Heh. Ooops."

Thorin's eyebrows rose into his hairline as he studied the hobbit in interest. "That was you?"

"Technically it was Estel." Bilbo replied with great dignity, snatching Thorin's cup away and bustling off to clean them. His great plan was stymied when Thorin simply grabbed him by the back of his coat and deposited him back in front of him. Bilbo huffed at Thorin in annoyance, but he looked unrepentant, and the boys just looked terribly amused.

"Explain."

"Estel. That was the name of the human child living in Rivendell." Bilbo said with some reluctance. He had suspicions about who the child must be, given that he was living there, though the child himself seemed not to know any of it.

"I am aware of the boy. You need not elaborate." He glanced around at their surroundings, met his nephew's eyes. "If he is indeed who I suspect, best he is not spoken of overmuch. He is but a child, and does not deserve the troubles that will likely fall on him should his existence be known."

"Who is he?" Kili wondered. Fili frowned as though struggling to remember something.

"He's likely the lost heir of Gondor. Forget he exists." Thorin replied quietly.

"Estel is a child, and while a middle-aged fellow like myself or an old fellow like Gandalf might find a place like that soothing and restful, I doubt it seems quite so grand to a small boy. Now, I'll grant you the Shire is just as quiet and peaceful, but unlike a fauntling growing up in the Shire, Estel's all alone. There aren't any other children around to play with. He seemed bored and a bit lonely. I just showed him how to…liven things up a bit."

"Why did you attack the elves with birds?" Thorin asked curiously.

"I didn't! Estel just…borrowed a few and put them in a cabinet in the kitchens after he removed the pies that were in there. The elves' baker and the bird keeper have a bit of a feud going on. I simply suggested that finding a way to suggest someone who wasn't him stole the pies might be in his best interest and he ran with the idea, that's all. The poor fellow that opened the cabinet took quite a fright."

Fili and Kili were chortling outright, and Thorin was smirking.

"For shame, Mr. Boggins! You're a terrible role model!" Kili tittered in delight.

"HA! I didn't encourage him to bathe naked in the fountain, that was all of you! We caught sight of you while we were wandering around. I've never been so embarrassed in my life!"

"Their tubs were too small!"

"The average elf is about six foot tall!"

"Too narrow, he means."

"Too narrow and too deep. How's anyone supposed to take a proper wash in those things?"

"Oh." Bilbo hadn't had a problem, except with getting in and out—that had been a bit awkward—and he'd only filled it partway.

"Is that why none of you would sleep in the beds?"
"No, we didn't want to sleep in the beds because there was a creepy elf hanging over you when you tried to lay in them. How's a person supposed to sleep with something like that watching you?"

He himself had only gotten the smallest glimpse of the promised rooms before being drug back to the open hall the dwarves had claimed. There was indeed an upper torso of an elf lady with her arms spread wide that formed the headboard. He would have been quite content to simply ignore it as part of the decorating scheme for the chance to sleep in a real bed. Ah well. Water under the bridge and all that.

"You know, speaking of washing, you two should go take advantage now that we have the peace and quiet to indulge."

"Probably not a bad idea." Thorin agreed.

"Go through there. End of the hallway."

"Fine, we get it. We stink."

"Maybe just a bit." Bilbo agreed delicately. He held up the used cups still in his hands. "I should get these rinsed out."

Thorin pursed his lips, then nodded regally and strode off. Bilbo watched him go. When he turned back he found the boys watching him curiously.

"Weren't you supposed to be getting a bath?"

"Yeah, yeah." Fili huffed, dragging his brother away with him. Bilbo headed to the kitchen and rinsed out the cups he held and put them in the drain board to dry.

When Bilbo got back into the common room, Thorin was off in the corner with Balin and Dwalin, likely discussing the road ahead. He could see how he chomped at the delay, however needed, and was eager to get moving again. Hopefully Gandalf would stay gone for a few days at least so they had a chance to rest before moving on. He went over to join Ori instead. He seemed to be finishing up whatever he'd been working on earlier, so he thought it would be okay to interrupt.

"Hello."

"Oh, hello Mr. Baggins."

"Really, Ori, I've told you, Bilbo is fine."

"Bilbo."

Bilbo nodded and peered at the page he'd been working on only to blink in astonishment and some embarrassment at the picture he'd been drawing of Thorin embracing him on the Carrock after the eagles had dropped them off. On the page preceding that was an image of Thorin laid out across the ground, fire all around, with a shadowy image of Bilbo in front of him, and Azog the Defiler on his warg standing over them both. It was a rough image, lacking many of the details Ori's drawings usually had, but it was all the more impactful because of it. It looked more like a shadowed image from a nightmare than a faithful rendition of an actual event. Bilbo shuddered and looked away. He still wasn't sure what he'd been thinking when he'd decided to go charging off to play hero like that. It had worked out for the best, but still…
Ori put a few finishing touches on the picture he was drawing and then turned to a new page.

"Bilbo? I was hoping you could tell me a bit more about hobbits and the Shire."

"Is this about the ninja assassin thing?" Bilbo sighed.

"You mean it's true?!" Ori yelped.

Bilbo gave him a dirty look. "No. Honestly! The ideas you younglings get into your heads! What possible need would we even have for such a thing?!"

"So…there weren't hobbits in the bushes watching us?"

"Oh, no, I daresay there was. A bounder or two, if any were in the area, children. Believe me, whether you all were aware of it or not you were well marked through every step you made in the Shire. Hobbits don't leave their homes much, and as a rule we are ever wary of outsiders. We're a peaceful folk, but that doesn't make us fools."

"Bounders?"

"They're the border patrol. There's a group for each Farthing. Buckland has the largest group, but then they also have the most need of them. The old forest has been known to grow angry and encroach on the settlements nearby. They had to grow the great Hedge to try to keep the walking trees at a distance. They have regular patrols whose main business is keeping an eye on the old forest.

Then there's the Barrow Downs as well. There's spirits or something in there that lure travelers away and kill them in the barrows there. The bounders on that end mostly try to turn travelers away from those parts, and of course they try not to get too close themselves. They also try to encourage big folks travelling from Bree to keep to the great road and not try to wander into the Shire itself when passing through. The shirriffs are mostly responsible for keeping order in the villages themselves. We don't have much trouble, really, mostly just family arguments that get out of hand, that sort of thing."

"And these are your warriors?"

"I wouldn't call them warriors… peace keepers, really."

"You mentioned before that your king"

"Thain"

"Thain, could call up a military muster. How can he be expected to do that if you haven't any warriors?"

"The whole of the Shire is full of farmers, my lad, farmers and small game hunters. We've archers, not a whole lot but we have them."

"What can farmers do?" Ori asked. He mostly sounded curious, but there was a small measure of learned disdain present in his voice nonetheless.

Bilbo had noted that the dwarves as a whole seemed to have a sort of benign contempt for farmers, for all that they depended on them greatly--not even their own farmers, as dwarves flatly refused to have anything to do with anything green and leafy. Bilbo was not a farmer by trade, but as a lad in his tweens he had helped out with the harvests every year, just like every other able-bodied hobbit in the Shire did.
Those times had been enough to instill a deep respect for those who did it year-round for a living and filled the markets each year for the rest of them. There was hard labor involved in bringing in a crop. Long hours with the sun beating down, arms getting sore from wielding a scythe or a sickle for hour after hour, gathering it all up and loading the wagons to take it to where it was processed and stored for later…

Hobbits tended to be round and soft on the outside. What no one ever seemed to realize was there was a solid layer of muscle underneath all the pudge from farming. They were a peaceful folk, a gentle folk, they'd prefer to eat bountiful meals and dance beneath the party tree than go to war… it didn't mean they were useless, or that a bunch of stubborn dwarves had the right to look down on them. He was actually getting a little tired of the constant small digs against his people, and all those who worked with the earth.

"Hold on a moment, would you?" he told Ori firmly.

He went in search of the intelligent animals that kept house for Beorn. He found a horse watching over a boiling pot.

"Excuse me. If it's not too much trouble…could you tell me where your farming tools are located?"

The horse whinnied questioningly.

"I'm not going to take them, or mess with your gardens or anything…I just would like to make a point to some stubborn dwarves that just because they don't do something themselves it isn't shameful or useless or anything of the sort, and really, considering they'd all starve if not for farmers one would think they could be a little more respectful of other people's lifestyles!"

The horse whinnied again and one of the sheep set off. Bilbo nodded his thanks and followed him.

Fili and Kili exited the bath and came into the hall, only to see a slightly irate Bilbo marching after a sheep. They followed them curiously, only to see Bilbo imperiously summon Ori to follow him. Dwarves were curious beings, and at the moment there was nothing much going on to divert them, so naturally the entire group rolled to their feet from wherever in the room they'd been lounging and ambled after the strange parade. The sheep led everyone outside and to a shed located a short distance from the house, bleated at Bilbo admonishingly and then headed back towards the house.

"I believe friend sheep there was warning us to not mess about with their implements. Do try to be considerate. I doubt any of you would like it if a group of strangers stomped into your workroom and started mucking about with your tools. Keep in mind, however little any of you respect farmers or the work they do it would be very much the same thing." Bilbo warned before ducking into the shed.

"What crawled up his ass and died?" Gloin demanded.

"Ori?"

"Yeah, what did you say to Mr. Boggins?"

"I was asking about hobbit warriors. He said they didn't have them, so I asked why their king was able to call a military muster, who would answer? He said they were a whole society of farmers and small game hunters. He said they had archers, not a whole lot, but they have them, and the rest would be the farmers and I wondered what good that was, and well, here we are."

Bilbo came out with a long handled tool with three sharp tines on the bottom. It, and the rest of the farming tools in the shed, were all quite a bit bigger than he was used to, but he'd make do. He was stronger than he looked--especially after all they'd been through lately--and, damn it! He was making
"See this? Pitchfork. It's used to toss hay to animals for feeding mostly. It has good heft, it's rather sharp on the ends. Every farm has one."

"Still won't do much good against a sword." Bofur laughed, though Dwalin eyed the thing and frowned.

Bofur made a playful jab at Bilbo with his mattock. Bilbo hefted the thing and twisted, pulling it right out of his hands. Bofur was so startled it took him a moment to react to the sharp tines now just under his chin.

"You were saying?" Bilbo asked mildly before returning the pitchfork to the shed. The dwarves exchanged a wide-eyed glance.

He returned with a very odd knife with a long blade that looked like a crescent moon. "Sickle. Any farm that has grain that needs harvesting probably has at least one of these. Most farms have several as it takes a good size group to harvest everything in good time. He wandered to a tall tuft of grass nearby, grabbed a hank of it and sliced through it with little trouble before returning to the shed.

The next thing he brought out was a shovel. "I can see the smiles. I would think you'd be less dismissive. Some of you fight with mining tools, and smithing tools. Do you really think farming tools are so different? The sides are rather sharp, not axe sharp or sword sharp, but sharp. You can cut with it, you can bash with it….most importantly…you can dig holes with it." He studied the flat blade at the end thoughtfully and nodded. "In a pinch, you could probably fry eggs over a campfire on it. Very useful." He held it up "Good long reach."

The next time he returned he had another long curved blade, though this once was less circular, and it was mounted on a very long pole with a second smaller handle sticking up from the shaft.

"Again, grain farmers have these. This is obviously much larger than any you'd find on a hobbit farm, but I'm sure you can see the defensive possibilities inherent in such a tool."

He moved a good distance away from all of them widened his stance and lifted it, holding it across his body. There was more tall grass nearby, a whole section of it, growing wild and unruly. Bilbo adjusted his grip a few times, getting a feel for the thing, then suddenly swung the scythe out and mowed down a whole section of the grass in one sweep. The dwarves stirred uneasily. All of them had played at whacking at tall grass when they had to travel through it. It was actually rather difficult to cut down the grass like that. It tended to bend out of the way of one's sword. What he'd just done told them the scythe was very, very sharp…and that hobbits knew more about cutting grass than they did, though they'd already guessed as much.

If all farmers were like hobbits, they weren't going to charge you full on, yelling war cries. They would sneak from the sides or the back and cut you down like wheat given the chance to do so… or hide in bushes and pelt you with stones before doing so.

Bilbo put the scythe away and shut the shed.

"Those are just the basics. There are also a variety of knives and hooks and threshing rods and all sorts of things lying about…not to mention anyone with a good knowledge of plants can poison someone without too much trouble…and if that's not enough, well, there's always conkers."

"Aren't they just nuts?"

Bilbo looked at them pityingly and they noted then he had some thin rope in his hands and began
fiddling with it as he spoke.

"While I've not joined in gathering the harvest since I was in my tweens, I do still remember it. You scoff at farmers, but you really shouldn't. You average farmer is out doing hard labor with tools like that for hours every day during harvest season--sunup to sundown. The rest of the year they're ploughing and sowing and driving off predators and weeding and working all day every day.

That's just the plant related stuff. If they have animals, their days start before sunrise, because the animals get fed first before you even consider feeding yourself. That means hay and oats and mucking out stalls and milking cows and gathering eggs and so on and so on… Farmers won't go looking for a fight. They're too busy, and frankly their work is too important. If you bring a fight to them though, they will fight, and they're armed at all times…most of them have dogs as well. They act as guards and help herd sheep and what have you. They know that if you get past them that all their hard work will be lost because their crops will be stolen and their fields burned. What's more, they know their wives and any children too small to fight alongside them will likely be cut down if an invader gets that far.

You dwarves do no farming of your own. You should consider the fact that you are wholly dependent on the hard work of others to feed you before you scorn the ones that do so. Oh, and for your information, we only use nuts when we're children playing games."

He twisted his wrist and a stone the size of his fist shot out and stop just short of Dwalin's eye before snapping back to his hand. They saw then he had a made a sling of sorts to hold the stone, and had kept the rest of the rope in his hand.

"What good does that do?"

"I was a champion at conkers in the Shire. Had I let the stone go further, you wouldn't be able to see out of that eye now. Had I gotten you in the throat, you'd likely have trouble breathing. Back of the knee, your leg would have buckled. Temple, well that could kill you if it's done right. If you don't happen to be wearing a codpiece…well, I think you know very well what would happen."

"You said you weren't warriors."

"We aren't. That doesn't mean we're weak. It doesn't mean we're useless. We don't go looking for fights. We go quite out of our way to avoid them, in fact. We're peaceful folks. We'd prefer to live our lives in comfort and peace and watch our fields flourish and our children grow.

We didn't start in the Shire you know. We were driven out of our first homeland. We wandered a long time before we found a new home. When we did, we stuck our roots in deep, and we have cared for that land and made it flourish. The Shire is our home, and given no other choice, we most certainly would defend it."

Bilbo cocked his head then, listening and his nose twitched. He bundled up his rock and string contraption and stuffed it in his pocket.

"Sounds like they're laying out dinner!" he chirped, before hurrying back to the house.

The dwarves all exchanged a look.

"Ninja assassins." Kili murmured, eyes wide.

"Ninja assassins." Fili nodded.
"Where was your first homeland?"

It took Bilbo a moment to realize Bofur was speaking to him; he'd been rather focused on the food that was spread in front of him. He glanced up and found not only Bofur but all the dwarves looking at him, though Balin, Dori and Thorin at least had the decency to pretend they weren't.

"It's a matter of some debate. We don't have any written records surviving from that time, of course, and the original three clans didn't live in exactly the same location, just in the general vicinity of one another. They also didn't leave all at the same time, and took slightly different routes during the traveling time, though they all ended up meeting up near Bree.

That was the first permanent settlement after the wandering, and that was mostly the Harfoots. All the tales seem to agree they left first. Their original settlement was supposed to be near mountains. Given all the trouble we've recently had simply crossing the mountains, I think I can see why that might have been. Harfoot tales say there were monsters hunting them and they fled to get away from them.

The next to leave were the Stoors. They lived near the river… still do to this day. Many of the hobbits in Buckland are of Stoor descent. They're the only hobbits that can grow beards, though it's usually only the old gaffers that choose to. They're a weird bunch in Buckland, like to go boating and fishing, go around growing beards. Some of them are my relatives, of course. My mother's sister married a Brandybuck, and one of my Baggins cousins looks to be headed that way himself. He's just a wee lad right now, so is the object of his affections, but everyone is expecting it once they're actually of an age. More Brandybucks in the family. Just what I need. But you didn't ask about that… where was I? Oh, right, the Stoor migration.

They didn't mention monsters, their stories focus more on a sickness in the land and how the sickness was making some of their people turn cruel and evil. There was a Stoor that murdered his cousin for a trinket. It was his birthday you see, and he demanded the trinket his cousin found as a birthday present. When he refused, he killed him in cold blood. That just isn't something we do. Murder! It's appalling. Murder of kin just that much more so.

A terrible business, that. That's why we give presents on our birthdays now rather than receive them. It's… remembrance— a hobbit died from another hobbit's greed for a shiny bit of nothing. There was a lesson there for everyone about valuing the things that matter. It's a bit of atonement as well, I shouldn't think. That hobbit and his evil ways were a blight upon all of us, one we share equally. After the wandering, once we settled in the Shire, the three original clans became one. We're all interrelated. He's a stain on our collective past. We made the conscious decision to distance ourselves from such goings on. What is a bit of gold or a shiny trinket in the end, after all? Something that collects dust, when all is said and done."

"You spit upon our entire life and culture with your words, Mr. Baggins. The bounties of the earth, finding them and crafting them, are what we were made for."

"One of you told me it was the finding and the crafting that were most important in your culture. Gold, by itself, isn't important."

"Still you scoff at us! Gold and the things we craft of it are the legacy and wealth of my people."

"But in the end, the people themselves are what's most important, wouldn't you agree? That's what I'm saying." He studied Thorin's grumpy face a moment and continued.
"When the dragon came, would you have preferred an alternative to what happened? All your people killed, so long as the gold was safe…or, as I suspect, was the survival of your people the thing you were most grateful for? Gold, for all that it shines, is worth nothing without people to share it with, without good food and comforts to buy with it. A home that was only filled with gold, with no family, no warmth, no good cheer, would not be a home at all." Bilbo smiled sadly.

"Believe me when I say that. It's something I know from experience. Bag End is a rather large smial, quite the envy of the four farthings. The only ones that really top it are the Great Smials of Buckland and Tuckborough. I'm actually a rather wealthy hobbit. I'm quite envied for that as well, you know. It's all been rather empty since my parents died. Oh, I have aunts, uncles and cousins aplenty, but the ones I like all live a good distance away, so I don't see them as much as I would like…while the rest I see all too often, usually trying to steal my spoons." he laughed hollowly and continued with his story.

"The murder by itself was bad enough, the growing sickness in the land an ongoing worry…but then there were strange goings on that frightened and worried the Stoor hobbits and made them decide they needed to leave much as the Harfoots had. Their tales say an invisible thing was attacking them… I know, it sounds ridiculous…"

Bilbo trailed off for a moment as his earlier musings about Gollum and the ring he'd found came back. His hand crept up to the pocket where he stowed the ring and he rolled it through his fingers. He shook his head and kept talking. He was just being silly. There was nothing evil about the useful little ring he'd found, surely, and he certainly didn't feel the least urge to murder anyone!

"That's what the stories passed down say though. Some invisible evil stalked their community and savaged several hobbits--in the streets, in their homes even! They didn't know what it was, or what was causing it, but it was the last straw, so they packed up and crossed the mountains like their Harfoot cousins had years before."

Bilbo smiled then, and his chest puffed just a bit. "The last to leave were the Fallowhides, which is what my mother's family descends from. They lived on the edges of a forest, and were more nomadic than the other clans. They were hunters rather than farmers like the other clans were. Fallowhide tales speak of a sickness growing in the land as well, and a darkening of the forest. Game began to become scarce in their usual haunts, and it became more dangerous from marauding monsters roaming the area. They were the last to cross the mountains."

Bilbo drank some mead to wet his throat before continuing. "As I said, we don't have any definitive word on where our original homeland was, but some of my ancestors spent a good deal of time collecting all the tales the different clans had, and most now believe it was the Anduin valley where we started off. It has mountains, forests and a river, men and elves and dwarves--or did. It's the only spot anyone can agree on as a likely place as anywhere else someone suggested is missing one or more of the elements that carried down in tales. If I remember my maps correctly, that would be just a ways south of here, correct? I'm probably the first hobbit to be in these parts since we all left generations ago. Goodness! I'll certainly have tales to tell when I return at journey's end… assuming I live to do so, of course!"

"That's quite a tale there. You said the three clans became one?"

"Everyone knows what clan they descend from most, but there's been so much intermarriage that we're all one people these days, more or less."

"Why don't you have a beard then?"

"I've little Stoor blood in me. I've some, of course. One of my ancestors married a Stoor hobbit a few
generations back. My grandfather had rather impressive sideburns, but that's it. The Bagginses are Harfoots, my mother's clan, the Tooks are Fallowhides with a bit of Stoor, hence the sideburns."
Bilbo explained.

"Anyway... When the Fallowhides eventually caught up to the rest, they found a mixed settlement of Stoors and Harfoots in Breeland. They elected the Fallowhides as their leaders--they were more adventurous and outgoing than the average hobbit. Two brothers approached the King of Arnor and asked for the right to settle the Shire, and it was granted on the understanding that we would maintain the roads and bridges, which we still do, though Arnor fell long ago. The great North road and the great Eastern road are still intact and in good condition in the Shire and they have been since we first settled there. It's a point of pride to us."

The Dwarves nodded. The great eastern road was indeed in good condition in that part of the world. Elsewhere it had all but disappeared in places.

"The Oldbuck clan were the first Thains, chosen to lead us when the last king of Arnor died, but then Bucca of the Marish decided to take his clan and went and founded Buckland. The Brandybucks were all Fallowhides, but they intermarried extensively with Stoorish hobbits, and that's what went to Buckland. They wanted to be closer to the river, you see. Like I said, odd folks.

The Took clan, who are also Fallowhides, took over as the Thains of the Shire and have been since. My grandfather, the Old Took, was the Thain for many years, then uncle Isengrim, my mother Belladonna's eldest brother was, and now it's my cousin Fortinbras as of two years ago. My grandmother, Adamanta Chubb, my mother's mother, was a Harfoot hobbit, all the Chubbs are, but her grandmother was a Fallowhide. My father, and the rest of the Bagginses are all Harfoot hobbits as well. They've always been the largest clan. Most of the Shire is Harfoot hobbits, with the exception of Tuckborough, which is mostly Fallowhides. Buckland is Fallowhides, the Brandybucks, and Stoorish hobbits, and there are some Stoors still in the Marish. You see?"

"Not really." Fili admitted.

Balin smacked him in the back of the head. Ori was nodding, and also taking copious notes, as he always did when Bilbo spoke of all things hobbity.

When dinner was over, Bilbo wandered outside to enjoy what was left of the sunshine. Bifur found a comfy seat by the fire to continue working on his button project. Dori grabbed his brothers and shooed them towards the bath. The others found ways to occupy themselves around the room. Thorin remained at the table, brooding.

There had been several well, odd facial expressions that the hobbit had made while telling his story. And what was all that with the golden trinket that made one of his ancestors a murderer, a kin-slayer no less? It had been that, specifically, that had prompted the oddness. Kin-slaying and an invisible menace… Both times, he had made an odd face and started fiddling with his pocket, a habit he seemed to have picked up only recently. He thought then of when they had all regrouped outside the goblin caves, when he had still believed Bilbo to have fled into the night to return to Rivendell.

He had appeared suddenly and without warning amongst them, and had been cagey about how he'd managed to escape the goblins on his own and with little injury to show for it. Gandalf had questioned him, or tried to, but then the hunting calls of Azog's wargs had sounded and they'd been fleeing for their lives once more. There was something niggling at him about all of it, but he could not for the life of him figure what it was.

He dug into his pockets for the map he'd carried with him from Ered Luin that showed the world east of the mountains, where once they had lived before Erebor fell, and where, it seemed, the hobbits
had also once lived before they too had been driven from their homes. Until hearing his story, he never would have credited the soft little hobbits with having a history that so closely echoed their own. It seemed he had misjudged Mr. Baggins, and his people, far more than he’d realized.

There was the misty mountains, the Greenwood, home of Thranduil the betrayer. In the northeast Erebor and the Iron Hills. Southward, Lorien, where yet more elves lived, their leader a witch from what he’d heard, as if a normal elf wasn’t bad enough. The Anduin river ran downwards towards Rohan and Gondor, alongside the mountains, and running between them and the Greenwood.

There! The Anduin Valley, which contained the Gladden Fields. A great battle had taken place there long ago. Isildur, who had cut the ring from Sauron’s finger during the last great battle with him, the last alliance of elves and men, was waylaid there by orcs and his forces destroyed. He was never seen again, nor was the ring he carried after refusing to destroy it in Mount Doom.

He had seen a great mural of that battle while they guested in Rivendell, along with the shards of the dwarven-made sword Narsil wielded by Isildur, which had shattered, and the broken remains used to cut the fingers from Sauron’s hand. Isildur, whose heir fostered in Rivendell and became King of Arnor in his time upon coming of Age. Arnor that the hobbits swore allegiance to upon being given leave to settle in their Shire.

Anduin, the Gladden Fields, Isildur and Arnor and Sauron’s ring, murderous hobbit kin-slayers and invisible foes, strange events in the goblin caves and a burglar who seemed to become infinitely more sneaky overnight…

"How did you escape?"

"I found something, down in the goblin caves. I…"

"Found something? Found what?"

"I… My courage. I found my courage."

He had been lying…not necessarily about finding his courage, as he certainly did seem to do just that, if his attack on Azog’s forces was any indication. He had noted it at the time, even as he’d been reeling from his impassioned promise to help them reclaim their home, for no better reason than because they deserved to have one… this, even after his cruelty and disdain thus far.

Gandalf hadn’t seemed to believe him either and his eyes had narrowed suspiciously, but his chance to question him further had been lost when the wargs had cried out.

The wargs, and the orcs that rode on them were actually another thing. Orcs tended to turn on one another and fight one another in the absence of any other enemy… and yet, Azog had a group organized and hunting them across Arda, and they kept catching up to them, still organized and not turning on one another. There were too many gathered in one place, all working together. Orcs didn’t do that unless something was driving them…

Thorin’s heart started pounding and he felt only the overwhelming urge to simply cast aside his odd musings as boredom or eagerness to get started again…. Erebor still lay ahead of them, still vulnerable. His home, that had lain ever before his eyes since she was lost. The vast wealth of the mountain, unprotected. He wanted to go home. He wanted the wealth of their people in his hands once more. He wanted to finally lay aside the burning need for vengeance, he wanted to reclaim his birthright and assert Durin’s line’s supremacy once more. He wanted a better future for his boys and his sister and his cousins… and himself.
No more groveling to men for a pittance, no more slaving over a forge unless he chose to, no more uncertainty, no more hungry nights, no more being homeless squatting vagabonds. He had told Balin just this morning that no obstacle would turn him from their quest. It was probably nothing. They already had a quest to worry about.

That night, Thorin dreamed.

_He saw the last alliance of elves and men._

*A monstrous being of incredible size strode across the battlefield like an unstoppable tsunami._

*He saw the sword shatter, saw Isildur's desperate lunge for the broken remnant, and a golden ring tumble to the ground._

*He saw Azanulzibar--their ancient kingdom, first homeland of his people, founded by Durin himself, lost to them when Durin's Bane, a servant of Morgoth, Sauron's master, attacked from the deeps, and then became a nest for filthy orcs._

That battle had been nearly a century and a half ago, and yet it haunted him still. He had been far too young for battle, not yet of age. His brother, golden, laughing Frerin, had been even younger. The only mercy was that Dis hadn't been drag along as well.

Seeing that monster behead his grandfather had haunted his dreams for years afterwards, as did the sight of his brother, torn apart by orcs when he'd not been there to protect him.

*His father had disappeared._

*He saw his own stand against Azog, and from the strange vantage from which he watched the battle, he could not help but see the similarities to the previous battle. Himself, taking up his oaken shield protect himself from Azog while he groped for his lost sword, a sword that had thankfully remained unbroken. Sauron had lost his fingers. Azog lost the lower part of his arm and fled the field of battle._

*All these years he had believed him dead. He wasn't. He was alive, well and hunting his family still._

*He saw the Gladden Fields. Isildur, harried by orcs on all sides. He fled towards the river, and was never seen again._

*He dreamed of halflings by a riverside, a golden trinket, a murder committed._

*He relived their desperate flight from the goblin caves. So many goblins, their numbers had filled the vast cavern as far as the eye could see...and yet Azog and his band of orcs were organized enough and numerous enough that the goblin king sent word of their capture rather than risk his wrath..._

*He dreamed of Erebor--its glorious halls, its vast wealth._

*He saw the dragon dead, he knew not how nor did it seem important._

*He sat enthroned in splendor, surrounded by the vast wealth of his people. So much gold...like an ocean of wealth caught fast in the mountain. Gold. So much Gold..._
He sat upon his throne, laughing and bound in chains of shadow.

Behind him, holding the chains like a man would the reins on a fractious horse, stood a shadowy menace, who reached down and plucked a golden ring from Bilbo, who lay dead at Azog's feet, along with himself, his sister-sons, and the rest of the company.

Thorin snapped awake, and bit back a groan of pain when the sudden movement pulled at his wounded ribs.

He tried in vain for some time to get back to sleep, to dismiss the dream as the product of an overactive imagination and nothing more, but his night terrors were not so easily dismissed. What good would it do to reclaim their homeland if it meant losing it again right afterwards?

If the Valar were kind, whatever Mr. Baggins found would be a silly trifle and nothing more, and whatever odd fancies had come to him as he told his story were just strange hobbitish fancies and nothing of any real import whatsoever. He could only hope.

He had to at least check, now that these strange thoughts had come to him. He could not do otherwise, as the consequences would be unthinkable for both his people and the world. He needed to at least ask. Soon he would be free to focus on Erebor to the exclusion of all else once more with a clear conscience and he could set aside his odd circling thoughts for once and for all.

He was still brooding when the company was roused from sleep by the smell of food. He continued brooding while he ate. He would wait until Bilbo had finished. He didn't want the company to hear his strange fancies—bad enough the burglar had to. When Bilbo finally pushed away from the table and headed outside, Thorin steeled himself to be laughed at and followed after him.

"Where's our fearless leader off to with such a look on his face?"

"He's headed for Bilbo!"

"Could it be?"

"Where's Nori?"

"Right here. Don't tell me he's actually making a move!"

"What's going on? What's this?" Dori demanded. "What did you do?" he hissed at his brother as he tried pushing forward to see what everyone was staring at out the window.

"Let me see too!" Ori complained.

"There's another window!"

Dori, Bombur, Dwalin, Ori and Balin scurried to the second window.

Outside Thorin had found Bilbo laying against a small hillock a short distance from the house, enjoying the sunshine and a pipe. He came to a stop next to him and a small smile crossed his face as he looked down. He was regaining some of the weight he'd lost during the journey, the lines of stress and fright that had begun to mar his face had smoothed out, and his hair shone with glints of gold
and copper in the sunlight.

The hobbit's eyes opened when Thorin's shadow fell across him. It took Bilbo a moment to find his voice when he opened his eyes. Thorin was backlit by the sun, and for a moment he seemed a majestic figure of legend. He shaded his eyes, and he was once again the grumpy (if handsome) dwarf king he normally was.

"Ah, Thorin. Hello. Care to join me? I've a full pouch. The animals here were kind enough to let me refill here. He actually had some Longbottom leaf, not the stuff you all smoke."

"It's different?"

"Completely different plant. The stuff you all use has rather large oblong leaves. Our leaf is seven pronged and much smaller."

For a moment it looked like Thorin was going to pursue the discussion of pipe weed and its differences across communities, but he shook his head, and crossed his arms, a stern look crossing his face.

"Mr. Baggins, though I thank you for the offer, I did not come here to discuss pipe weed. I would like to discuss the thing you found in the goblin caves."

The easy smile on Bilbo's face vanished like mist and his visage grew cold.

"There's nothing to discuss. I found my courage, like I said. If you'll excuse me, I was about to take a walk when you arrived."

Thorin caught him by the wrist when he tried to leave, and kept his grip gentle even when Bilbo tried to twist loose, looking almost savage as he did so. A cold fear twisted through his bowels at the sight. He'd seen that look before, on his grandfather when the gold sickness began growing out of control. He pulled him closer and gripped his shoulders firmly.

"Bilbo"

Bilbo's feral gaze vanished in his surprise at hearing the grumpy dwarf use his first name, though he was still stiff and wary beneath his hands.

"I need to see what you found. I have some concerns about what manner of thing it might be, however useful it might seem. The fact that you are unwilling to even acknowledge that the thing exists only makes me worry all the more. I am the leader of this company. I am sure you understand that, for the safety of everyone, I must be allowed to inspect the item and be certain."

Bilbo was still agitated, but he was listening.

"It's not dangerous. It's just a little ring."

The cold feeling in his bowels grew more pronounced.

"A plain gold band. It's nothing special at all. It just makes you invisible."

"Invisible?"

His mind flashed to Bilbo's tale from the night before and his worry grew more palpable still.

"Is that how you escaped the goblin caves?"
Bilbo twisted his fingers together and kept his eyes down as he related the story of the creature he’d met in the bowels of the mountain, the game of riddles, his chance finding of the ring, and how it had fallen onto his finger as though by magic when he’d nearly lost it while fleeing the murderous creature chasing him.

"He was right in front of me, looking right at me even, but he didn't know I was there. That's when I realized the worth of what I'd found. I actually followed him to the exit. I saw all of you run past. That's how I escaped."

"May I see it?"

Bilbo's eyes flashed up to meet his, cold and suspicious. It was difficult to keep his own expression even in response. Finally Bilbo groped towards his pocket, the same one he kept fiddling with lately. He held out his hand, on which a small gold ring sat. Thorin felt himself relax just a bit. That tiny thing held no inscription, and would certainly never fit on the finger of a monstrous being the size of Sauron. He reached for it, only to have Bilbo grow stiff and cold beneath his hand once more and hide it from his grasp.

"Bilbo. I just want to see it. I will give it back once I have done so, I promise."

"Why are you so insistent on this?" Bilbo asked suspiciously.

"I had some fear it was a cursed ring I'd heard tell of. Seeing how small it is, it probably is not this one, but I would like to make sure."

Bilbo dithered for a few moments, but he eventually held it out for Thorin to take. Thorin plucked it from his grasp and held it up, only for his earlier unease to come back full force all at once. The ring was bigger, much bigger. It was large enough now to fit easily on one of Thorin’s fingers, which were thick and calloused, much different from Bilbo’s small, slender digits. Bilbo gaped at the ring and then looked down at his hands in confusion. Something that size would never have fit on his hand.

"I don't understand. It fit me."

"May I?" Thorin asked, grasping his wrist and holding the ring up to put on him.

Bilbo nodded. When the ring was in place he vanished right in front of him. He would never have known anyone stood there had he not still had a firm grasp of Bilbo and the ring both. He pulled the ring free and held it up. It was once more large enough to fit him. Thorin closed his hand over it and met Bilbo's gaze.

"Mr. Baggins, I fear this matter needs more investigation before I can in good conscience clear it for use on our quest."

"What do you think it is?"

"Have you heard of Sauron?"

Bilbo nodded and his gaze darted to the hand holding the ring in disbelief.

"Oh, surely not!"

"I sincerely hope so. Come, we need more information."
"They're coming back. Quick! Act casual!"

"What was all that? How did Bilbo disappear? What was that ring?"

"Hopefully they'll tell us, now quiet!"

Thorin and Bilbo both seemed lost in thought when they came back inside.

"Ah, everyone, good. Balin…tell me something, do you know anything about the ring of Sauron?" Thorin asked.

He went to the table and laid the gold ring he'd had earlier on the table. The rest gathered around and looked at it. It was a plain band of gold. Pretty, but rather innocuous… though the longer they looked at it, the more it seemed to gleam. Balin twitched in surprise at the question, as did Ori.

"Sauron? What?"

"Ori?" Bilbo spoke up. "Did you have something to say?"

He seemed to be doing his best not to look at the ring, though his hands kept twisting as though he was only just keeping himself from leaping over to snatch it back.

"I saw a mural when I was walking around Rivendell. I was looking for the library. There was a broken sword there too. An elf found me there looking at it. He told me about them. The mural was of the last battle against Sauron. It showed Isildur lifting the broken sword, just before he cut the ring from Sauron's hand. The broken sword there was the very sword that did it. Dwarven made," he added proudly. "I asked about the ring, and the battle…and the library. He took me there. He said Sauron put his power in it, the ring I mean, and that Isildur was supposed to destroy it in Mount Doom in Mordor. Elrond was there, you know. That Isildur fellow was his nephew or something. His brother was a man."

"Yes, yes. That is known. Was there a point to this story?" Balin interjected.

"He said Sauron could come back so long as the ring remained undestroyed. He also said the rings of the dwarf lords were cursed. I questioned this of course. He said Sauron made them, and made some for the kings of men too, and then made his own to control them with. That's what that ring of his was for. He said the Nazgûl were the kings of men, or used to be. He said the rings didn't work as expected on the dwarf lords though. That's why so many of them were lost. He wanted them back because he put some of his power in them, but they didn't allow him to control dwarves or corrupt them the way they did men. It just made our tendency towards… towards gold sickness worse," he finished with a whisper.

Everyone turned to look at Thorin whose face looked carved from stone.

"What's going on?" Bilbo asked tentatively.

Balin tore his gaze from Thorin and looked at Bilbo, then looked to Thorin for permission before answering.

"King Thror, Thorin's grandfather, the last king under the mountain, still had his ring. He was one of the few who did. He also fell prey to gold sickness…so much so that he couldn't be torn from the treasury, even with a dragon bearing down on him. He had to be drug bodily from the mountain. Thrain took the ring from his father after his death at Azanulzibar. It was lost with him when he disappeared."
Bilbo wrung his hands again, remembering part of a conversation between Elrond and Gandalf that he and Thorin overheard.

"There is madness in that line. Can you promise that Thorin Oakenshield will not also fall?"

"Thorin is not his grandfather."

"What nonsense is this? Sauron did not… it was elves that…"

"The elf I spoke to said it was Sauron that made them and Sauron that gave them to us. He could change his shape, apparently. He seemed surprised that I didn't know."

"Why didn't you say something sooner?"

"We've been rather busy… and it didn't seem pressing as Thrain's ring was lost like all the others were."

"What's with all these questions? What is this all about?" Dwalin asked finally.

"And what's it have to do with that?" he gestured to the golden ring still sitting and looking innocuous on Beorn's giant table.

Thorin explained his odd train of thought earlier and his increased worry now that he knew that the trinket Bilbo found actually was a golden ring…much like the one that may well have been lost by Isildur in the Gladden fields to be possibly found by a hobbit, only to drive his cousin mad and make him a kinslayer.

Bilbo and the dwarves all looked at the ring. Such a small thing, so plain. It seemed impossible that it should be a thing of such import.

"That thing would never fit on someone man sized, let alone bigger. If the mural showed the truth, he was a lot bigger." Ori objected.

"It changes size. My hands are much larger than Mr. Baggins'. It grew larger when I took it from him, and shrank again when I put it on him."

"It's ridiculous. Surely it would have been fancier if it was so important?"

"It was supposed to be a plain gold band." Ori disagreed.

"How could we even tell if it was? It's not like it says 'property of Sauron. Very evil ring. Beware.'" Bofur joked.

"Actually…there is a way to tell. The elf I spoke to said there was an inscription on it. It was visible when Sauron wore it, because he was very hot or something. It was plain gold while Isildur had it… but he discovered that the inscription would show up if it got hot. It fell in the fire once and he was so desperate to get it back that he stuck his hand into the fire to rescue it. He burned his hand badly, but he discovered the inscription while it was still hot."

"Mr. Baggins? Would you do the honors?"

"You want me to throw it in the fire?" Bilbo demanded. "It's just a little ring. This is ridiculous!"

"We need to know for sure. Wouldn't you agree? Look at it this way… if it is not, there's no harm in
you keeping it. We can continue on to Erebor with a clear conscience, and a useful item to help us in our quest."

Bilbo wrung his hands again and slowly approached the ring and picked it up, taking it towards the fire. He stood there clutching it for many long moments, but made no move to throw it in.

"Mr. Baggins?" Thorin prompted.

Bilbo turned to look at him, his eyes too large in his face.

"Bilbo" he said again, his voice gentle. "Please."

Bilbo kept his eyes on Thorin and tossed the ring in the fire.
Lord Elrond of Rivendell and his retinue entered the borders of Lothlórien and came to a halt when they were met by some of the elves that called the place home-- their number including one he was especially glad to see.

"Arwen. Let me look at you."

"Father. It's good to see you. Surely you don't miss me so terribly? I haven't been gone for that long."

Arwen threaded her arm through her father's and they set off walking together at a leisurely pace while the rest gathered their mounts and baggage to see them to the city.

"While your brothers and I do miss you terribly, I'm afraid I'm here on White Council business. Tell me…are you in touch with Legolas still?"

"I have not seen or heard from him any time recently. Why do you ask?"

"I visited briefly with Mithrandir a few weeks ago. He said he'd run into Aiwendil, the brown wizard, and he was telling him tales of darkness in the Greenwood, fell beasts and danger. Aiwendil claims the enemy is gathering strength. I was wondering if you'd heard anything about any of it."

"No, I have not. Do you think there is reason to worry for them?"

"I'm sure it's nothing. Have you ever met him?"

"Aiwendil? No, I have not. I've only seen Mithrandir a time or two before when he visited you. I've seen Curunir a time or two since I have been here, but that one I have not met."

"If you had you would know why I am not more concerned. He is wise and powerful, I've no doubt, and he loves the children of the green lady and has dedicated his life to looking after them but…"

"But?"

"He's a little…odd. Dedicated, well-meaning…but odd."

"I will take your word for it, father. Is this the business that brings you here? Investigating his claims?"

"Yes. We thought it was perhaps worthwhile to look around a bit if nothing else. Curunir does not agree, though after much argument he agreed to meet all of us there to look around. He has a lower opinion of the brown wizard than I do." Elrond agreed wryly. "With that said, there is no rush. I will have a few days to spend with my only daughter while I guest here."
"Good. Though indeed it has not been long, I have missed you as well."

They wandered for a while, enjoying the peace and beauty of the forest.

"Do you think we should send some people to visit the woodland court, just in case? If you trust the brown wizard's word…"

"I don't want to make a big production should it prove to be nothing."

"What if he has actual reason for concern? Like I said, it has been some time since I have had word from Legolas. If we send people there and it is in fact nothing, well, there is no harm in it, surely? They can visit and return at some later date with news of our distant cousins to share…"

"And if there is indeed some calamity that has befallen them, such aid might well mean the difference between victory and defeat." Elrond sighed.

"I do not mean to overstep my bounds, father."

"No. No, you should never fear giving counsel, especially if it runs against what I have already decided. You are correct in all you surmise. Let us see the Lady. She can bring word to Imladris and perhaps even gather a number of her own people to join them. I've no doubt your brothers will be eager to venture forth."

"Indeed, they will. They are ever hungry for battle. They cannot rest while even a single orc walks free upon the earth."

"Nor can any of us, but I worry sometimes about them."

"If you fear their hearts grow dim because of this hunger, you may rest easy. It is quite the opposite, I assure you. Every battle they wage against the enemy lessens the shadows that already lie therein. It is their absolution. Though they were in no way to blame for what happened to our mother, the heart does not always listen to reason. They blame themselves for not being able to save her from her doom."

Arwen sighed then and looked at her father with sad understanding.

"They are much like their father in that, I think."

Elrond gave her a sad, rueful smile.

"And you, dear one, are much like your mother. Very little is hidden from your eyes."

"It pleases me to know that. I don't remember her, not truly, though there has been an emptiness in me for as long as I can remember."

Elrond's face creased in pain at her words.

"It pains me to hear you say such. She loved you… so very much."

"Yet it was not enough to keep her here."

"She was too deeply wounded. There was no peace for her, nor rest, not so long as she remained. She did try. In the end, it was simply too much for her. I will admit, I feel I failed her further by remaining."

"Someone needed to stay and guard against the enemy's return. The memories of men are short. The
wizards, however dedicated, cannot do it themselves. They were sent as guides, not as problem solvers. My grandparents, however determined, cannot do it alone."

"Let us find your grandmother and see if we can levy some volunteers to go eastward. I suppose we all shall see soon enough how dire the situation is."

Chapter End Notes

Aiwendil = Radagast
Curunir = Saruman
Mithrandir = Gandalf
The gold ring once more sat in the middle of Beorn's table.

The gathered dwarves and hobbit sat back a good distance from it, but none of them could take their eyes from it. The fiery inscription that had appeared on it while in the fire was gone now, but the sight was still burned into their minds. Such a small thing and yet so very, very dangerous.

Thorin had been brooding since the fiery letters appeared, and he seemed angry, sadly resigned…and very, very frustrated. Bilbo looked ill. He hadn't been able to look any of them in the eye since the ring had been fished from the fire. Unlike earlier he no longer seemed on the verge of snatching it back away from everyone's gaze.

"Well." Gloin muttered when the silence had gone on too long for his liking "this is a fine kettle of fish, is it not?"

"What do we do? I mean… no one wants Sauron to come back. I've read stories about the last alliance. I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy!" Ori murmured.

"All those orcs gathering in such numbers, out in force and searching… it has to mean something." Dwalin muttered.

Thorin stared at the far wall, a frown creasing his forehead. "I overheard part of a conversation between Gandalf and Elrond while we were in Rivendell. He did not think our quest a good idea, of course. He mentioned knowing it was important that the borders be strengthened in the east, but that he was unsure that our waking the dragon was the best way to go about it. They knew already."

"Knew what?" Fili asked worriedly.

"Knew that Sauron was still out there, knew he was gathering strength, knew he was gathering dark forces to his command once more. Any of it. All of it. They knew and none thought it meet to let any of us know what we might be walking in to! They wanted dwarven armies there in place to hold back Sauron's forces, but could not be bothered to let us know what might be coming!"

"They wanted us to be their sword fodder so they could have the leisure to search for this ring."

"A gold ring. They didn't trust us because of that."

"Of course. Greedy, untrustworthy. Is that not what they think of us? We cannot be trusted, for all that it was a man with elf blood that failed to destroy it in the first place!"

Thorin sneered. "They didn't tell us about this, they didn't tell us about the King's ring."

"Had he not become so enamored of gold, expanded the treasury to such lengths… Smaug might never have come. We would still have our homes." Balin muttered.
"The hobbits would as well. That damned ring, rising evil in the land, marauding orcs… it all comes back to him again, doesn't it?"

"But of course men and elves are too high and mighty to share these concerns with the likes of us! Are we not citizens of this world as well?" Balin grumbled.

"What do we do though? Erebor is still a good distance away and time is wasting." Nori asked.

"Now that we know what we have here we cannot simply let it be. It still needs to be destroyed." Gloin spoke up.

The dwarves all looked at each other worriedly, and Thorin closed his eyes and sighed. It looked like he was in pain.

"I want to go home," he said quietly. "I want our mountain back. I want our people safe. I want our people's gold back in our hands where it belongs."

"We continue to Erebor then?" Kili asked.

Thorin pushed back from the table and began to pace once he was on his feet.

"I want to, but we cannot. Again and again our people have been driven from our homes by Sauron's creatures. What use braving the dragon and reclaiming our home if it would only be lost to us again should Sauron rise again? I do not want to gather our people here only to have them once more set upon by evil! With the dark lord gone the orcs will turn on one another, no longer organized enough to prove a threat to us."

"We do not have very long until Durin's day. If we do this we may miss it." Balin reminded him.

"I know." he sighed.

Bilbo finally looked up and looked between the two of them. "What? What are you talking about?"

"We must travel to Mordor, to Mount Doom to complete the task the man-elf failed in. We will see this dark lord destroyed once and for all so he can no longer threaten our people. We will avenge the curse laid on my grandfather, the dwarves that burned in Smaug's fires when Erebor fell, my father, lost and tortured in prison somewhere until Gandalf happened upon him… the hobbits as well. The hobbits driven mad by his cursed ring, the orcs and rising evil that drove them forth from their homes. To reclaim Erebor has been all that I have wanted all the long years of our exile. We're so close… Was it truly just a few days ago we saw her again, there in the distance as we stood on the Carrock? I want to go home… but I want Sauron and his creatures destroyed and our people avenged even more. We have, all of us, lost too much to do otherwise."

"What about the portents? You said others would see them as well! What if we do this only to find our mountain looted while we were gone?" Dori wondered.

"There is still the dragon. We do not know that he has died, only that he has not been seen in some time. I suppose we can hope that fear of the dragon will keep others away until we have a chance to return." Bombur offered hesitantly.

"And we were depending on a hidden door to get us in."

"It could be no one else will be able to sneak in, even if they do not fear a dragon's wrath."

"We might have to wait a whole 'nother year." Nori pointed out. "Even if no one loots the place in
the meantime."

"I know. Damn it, I know." Thorin growled unhappily. "Must the whole world conspire against us?"

Dinner that night was a subdued, silent affair. Bilbo ate with little appetite--though he still put away more than most of the dwarves--and then excused himself to go to bed early. Thorin undid the chain on his neck that held Thrain's key and slipped the ring on to it, before offering the lot to Bilbo, who stared at the ring like it was a live viper about to bite him.

"For good or ill it came to you. I have not felt a longing for it yet, but I could. Gold sickness is very real problem for us. I fear what such a malady might become under the influence of such an item. Your people, however, do not have a dwarf's love of gold, and you reordered your whole society to atone for the actions of a single hobbit under its influence. I think it best left with you."

"Your key though."

"I only have the one chain, I fear. I would not see either thing lost, so you must be its guardian until we return." He explained as he fastened it around Bilbo's neck.

"I know you will take care of it until we have need of it."

Bilbo hung his head, looking miserable indeed. "You must hate me. Because of me, your quest…"

"Enough. This was none of your doing, for all the ring came into your possession. More than that, though I like it not, this was my decision. You have nothing to apologize for."

Bilbo nodded, but he still looked thoroughly miserable. Thorin sighed and put his fingers beneath his chin, tilting his head back until he looked at him.

"If not for you, I would not even be here to wrestle with this decision. You have nothing to apologize for. Sauron was out spreading his evil long before you were even born. If there is any fault to be had it is with Sauron himself, and with that man-elf that failed in the first place, and with Gandalf and that other elf for not sharing their worries with us. There are many who can take a share of the blame for this situation, and none of them are you."

Bilbo finally managed a smile. It was a wan little thing, but it was genuine for all that.

The moment was broken when Bifur approached them and gestured for Bilbo to hold out his hand. He carefully settled the buttons he'd carved out over the course of the day into his hand and patted him gently on the shoulder. Bilbo picked up one and found each had been inscribed with the image of an acorn, just like the brass buttons he'd lost in the goblin cave. Bilbo's smile widened and became more normal and genuine.

"Thank you, Bifur. That was very kind of you."

Bifur smiled and patted him on the head. Thorin gave him a flat look for his trouble. Bifur hurried back to his cousins.

"I don't suppose anyone has any needle and thread?"

"I can take care of that for you." Dori offered.

"Oh, no, I couldn't possibly ask you…"
"You didn't, and it's no trouble." Dori tutted, taking the buttons and retrieving his red coat, which had been laundered earlier and was now neatly folded with the rest of the clean clothes.

Bilbo woke slowly and stretched.

The hay, though a bit scratchy, smelled sweet and was far more comfortable than sleeping on the ground. He heard movement in the room beyond and sat up.

"Beorn! You're back!"

Around him the dwarves began to stir and stared at their giant host who was now seated at the table as his animal friends laid out breakfast for everyone.

"Little bunny!" Beorn boomed as he got closer. To Bilbo's dismay he was swooped up again, and his belly poked repeatedly by the giant man. "Little bunny is getting nice and fat again on milk and honey!"

"Please put me down." Bilbo sighed.

Beorn just laughed, and to his relief settled him down in the seat nearest him. He even pushed the food closer so Bilbo could more easily reach it, which went a long way towards earning his forgiveness for all the manhandling. When the dwarves were seated Beorn nodded to all of them.

"It seems your friend was telling the truth. I found them creeping along the edges of my land. Some of them got away, but you'll not be troubled further while you're here."

"That's good." Thorin nodded.

Beorn frowned and looked around at all of them.

"Why all the long faces? I would think you'd be happier at my news!"

"Bilbo here found Sauron's ring in the goblin cave. We were headed to Erebor to reclaim our homeland from the dragon. The ring has changed all that."

"Sauron? His ring? What?" Beorn demanded.

Ori took it upon himself to fill in the story for their host while the rest of them ate. When he was done Beorn's face was like a thundercloud.

"I don't like orcs. I think I like their boss even less. This is not a good thing for a little bunny to have."

"We agree, which is why we must travel to see it destroyed."

"I can see that, but your mountain will still be there when you're done."

"We've a map to a secret door that can only be opened one day of the year. By going to Mordor instead of Erebor we might miss our chance altogether." Bofur explained.

"And we might return to find our home stripped of everything should another way be found in." Gloin added miserably.
"You surprise me, dwarves. You are making the choice to turn your back on your gold, possibly forever, in order to see this evil ring destroyed?"

"Don't remind us." Thorin grumbled, poking glumly at his porridge.

"No. This is a good thing you do. Maybe I've misjudged your people."

He sighed then, sadly. "This place, right here in my own lands, is still safe and beautiful. All around though, the world grows darker and more and more evil things test my borders. The forest there is not what it was. Dark things live there now, and it's dangerous to travel there. The water is tainted, and the whole thing is overrun with giant spiders. I won't go in there anymore, and neither will my friends. It isn't safe. Maybe it's this bad man with his evil ring that makes it so. I don't know. I'm a simple man."

He considered for a while and looked at Thorin again.

"This bad ring. Where must you go again to see it destroyed?"

"To Mordor, which lies east of Gondor. We must travel south, as swiftly as we may do so. There are cities there that were built to guard against incursions from Mordor when Sauron still walked openly in the world. We have already traveled far, but this journey is much further indeed."

"It's too bad we don't have a boat. The river goes all the way south, doesn't it?" Kili asked.

"It does, but a boat can't take you the whole way. My people used to trade with the south a long time ago. It can take you a good ways south, but then you have to go on foot. There's a rough part of the river that will smash up your boat should you try to sail it, and then the river splits into a great fall. Even if you can't go the whole way on the river, it would save you a lot of travel and time, it is true."

Beorn stared at the wall for a bit and then scratched his cheeks while he thought.

"I have a boat. It hasn't been on the water for a long time. I hope it's still able to make the trip. I can take you down to where the river gets rough. You'll have to do the rest on your own. If you keep the river to your side and keep south you should come to the cities of men eventually. It'll be a long walk still, but not as long as not taking the river, I think. I don't know if I like this though. Mordor sounds like a bad place for little bunnies…even for dwarves if it comes to that. You're trying to do a good thing though. I can respect that. Maybe you'll succeed and the world won't be so dark anymore. That would be a good thing."

"A boat? All that way? I don't know…" Bilbo fretted.

"It's hundreds of miles. If we're to have any hope of completing this new quest in any kind of reasonable time, a boat is our best bet." Dwalin pointed out.

"Hobbits don't do well with water. The Stoors are considered odd hobbits for a reason. After natural causes, drowning is the leading cause of death for hobbits!"

"Don't worry little bunny. I won't let you drown." Bilbo sighed. He still didn't look too enthused about the idea.

"It's a long trip. We'll need provisions. My friends will see to that. I'll see to my boat. We'll get down that long river before you know it."
Beorn's boat looked like it had seen better days.

"She hasn't been used in a long time. I can't be bothered to trade with men these days."

"Are we sure it will make it?"

"She's old, but I think she'll make it that far. I guess we'll see."

This was not at all comforting to Bilbo. He didn't care what the big man said, he was certain he was going to drown on this thing. Beorn's animal friends gave them each a good store of provisions, water skins for each of them, and he even parted with a few warg skins and some blankets to replace their lost bedrolls. Beorn was already on the boat, ready to cast off, and most of the dwarves had boarded as well while Bilbo still dithered on the bank. Thorin clamped a hand on his shoulder and marched him aboard, then planted him directly in the center.

"We will not let you drown if we can at all help it. Be at ease."

It was rather cold comfort, as Thorin himself sounded rather out of sorts at being on a boat.

Beorn cast off the ropes and steered into the strong current in the center. Bilbo gulped and closed his eyes as the boat began moving swiftly downstream. The dwarves eyed the surrounding water with distrust and moved towards the center to join him.

"The truth is, dwarves don't do much better with deep water. We don't tend to get on boats much. We sink like stones." Ori confided nervously.

"We can swim though. We'll be fine." Kili added bravely.

"I can't" Bilbo muttered. "And hobbits sink like stones too, though we also get washed away by currents easily. The water really doesn't like us."

"All will be well." Thorin told him again.

This time, he looked directly at him, and his voice was sure and strong. When he spoke like that, so assured and commanding, you couldn't help but believe him. Perhaps all kings were like that, though really Thorin was the only king he knew. Bilbo found himself relaxing slightly in spite of himself—not all the way, not completely, but at least he didn't feel like a too-tight bowstring anymore, ready to snap at the slightest pressure.

Bilbo had been terrified of deep water since he was a small child and nearly drowned. He'd been lucky then. His parents and he were picnicking and he'd wandered off to investigate the river. He'd slipped on the grass and tumbled in and nearly got swept away. Luckily his parents were nearby and had grabbed him out before he could come to harm. The water was deep for him, but not for them, and they were large enough to resist the weak currents near the shore.

Between that unfortunate experience and the constant rumors and stories of hapless hobbits that had lost their lives to the water, he'd had a healthy fear of and appreciation for the dangers that came with being near open bodies of water. He'd become a bit inured to wild water while traveling. If one wanted to wash up or get a drink, one had little choice but to venture near the rivers and streams one
passed along the way. Standing on the edge and reminding himself he was an adult and wouldn't be swept away should he stray in the shallows near the shore was a far different thing from sailing upon it.

It was strange how quickly something that had terrified him for as long as he could remember could quickly grow so boring. The water burbled, the boat rocked, the shoreline passed to either side—sometimes full of trees, sometimes rocky, sometimes sandy, sometimes grassy, but there was an alarming sameness even with the variety.

As the hours rolled by he found his nervousness melting away to be replaced by boredom. The rest of the company had spread out a bit as the hours went by. Bifur was whittling again. Ori scribbling in his book, Nori, Bofur, Gloin, Bombur and the boys were playing a game involving dice. Oin and Balin were dozing lightly on the deck. Thorin and Dwalin were watching the river ahead and the banks alongside them for any signs of trouble. Beorn himself sat upon a large barrel and gave the boat a nudge every so often when it began to drift from the center. He looked at Balin and Oin and wished he could relax enough for a nap himself. The rolling of the boat beneath him was strangely soothing for all that all the open water still made him nervous.

He gathered up his courage and carefully made his way to the bow where Thorin and Dwalin stood watching the river. He yawned widely enough to crack his jaw. Thorin turned to look at him and he smirked slightly.

"You seem to have moved past your fear."

"Not really. I'd like to take a nap, but I doubt I could relax enough to actually fall asleep."

"Tired already?" Dwalin scoffed.

"It is strangely exhausting to do nothing for hours and hours…that and, I didn't sleep well last night."

"You should sleep then. I will wake you if anything happens. You have my word."

"I believe you. I still don't think I could relax enough to actually sleep… not to mention it seems strangely lazy. I've not actually been awake for all that long."

"You should try to enjoy the ride while you can. It will take a few days to get to the impassable section of the river. Once we get there we have another long walk ahead of us."

"Don't remind me."

Thorin nodded and went back to watching the river. Bilbo noted he seemed strangely melancholy.

"Are you, um, alright?"

"I am well, Master Baggins."

"Bilbo. My name is Bilbo."

Thorin turned to look down at him, and his face softened. "… Bilbo," he agreed. His voice had gotten strangely husky.

Dwalin slanted a look at his king and smirked. He wiped the smirk away before saying anything.

"I think I'll go take a kip. I think I can relax enough to nap even if you can't."
Thorin looked at him oddly, but nodded.

"Your brother too. He and Oin have been asleep for the last hour at least." Bilbo gestured back to the rest of the Company.

Thorin continued looking at him oddly as he went to join the others nearer the center of the deck.

"What?" "It's just very unlike him to want to take a nap when we're in an unfamiliar place, especially in the middle of the day."

"Maybe he just wants to be rested for when we stop at night?"

"Perhaps. Yes, I suppose that must be it."

The boat rocked unexpectedly and Bilbo staggered into Thorin and grabbed hold of his furry coat in an iron grip. Thorin carefully reached up and set his hand against the hobbit's back until he felt him relax again.

"Sorry…it's just…water."

"You don't have to apologize."

"Are we at the rough part already? I thought it would take longer."

"It will likely take all of today and tomorrow at least. It is a fair distance away." He sighed again and stared sightlessly out into the water. "And with every moment Erebor gets further away."

"I'm sorry."

"It is not your fault. I have said this."

"Still…"

Thorin sighed again, his voice quiet and strangely melancholy.

"My people have lost every home they've had. Oh, it often took generations in between, but we did. We lost Khazad Dûm, Mount Gundabad, we lost our settlement in the Grey Mountains, we lost Erebor… If orcs continue to gather in such numbers we might have lost our settlement in the Blue Mountains in time. After Erebor's fall we attempted to take back Khazad Dûm… and I lost half my family, those that were left after the dragon's rampage, in one fell swoop."

Bilbo could only look at him with horror at the thought of such tragedies piling up in one person's life so quickly.

"Sauron's creatures have hounded us across the world, taken our homes, killed our people, cursed our kings if what the elf told Ori was true… And yet the means to destroy him and lay waste to a good number of his creatures in one fell swoop has fallen into our hands. Much as it pains me to turn aside from our quest, especially after I swore no hardship would sway me from our path… this is too important to do otherwise. If we do not act he will come back at some point and bring a war the likes of which none but the elves remember, so long has it been since such darkness swept the land… Even if we were to succeed above all odds and lay waste to the dragon and reclaim our home from the wretched beast it might all be for naught were we to leave this problem unchecked."

Bilbo squeezed his arm in sympathy. Thorin looked down at him contemplatively. Whatever he saw in his face seemed to encourage him to continue.
"I slept badly last night as well… the mountain, and the gold within it, seemed to call me, stronger than even it has all these many years of our exile. I told myself it was the right thing, the necessary thing, to do… and yet it was very nearly painful to climb aboard this vessel, knowing that it would take me far from where I want most to be… It is strange though… The further we travel, the more at ease I am with my decision. I had not realized how strongly the gold was calling me until I turned away. I wonder now if perhaps I chose our path more rightly than even I knew…"

"You fear you had fallen prey to that gold sickness Ori and Balin mentioned?"

Thorin let his hand drop from Bilbo's back, and he missed the warmth of it immediately… then blushed when he realized how close they'd been standing and how intimate their pose. It had felt comfortable…and comforting.

Thorin gripped the rail with both hands and stared out into the distance. "It has been something that has…concerned me."

Bilbo had a feeling that meant Thorin had been terrified.

"My grandfather…" Thorin's face creased with pain and remembrance "He was both my grandfather and my king, and I loved him even as I saw how far he had fallen. I can remember him playing with us when I was small, I can remember the people being happy and prosperous… but then he began to change. I was young then, and at the time I did not yet realize that things were becoming difficult in parts of the mountain because his hunger for gold had grown so great. And looking back, I believe his relationship with our allies had grown strained as well… Though strained or not, it does not excuse Thranduil turning his back on us as he did. I could understand him not wanting to lead his people in to battle the beast. I and our soldiers had tried to fight it when it entered the mountain and it was no use. We were knocked aside like toys, and those unlucky enough to be in his path burned… everything burned." he said tightly.  Looking at him, Bilbo could see that Thorin's gaze did not see the river ahead of them, but the long ago day that Smaug had attacked.

"It all happened so suddenly, those able to escape had nothing but the clothes on their back, and in some cases not even that. They were burned, choking, screaming, searching for kin on the plains as the grass and trees and the city of Dale burned around us. His forest was untouched, his people hale…and he could not be bothered even to give safe passage or offer medical care. There were children, women, old ones, all of them hurt."

Thorin's face twisted in a bitter grimace.

"I saw him, and his army gathered there on the horizon and I called to him for help. He just turned away from me without a word, and his people followed him. We lost so many to the mountain…and we lost so many more on that long walk away from there. We had nothing." Thorin let out a breath, and as he continued the terrible rage was gone, and in it's place was only pain and weariness.

"My grandfather… I went back in to the mountain to get him. He was still in the treasury, entranced by his gold and by the Arkenstone. The dragon was coming, our people were dying, and all he cared about was the treasure. He dropped the Arkenstone as I dragged him from there. He fought me and tried to go back, for all that the dragon was upon us and ready to fire once more. We only just escaped and he fought me every step of the way. He was no help afterwards either. He was too caught up in mourning the gold he'd lost and the stone. He was determined to get our riches back. He decided we would storm Khazad Dûm and regain it, for all that Durin's Bane drove our people from its halls long ago, and it had since become a seething nest of orcs and other foul creatures."

Thorin's face grew haunted as he remembered that long ago war.
"Three long years we battled, and took many losses, but it all culminated at Azanulzibar. We lost half
our own people and half the soldiers of the other clans that came to help us. Then my father
disappeared. I searched the whole of the battlefield for him. The bodies…there were so many, we
could not even consign them to the stone. We had to burn them. The funeral pyres burned for weeks,
there were so many. My grandfather slain, my brother…"

It was a moment before he could continue.

"And my father... My father was just gone. So many of our people lost and hurt, and it was left to me
to keep what was left together." He sighed then, a melancholy sound. "All these many years, I have
waited and tried to do my best for those that were left. I wanted to reclaim our home, and restore our
legacy. I met with the lords of the other clans before we gathered in the Shire, you know. None
would come to our call, not after Azanulzibar. Reclaiming Erebor would restore my line's honor."

His hands clenched on the railing at this pained admission.

"Thorin… You have more honor than any I've ever known! I mean, just listen to yourself! You were
so young, and saw so much tragedy in such a short time, lost so much…but you saved your
grandfather, rallied your people in battle and likely saved countless lives that day. You struggled and
sacrificed for your people all these years and gave them a new home and a new life. You said
yourself that your line was cursed…and yet you turned away from your gold to do the right thing—to
protect your people, avenge mine and protect the world! I know that the word of a simple hobbit of
the Shire means very little…but I think you are a great king, and certainly an honorable one, and I for
one am proud to follow you."

Thorin said nothing, but he ducked his head, looking embarrassed…and for a moment, he gently
squeezed the hand laid upon his in thanks and smiled. Bilbo could feel his face, and the tips of his
ears flushing at the sight of that smile and he cast around for something more to say.

"Goodness, all this heavy talk. On the plus side, I've quite forgotten to be afraid of the water! EEP!"
The boat lurched again and sent him staggering. Thorin put his hand on his back again, and rubbed
while Bilbo kept a white-knuckled grip on his fur coat.

"Well… I think I spoke too soon!" he squeaked.

Thorin laughed, though he ducked his head apologetically when Bilbo glared at him for his trouble.
Bilbo couldn't stay mad for long though.

"I don't think I've ever heard you laugh before." he mused. "You should do it more."

They both noticed at the same time that it had gotten strangely quiet and turned to look behind them.
The whole group quickly turned back to what they were doing and tried to make it look like they
hadn't been covertly watching the two of them. Thorin and Bilbo turned back to look at each other
and realized they were standing very close to one another once more. Bilbo laughed self-consciously
and let go of Thorin's coat and took a step back. Thorin let his hand drop and did as well.

What could have been an awkward moment was stalled when Bilbo noted movement on the far left
bank. He shaded his eyes to see better, but the moving blur was too distant to make out any details.

"What is it?" Thorin asked, following his gaze.

Just then the howl of a warg echoed eerily over the water.
"It must be more orcs?"

"They're headed for Erebor." Thorin whispered, despairing.

"We don't know that. There are elves about too. Orcs hate elves…and vice versa."

"They do, but Azog has a special grudge against my family. He would see us destroyed root and branch. It is us he has hounded across half of Arda. Anyone with half a brain, who knows who I am, knows my history, will know Erebor is my goal. They're headed for Erebor…and we shall not be there to meet them."

"That's all to the good from where I'm standing! There are only fourteen of us, if you've forgotten. I can't see them clearly enough to be sure of numbers…but the size of that moving blur tells me there are a lot of orcs over there. Too many for us to handle by far!"

"And if they get into the mountain there will be no digging them out again. I could not bear it, should our home be further defiled by that monster!" Thorin's voice creaked, on the verge of breaking.

Bilbo placed a hand on his arm and squeezed until Thorin tore his eyes from the distant shore to focus on him.

"You said it yourself. We don't know that the dragon is dead. We needed to go in by a hidden, secret door. Even if they are headed that way, there's no guarantee that they can get in…and if the dragon is still alive, well, I doubt he'll be happier at visiting orcs than he would by visiting hobbits. Even if he is dead, well, there's elves and a town of men nearby as well, right? I doubt either group will be happy at an orc army on their doorstep. We're headed in the opposite direction. Even if we disembarked now and tried to catch up to them, what could we really do against such numbers? Don't borrow trouble. We have a plan already. We need to stay focused on what we can do. The rest will sort itself out in time."

Thorin nodded, but it was obvious his decision to alter their quest midway still weighed heavily upon him.

"Bilbo, didn't you say the hobbits' original homeland was somewhere south of Beorn's house?"

"Well, if we're correct about it being the Anduin valley, then yes, it should be."

"Neat. That means we should be passing it at some point. Do you think there are any wee hobbit houses still there?" Kili wondered.

"Well, I don't know. We've been in the Shire quite a long time by this point. I also don't know exactly where they were when they were here. "By the mountains" is pretty inexact when there's an entire mountain range as a possibility. So is 'by the river' and 'by the forest'. We've been travelling down this river for hours now, and there's no end in sight. Same with the forest."

"That isn't the only forest in these parts either." Beorn interjected. "Further south are more forests."

"Aye. The elf forest Lothlorien was just below the east entrance of Khazad Dûm. I remember that much. They didn't both to come help us battle the orcs when we were there fighting them. You would have thought it would be in their best interests to get them off their doorstep, but what can one
expect of elves." Dwalin spat.

"So, you see. I wouldn't even know where to begin looking." Bilbo continued. He really didn't want to listen to another rant on the evils of elves.

"I can offer a clue, I think." Thorin spoke up from nearby. "The Gladden Fields should be just ahead. The man-king Isildur fought a battle and was lost there long ago. Your hobbits must have lived nearby if one of them found the ring there years later."

"Well, that might give a clue to the general location of the Stoors. It still doesn't help with the others."

"They probably weren't too far from one another. You said hobbits don't like to travel much. They wouldn't have even known the other groups were there if they were too far apart from each other, right?"

"That's true…though we might have been more adventurous in those days. The Fallowhides were nomads, after all."

Bilbo moved to the railing and peered at the banks southward with more interest than he'd shown so far. "I would like to see it, I think, for curiosity if nothing more. I wonder if the land hereabouts would call to me at all? Unless we've changed remarkably from days of old, there may be an echo, at least. We would have tended this land with love, and it may still remember us. That would be something, wouldn't it?"

As the afternoon shadows began to grow long, Beorn began casting about for a place to pull over for the night.

"There's only me to steer, and I need some sleep before we continue on. We'll stop for the night and continue on in the morning. Another full day like this and we should make it."

The boat needed to be tied off before it drifted. Beorn solved this dilemma by handing Fili and Kili a coil of rope.

"Tie it to the trees before we pass them. There's a good lad!"

"But how are we to reach….AAAAAHHHHHHH"

The boys' shriek echoed off the surrounding water and mountains as he tossed them one after the other to the shore. Bilbo facepalmed as the rest of the dwarves began bristling and shouting. Beorn ignored the commotion with remarkable aplomb.

"What? How else were they to reach? Anyway, see? They're fine," he pointed.

The boys, still looking shaken by their impromptu flight, were staggering to the nearest trees and tying the ropes fast.

"Nice and tight now!"

"Yeah, yeah."
Once the boat was secured, Beorn stretched and then leapt to the shore.

"I'll take a look around, make sure there's no orcs or other nasties about. There's a net there if you want to try your hands at catching some fish for your dinner."

The hair on his face began lengthening even as he spoke, and between one moment and the next there was now a giant bear where Beorn had stood. The bear fell to all fours and charged off further onto the shore and was soon gone from sight.

"You hear that, boys! We can have a hot dinner tonight and he won't kill us for it!"

"Woo hoo!"

Several of the dwarves headed over to see about the promised net, the rest maneuvered the gangplank into place so they could reach the shore and look around a bit. Bilbo followed those headed to shore. It would be nice to have firm ground underfoot again, and he could do some foraging to supplement whatever fish the others managed to catch.

The place where they'd stopped was green and inviting. A smaller river that flowed down from the mountains ran through the area, flowing down into the great river they'd been traveling on all day. It was neither as wide, nor as deep, nor as swift flowing as the great river was, but even from the shore one could see dozens of blue-silver fish darting about in the shallows.

While the dwarves got the net ready, Bilbo wandered off, enjoying the peaceful scenery. He soon learned it was a lucky stop indeed; food seemed to be growing everywhere thereabouts—he found a patch of wild tubers, nuts, a thicket of wild-growing tomatoes even! There were late-season berries that he gobbled down greedily as he wandered, small tart apples that he filled his pockets with, and mushrooms aplenty. There were even some skinny wild carrots and patches of herbs. He hadn't even had to explore very far! He had quite a haul when he returned to camp.

Bombar, Bofur and Bifur were busy cleaning and deboning the fishes they'd caught. Bombar's eyes brightened when he spotted the bounty Bilbo had returned with. "Oh! It will be a lovely stew indeed tonight! Give it here and let's get it all into the pot!"

Balin and Dwalin had settled nearby under a tree to keep an eye on their king. They had all heard his words to the halfling earlier—and wasn't that a surprise? To speak so easily of the many tragedies in his life to their burglar, it was unprecedented. Even to those closest to him, he was not a dwarf that opened himself up easily. Even with that aside, to hear him speak of gold sickness, and the possibility that he'd already been suffering from it had been more shocking still.

They had all noted his reluctance to get on the boat, for all that he was the one who had decided to change their course. At the time they'd not thought anything of it—none of them were completely comfortable out on the water, after all. To know he'd nearly turned and fled into the forest rather than join them had been sobering indeed. It was all the more worrisome because now that they'd stopped, he seemed distracted and antsy. Worse still, he had wandered to the edge of the great river and was staring back towards Erebor, and seemed to only just be holding himself in check.

They were thankful indeed that they were on the wrong side of the river for him to just run off, but they were keeping an eye on him nonetheless. That's when they heard singing.

They glanced towards the fire and saw Bilbo there with the Ur brothers, helping them to prepare dinner. He was singing a cheerful nonsense-ditty on the joys of good food and a full belly.
Movement at the edge of the river caught the corner of their eyes and they saw Thorin seemed to have noted the singing as well. Though he was still gazing towards Erebor, only half his attention seemed to be on the distant mountain anymore.

The sound of stomping feet drew their attention back to the others. Bofur was now trilling his flute to accompany the singing hobbit, who was now dancing around the fire and the pot, still singing as he dropped in the newly chopped vegetables. Thorin turned away from the mountain to watch, and a small smile began to creep across his face. The boys popped to their feet, dragging an embarrassed Ori with them to join in. Soon all four of them were twirling around the fire and laughing, bellowing out the chorus:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Into the pot!} \\
\text{Into the pot!} \\
\text{Put it all into the pot!} \\
\text{So long as you've a full belly!} \\
\text{Your troubles can be forgot!''}
\end{align*}
\]
Gandalf wandered about Beorn's house, confused and irritated. One of the sheep that was tidying up around the house trotted over to speak with him.

"Where are the dwarves and the hobbit?"

The sheep bleated.

"What do you mean they've left already? Confounded dwarves! Ugh. I wouldn't have bothered coming back if... I do have more important things to be doing, you know!"

The sheep bleated again.

"Beorn went with them? Well...that's unexpected. Hopefully he'll keep them out of trouble until I join them. Dwarves!"

Gandalf stomped off. The animals all looked at one another and shrugged, before going back to what they'd been doing.

The forest blurred around him as he used his magic to speed his way. In many ways, it was much simpler when he was alone, and did not need to limit himself to mortal ways of travel; those were the limits placed on he and his brethren when they were sent to Arda to help out, so there was no point in complaining. He could admit, to himself at least, that it was nice not having to spend endless long weeks sleeping in ditches while he waited for his mortal companions to make their slow way across the continent. His journey ended as abruptly as it had begun and he found himself on the edges of the ruins of Dol Guldur.

It was an unwholesome place, and did seem to host more mischief than most places these days. He had found Thrain, son of Thror—Thorin's father and until his death, rightful king of the dwarves formerly of Erebor, not that anyone had realized the poor soul was still alive—in the depths of the fortress many years ago. He'd been quite mad when he'd encountered him, all sense torn from him by whatever tortures he'd undergone while trapped there.

He had been a strong dwarf, and an honorable one. Through all the long years he'd been lost he had withstood whatever was thrown at him and refused to give them any of the information they'd wanted. He could have saved himself endless pain and earned a quicker death had he done so. His fortitude and refusal to bend had kept the shadow in check for decades they might not have had otherwise.

He really did have to remember to sit Thorin down after all was finished and let him know his father had died a hero, honor intact, though it cost him dearly. He still second guessed himself somewhat on his decision not to tell the dwarven king all of it when he'd given him the map and key Thrain had given him before his death. He had reasoned that it was best Thorin not be distracted by his grief or a search for vengeance against those that had wronged his father. Well, what was done was done.
There was no taking it back now. Thorin would have to be content with learning the whole of it once the mountain and the eastern borders were secured once more.

With difficulty, he threw off his musings and crept closer to the outskirts of the ruins. Movement to his left put him on guard and he raised his staff warily.

"Gandalf!"

"Ah! Damn it all, Radagast! Don't sneak up on me like that…especially not here."

Both wizards took a moment to look around at their surroundings.

"I fear you were right, my friend… a shadow lies on this fortress, a dark one."

"And well I know it. Look at this place Gandalf… the trees are dying and unwholesome beasts have taken up residence in the shadows that now cling so deeply in its depths."

"It is worse even than you fear, I am afraid. The sickness that lies here so heavily has crept northwards, perhaps even to the northernmost reaches of the forest. I know the old forest road, which used to connect the eastern borders with the lands of the west has fallen to ruin, and the spiders you warned me of have wandered that far as well, perhaps further. I did not investigate the whole of it, but what little I saw greatly unsettled me. Even when the sun lies highest in the sky, the shadows beneath the tree are deep and nigh impenetrable. Webbing lies so thick on some of the trees that no sunlight penetrates at all and leaves all beneath it in eternal night. Between all that and the loathsome blade you found in the fortress, I fear what we will find once we venture inward."

"Best get on with it then."

"Indeed… I feel no shame in admitting I'd feel better if the others were already here as well."

"You know elves… no sense of urgency. They're probably walking among the trees and singing about tragedies from ten thousand years ago."

"It may well be. I know we fall into that same trap ourselves, except when immersed in the mortal world. It changes one's perspective."

Radagast gripped Gandalf's sleeve to halt him, but he'd already slowed to a stop.

"All of them!" Radagast hissed worriedly. "When last I was here, only the witch king himself had escaped his grave!"

"The Nazgûl walk the world again… he is here."

"He is here… and he knows we are close."

"My friend, get the others. The situation is far more dire than we ever dared to think."

"I cannot leave you here alone!"

"He knows we are close. I will draw their attention while you flee and find the others. It is the only way. Even weakened, he is more than any one of us can hope to deal with alone, and with the Nazgûl roaming free once more as well…"

Radagast looked conflicted, but he realized as well that the only way any of them were likely to win the day was if they had their full strength mustered against the enemy's forces.
"I will travel as swiftly as I can. Be safe, my friend."

Gandalf waited until Radagast was on his way and then stepped out into the fortress, easing the bonds normally held on his powers that allowed him to pass freely amongst the mortal races without alerting them to his true nature. All around him the shadows grew longer as the Nazgûl seeped out of the ground around him, and the air grew cold and oppressive. He held his staff steady in one hand and with the other he drew Glamdring. The sword drew free of its sheath with a ringing chime, for the swords of Gondolin had been forged in an age long past to battle the enemy in all its guises and it was eager to be of service once more. With an unearthly shriek that froze the blood in his veins the Nazgûl attacked. The former kings of men were no longer hampered by mortal flesh; Sauron's power had twisted them utterly into their current forms. They moved with the speed of thought, tainted blades held aloft and eager for battle.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The company continues southward, and runs into a bit of a setback.

"Well. This is as far as I can take you. You can see the river isn't so friendly up ahead."

They could all see very well. There were large boulders and smaller but still dangerous rocks filling the river. The water, which had been swift but mostly calm so far, jumped and frothed over the rocks, before disappearing up ahead with a roar as it gushed over the falls.

"Our thanks for the transport, friend. You've saved us a lot of time." Thorin replied gruffly.

"You're trying to make the world a better, safer place. It was the least I could do, really. You come see me again sometime after you're all done. You can tell me your story."

"We'd be much obliged by your hospitality." Balin spoke up.

"That goes for you especially, little bunny. Have to make sure to feed you up good again, keep that belly of yours nice and round!"

Bilbo was torn--on the one hand, he really hated being called 'little bunny'…on the other hand, food.

"I look forward to it, Beorn."

Bilbo was a true hobbit through and through, even if he was currently doing something as mad as going on an adventure. Food always won.

"We'd best get going. We're not going to get to Mordor by standing around like a bunch of lumps."

Dwalin finally growled.

One by one, the dwarves hopped off Beorn's boat and hefted the new packs they'd all been supplied with, filled with provisions for the road, and filled their waterskins till they were bulging. Bilbo sighed when he saw there were yet more mountains up ahead.

"Why in the world did we get off over here? These will take forever to traverse and there's a boundless marsh on the other side!"

Bilbo grumbled when they were but an hour in. An hour was too long already, so far as he was concerned. They were sharp beneath his feet, and endless--they seemed to go on and on as far as the eye could see. "We know the way through, don't worry. Besides, we'd of had to ford countless rivers on the other side crossing the Entwash delta before we got to the grasslands of Rohan…and the men of Rohan aren't exactly welcoming to outsiders." Balin replied

"They're not? In the stories…"

"Which may well be true, but recall the others in the stories you've likely read are either other men or elves. They didn't bother us overmuch during our wandering time while in exile…but they made it clear that they'd be pleased to see us move on as soon as possible." Dwalin grumbled.
"Oh… That's…disappointing." he admitted.

The world outside the Shire really wasn't like his books and maps at all. The men of Rohan were supposed to be mighty and honorable warriors…elves were always supposed to be beautiful, gracious and wise. Neither one was supposed to leave a wandering, hurting group of refugees to fend for themselves when they had lost everything. It was too depressing to think about.

"Why didn't you move here when you lost Erebor, rather than travel so far west?"

The dwarves all looked at him like he was quite deranged.

"What, here?" Kili spluttered.

"That've been more shameful that asking for room in Ered Luin! Crouching in hills, not proper dwarves at all! The very idea!"

"Hills? They look like mountains to me."

"Pah! Your lot think those rolly little green humps in your Shire are hills! Given that, I suppose these would be mountains to you." Gloin huffed.

"Well, excuse me."

"It's alright. You obviously don't know any better."

"Mountains! HA!"

Bilbo glared at Gloin, Nori and Bofur's backs and continued tromping after them. They continued walking till it was quite dark, but the dwarves seemed to be unconcerned with their travel, so Bilbo held his tongue. He did hope they weren't planning on climbing these wretched "hills" all night though. The sharp stone was making even his tough hobbit feet feel rather tender, not to mention it was cold. At last they were led into a shallow cave after Dwalin and Gloin searched it out to be sure there were no wild animals within.

"How much longer will it take to get through here?" Bilbo asked as he flopped down on the floor of the cave with a sigh.

"If we start early and continue on as long as possible, a week or so. Then it's marshes for a few days to a week or so after that if we're lucky, and then onwards towards the Ash Mountains that line the borders of Mordor.

"Why if we're lucky?"

"Huh?"

"You said two or three more days to a week if we're lucky."

"Spent much time in a marsh before?"

"Not since I was a fauntling. I have kin that still live near the Marish in the Shire. My cousins and I would go exploring when we were young. Just around the edges mostly. We never went very far in."

"If you had, you'd know why I said if we're lucky. It's a treacherous place, those marshes. If we move slowly and carefully and test our steps as we travel we should be fine, but with all the water there, the safe path can shift unexpectedly. We've crossed it before, learned a lot of our lessons the
hard way. If we're careful and don't lose our heads it should be fine. It won't make for the most pleasant of trips, but it will save us a good many leagues of travel, not to mention the stench of the marshes should foil the noses of any wargs that might still be on our trail--unlikely, but best to plan for the worst."

"It should also keep any interfering men from getting in our business. They're a nosy lot, men are. It's always 'where are you going? What are you doing? Do you think that's wise?' As if it's any of their business!"

The mood that night was merry indeed. They had shelter amongst good, honest stone. Nothing was trying to kill them at the moment. They all had a pack full of honeycakes and some dried fruit and nuts as well for breakfast. For once their quest seemed to be going alright--and it all started as soon as they turned off the path to Erebor. No one mentioned this of course, not out loud. Their king was still a bit broody and the rest of them were no better. The only one who really addressed it at all was Gloin, as they were all laying out their furs and blankets to sleep that night.

"Shan't be long now. We'll get that wee ring melted down good and proper and be back on our way to Erebor before you know it. I'd just like to see any orcs or dragons get in our way!"

"That's right! We'll show them we're no easy prey!"

"We'll make a clean sweep of the bastards and reclaim our home!"

"Aye, lads! That's the spirit" Gloin told the youngsters cheerfully.

The Company woke at first light and gathered their things to continue their trek through the endless rocky hills. The pathway through was narrow and there were few places wide enough to stop comfortably, so meals were eaten while walking and they did not stop until the light began to fade in the early evening, after finding a shallow cave or overhang in which to spend the night. This continued for five days. By the time they had reached the end of the Emyn Muil, Bilbo's calves and thighs were throbbing from the constant walking, and his feet were just starting to become somewhat tender from the sharp stone that had been underfoot the whole way. A sluggish breeze from the lowlands blew up the pass.

"Ugh! What's that smell?"

"That would be the Wetwang." Thorin sighed, gesturing outward.

The Company gathered close and stared down into their next destination with little enthusiasm. Bilbo pushed his way between some of the dwarves so he could see too--he'd gotten stuck in line behind Thorin, Dwalin and Bifur, all of whom were considerably taller than he was. He gasped in dismay as his first sight of the marsh. Though the season was just edging on towards autumn, looking down into the marsh one would think that the world was held fast in winter's icy grip. The only green to be seen was the scum on the dark, greasy surface of the water. Dead grasses and rotting reeds loomed up in the mist like ragged reminders of long forgotten summers. It was a dreary place, unwholesome and unwelcoming as could be. Worse still, it seemed to continue on south and east for as far as the eye could see. To the west it was equally impassable-- the Anduin river ran wide and swift just beyond the tapering edges of the marsh; there was no safe passage out from that direction. Small muddy hillocks dotted the expanse of the fen. Bilbo looked at the small, soggy things with a sinking feeling in his stomach--he was quite certain the nasty things were to be their bridge across. He had no sooner noted this displeasing thought when something else caught his eye and drove all thought of endless days on soggy hillocks from his mind.

"Are those… bodies?"
"Bodies?" Kili yelped.

He peered down over Bilbo's shoulder and shuddered when he saw them too.

"It is bodies... lots of them by the look of it!"

"Ancient warriors that fell here during the Battle of Dagorlad."

"The last alliance of elves and men?" Ori murmured. "But... they look practically untouched. That battle was centuries ago."

"Aye. We know not if it's some property of the waters of the marsh that preserved everyone so well, or if it is some black magic of Mordor that made it so. You can barely take two steps without seeing another of the fallen. From the looks of things, though I'll admit we never ventured so deeply into these cursed lands, the dead lie out to the horizon, so many fell here. I like it not, having to return here, but given our mission it's better than the alternative." Balin sighed.

"Come. It is already late in the afternoon. We will make camp and strike out at first light. I've no wish to spend an extra night camped out in the muck if we need not do so." Thorin announced, his words prompting a sigh of relief from all and sundry.

"If I remember right there was a bit of a cave nearby. More a shallow dip in the mountain than a true cave, but better than nothing." Balin spoke up.

Bifur and Bofur knocked at the stone to either side and ran their hands over it as though they were listening. Bifur spoke up and gestured to the left.

"About a hundred feet or so that way. There's a ledge leads there, it's a bit higher than we are now. We might just fit, but it'll be close quarters."

"It's a bit nippy, and we cannot have a fire up here; it will be seen clear over the marshes and let anyone who happens to glance this way note our presence, so it is just as well."

A bit of casting about found the ledge Bifur had found. It was narrow enough that they had to go one at a time and move carefully. The 'cave' was actually just a shelf between two of the peaks with a bit of a wall at the back. As predicted they just fit. There was enough room for them all to lay down side by side across the width of it, but there was little space to turn or shift during the night.

"At least we should be warm." Bofur said cheerfully.

"Aye, there is that." Gloin agreed.

Everyone busied themselves laying out half the blankets Beorn had given them, while the rest were held in reserve to cover them in the night. Dinner that night was the last of the honey cakes, and the mood was subdued as they ate while looking out over the mucky, green-tinged waters they would be traveling through for the next few days.

Bilbo wriggled his toes and grimaced at the thought. For the first time in his life he bemoaned the fact that hobbits didn't wear shoes; he rather thought he would appreciate a sturdy pair of boots between his feet and the slimy ground. He let out a rather woebegone sigh at the direction his thoughts had taken.

"Something troubling you, Master Baggins?" Thorin asked quietly.

Bilbo shot him an affronted glare. Thorin's eyes widened minutely in dismay as he tried to figure out
what he'd done to offend the burglar. It took him a moment to understand. His lips twisted in a small, wry grin once he did.

"Is something troubling you, Bilbo?" Bilbo beamed at him and elbowed him gently in the side.

"There. That wasn't so hard, was it?"

Thorin sighed, though a small smile played about his lips as he did so, and looked at him expectantly.

"Just dreading the next few days. My poor feet are going to be half-frozen…not to mention completely caked in stinky muck, before we get to the other side. I have a feeling it would have been quite bad enough in high summer—I'm sure it would smell considerably worse, for one thing—With autumn fast approaching…At least it's still water; that should mean it won't be quite as cold as say, a river would be. Either way, I'm not looking forward to it."

"Perhaps we could wrap your feet…?"

"Any cloth would just become sodden, which really wouldn't help, but thank you."

The light was fading fast. Everyone decided to make it an early night. It was windy there on the shelf and the stone was hard, but with everyone piled together as they were, it was at least warm. Bilbo found himself sandwiched between Fili and Kili who wasted no time snuggling up and falling right to sleep.

Wakefulness came slowly to Bilbo. He could hear the sounds of the rest of the company beginning to stir around him, and feel the early morning sunlight on his face, though it wasn't yet high enough above the horizon to have wakened him on its own. He was warm, and surprisingly comfortable for having spent yet another night lying on the hard ground; he didn't want to move, especially knowing what the day would bring, but he woke regardless of his wishes. That was when he began to notice several things. There was a heavy arm lying across him and he was pressed into a much larger body lying behind him, and a face was pressed into his hair. He made himself relax again when he started to tense up. There was nothing to be embarrassed about; in such tight quarters it would have been more surprising had he not ended up in such an awkward position, really. He just needed to be an adult about things. He tried to carefully remove himself out from under the arm he was trapped under, but a raspy grumble sounded behind him, and the arm tightened, pulling him in even closer, and the top of his head was nuzzled.

"For goodness sake, Kili, I'm not a plush toy!" Bilbo thought to himself irritably.

It took some doing, but he managed to wriggle around until he was facing him, only to freeze in place when he realized it wasn't Kili snuggled up to him. It was Thorin. He had intended to poke who'd he thought was Kili until he woke up, perhaps tease him a bit about his grabby hands…All those thoughts flew from his head once he realized who was holding him. It was strange, seeing him this close. He looked younger—in sleep the lines of stress and worry on his face were smoothed away. He looked peaceful, unguarded…less grumpy.

The sound of the others awakening reminded him of what he was about. Prideful as he was, Thorin surely didn't want his companions to see him snuggling a hobbit like an overgrown teddy bear; best to wake him up before anyone noticed. It turned out he needn't have worried; Thorin began to stir but a moment later. His eyes fluttered open, and for just a moment he smiled at Bilbo, his gaze soft and warm. Close as he was, Bilbo saw the exact moment he realized the position the two of them were in, and the fact that the company was awake all around them. His gaze shuttered and he began to unwind himself from their entanglement. Bilbo would have thought him angry or disgusted if not for the faint tinge of pink that colored his cheeks above his beard.
Bilbo took his time getting up and busied himself gathering up and packing the furs so he had a chance to get his pulse back under control.

Breakfast was a bit of cram and water. All too soon it was time to continue their journey.

Bilbo looked at the green-tinged water in disgust, grimacing as it and the soggy hillock which was their first step into the marsh, squished up around his feet.

"Ugh."

"Stay strong, Master Baggins. We've at least a few more days of this before it's over."

"Don't remind me."

Even with boots on, the dwarves were no more enthusiastic about the latest leg of their journey. The muck sucked at their feet, the green water stank, and the dead bodies staring at them through the water were unnerving. It was rough going; the mucky hillocks dotted the green water liberally, but they were often some distance from one another, which required them to either trudge through the water--and the thick, goopy mud beneath it, or leap across to get to the next of them. It was rough going for all of them, and there was more than one mishap as they made their way through.

They plodded on with grim determination for as long as they could; none of them wanted to spend any longer in the marsh than absolutely necessary. Alas, even determined as they were, it was far too large to traverse in a single day. They continued well after moonrise, making for a larger than average hillock that looked both reasonably dry-ish, and large enough to hold all of them.

"This is likely the best we'll find. This place is treacherous enough in daylight. I'm of no mind to try our luck at night."

"At least it's just damp, not full on boot sucking mud like the rest of this cursed place."

The dwarves settled down, grumbling and disheartened. Bilbo found a somewhat dry section to settled down in, and tried to avoid looking at his feet. The skin was faintly green from the water, and the hair on his feet was thoroughly caked in mud. There was nowhere to wash, so he was just going to have to ignore it for the moment, but oh, he had never missed the Shire more than at that moment. What he wouldn't give for a hot bath, clean clothes, a hot cup of tea! He was feeling quite sorry for himself as he rolled himself into his fur. To make things worse, he was pretty sure he was getting a cold.

"There's a light out there. I think someone's coming this way."

"No, look at how it's bobbing. Whoever it is needs help."

"Ignore it. This marsh is full of tricks. We learned that the hard way the last time we came through here. Those lights lead you out to deeper waters and will get you drowned if you follow them."

"Don't watch them at all. They'll entrance you, and you'll find yourself atop the drowned dead before you realize what's happened. Everyone just get some sleep."

"What about the watches?"

"We won't have any while we're here. You saw yourself as we waded through this monstrous place. There's no one for leagues in any direction, nor is there likely to be. Leaving one person awake is like asking for them to wander off and get themselves drowned out here. If you wake up in the night, don't wander off and don't sit staring out into the bobbing lights."
It was a rather grim and restless group that huddled close that night to sleep.

"Bloody hell."

"Nori?"

"Muck in my boot again."

"Be more careful."

"I'm being careful."

"Ah!"

"Watch it there, laddie. Don't want to be fallin' in the water there."

Bilbo let out a shuddering breath in relief when Dwalin hauled him back from falling head first into the water, where he would have landed atop a man in heavy armor. "I can't believe that the men of Rohan would be unfriendly enough to make this monstrosity worth traversing."

"It is not ideal, no, but it will save us time and effort in the long run."

"I'm with Bilbo. This place is creepy." Kili complained.

Ori squeaked and stumbled as his foot sank into thick, cloying mud rather than firm ground like he was expecting. It was made all the worse by the fact that there was a dead elf just a short distance away, staring at him sightlessly through the scummy water. He flailed for a moment in disgust and stumbled away, nearly knocking Bombur into the water as he did.

"He just looked at me! I saw him! He opened his eyes!"

Dori hustled to get himself between Ori and the water and glared at the dead elf as though daring him to try anything.

"I'll be glad to be well clear of this place." Bofur grumbled, smacking one of the biting flies that seemed to overrun the whole area when it tried feasting on his face. He looked miserable; even the flaps of his hat seemed to be drooping.

"Stay steady, lads. Believe it or not we're most of the way through. Just a bit further."

"I can see the mountains. It'll be good to have good, firm stone underfoot again"

"Even if that stone is the border of Mordor?"

"Even then."

The light was getting low, but the dwarves, and hobbit, pushed on grimly. None of them wanted to spend another night amidst the bog, surrounded by the dead or watching the flickering will o' wisps that taunted them into the tainted waters. Little by little the ground firmed up beneath their feet, and the bog water got lower and less encompassing, though the transition was so gradual that they didn't realize at first what was happening. The land beyond didn't offer much in the way of respite beyond being drier. Everything was brown and dusty grey. Nothing seemed to grow anywhere in these cursed lands. They could see the mountains now. They loomed like a dark, ominous cloud on the horizon.
"We should hit the river. We can clean up some of the muck and refill our water before continuing on. I wouldn't trust water from inside the dark lord's own country. It'd probably turn ye into an orc or something."

"Probably a good precaution. Be wary. We're not far from one of Gondor's outposts here. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that they might patrol even out this far, though it is unlikely."

No one really needed prompting. They were all eager to wash away some of the stench and muck from their trip through the bog, though none it seemed so much as Bilbo.

"You're all wearing boots. My feet were sunk in that wretched place for the last three days! The hair on my feet will likely never be the same! The whole place is sick! The muck, the water…all those poor dead people. All of is sick and wrong! It's nothing like the Marish back home! That place was a bog as well, but it was a proper one. Healthy. There's greenery and trees and frogs and… That place…it's all wrong."

"It's filled with dead folks and is on the door step of a very evil dark lord. It's to be expected, I would think."

"Expected, perhaps, unpleasant just the same."

While the dwarves who chose to were still splashing about in the water cleaning up, Bilbo wandered through the scrubby grass near the water's edge. It was nice to be among greenery again, even such poor excuses as the river grass. He stumbled back in fright as he disturbed several good sized birds that seemed to be nesting in the grass. They fluttered up, squawking and flapping around him. He had the presence of mind to unleash his conker at the closest one and pounced on it while it was still dazed. He heard a cheer and a splash and saw Dwalin wading out further into the river to fetch a second bird that Kili brought down with his bow right afterwards. The cheers increased when Bilbo staggered out of the tall grass with a second bird.

"Meat! Finally! We're not meant to go without for so long!"

"Finally a real dinner!"

"If we only had some ale it'd be perfect!"

"Quiet." Thorin growled, catching everyone's eyes. "Think of where we are and what we propose to do! Beyond those mountains lies Sauron's stronghold. We do not know if he lies within. Sauron himself may lie beyond, not yet strong enough to bring war to the world, but perhaps strong enough to wrest his prize from our Burglar's neck! Remember too that orcs and other fell beasts of their kind are his creatures! We have seen the numbers that infect the lands of the free people of the world. How many more must lie then between us and our goal? Remember too that we are now not far from the cities of men… men who have already proven again and again unable to resist his power! Ten of their kings fell to it if that elf spoke true. We do not want to have to dodge crazed men the whole way to Mordor, only to have the commotion they raise alert the orcs to our presence. Until the ring is destroyed we must be on our guard."

"He's right, you nits. We need to be sneaky."

"You could start by not shouting near the river. Voices carry on the water." Bilbo spoke up quietly.

"Aye. We should probably get off this flat plain as well. There are some large boulders over that way. When we're done washing up we should probably make our camp among them. They'll hide us somewhat if anyone comes looking, and they'll give us a bit of defense should any men or orcs come
"We should probably dig a pit for our fire too. A fire on a flat plain will be seen for miles." Balin added.

"Aye. Learned that one the hard way. We've not been very stealthy so far on this trip. We need to change that from this point onward. It would be catastrophic otherwise. Instead of ridding the world of a future problem, we'll be handing them a very big problem they're not at all prepared to handle."

It was a much more subdued group that finished up their business at the river and began making their way towards the rocky foothills of the mountains. That night as they lay huddled amongst the rocks around their concealed fire, Nori asked a question they'd not considered previously.

"Where are we going in? There's a giant gate or somesuch, facing Gondor, prolly guard towers and the like right there. We don't know what lies on the other side of those mountains."

Thorin withdrew his map and spread it out on the ground so they all could see it. It showed the mountains, but the inside of the range was a blank spot that just said Mordor.

"That would be the gate, right about there. That's why those cities of men were built there, to stand against incursions from there. It's why the men of Gondor have always been held in high regard, in spite of their failures against Sauron. They have always stood as the first line of defense between Mordor and the rest of the world."

"We don't want to go in that way. That's all but guaranteed to be heavily guarded and under too many eyes." Nori objected.

"It's probably the quickest way in though."

"In this case it's probably just the quickest way dead. Thing is, we don't know what's behind there. Most of the orcs is probably stashed in and about here. It would make sense, with Gondor being right there and all. We should probably try our luck elsewhere, even if it means a longer walk. We can make further plans once we get a look inside."

"It looks like there might be a pass here…and it likely won't be too guarded. The Dead Marshes guard this whole expanse better than any army could. We're not an army though, we're a small group. We could probably creep along the base of the mountains without too much trouble and look for a likely spot to cross."

"Back into the damned marshes?"

"Aye. None of us is looking forward to it. Consider though that it may not be as wet or as treacherous close to the mountains."

"It seems our best bet."

"Aye, it does. That doesn't mean I have to like it."

"You know…once we get in there…depending on what all we find, of course…it might be worth it to see if we can't take a poke about that fellow's stronghold."

"You want to rob the dark lord?" Ori squeaked, staring at his brother in horrified amazement.

"Yeah. If it can be managed. I mean really, think about it! He was around a long time, right? Fought against all sorts of ancient societies, elves and men, dwarves too, back in days when we still had
Khazad Dûm, when we still had Mount Gundabad, when we still had a home in the Grey Mountains. If he collected anything of worth at all, and he likely did...there could be weapons and armor from the first age, mithril and who knows what else!"

Bilbo looked around at them curiously.

"Surely old weapons and armor aren't that big a draw."

"You'd be wrong, lad. They would be that big a draw, and more than that, it would be very much worthwhile to get such things out of the hands of orcs if at all possible." Gloin disagreed quite seriously.

"Even without bringing mithril into it, the stuff of the first age is just...well, better than anything we can make now."

"It's true, though none of us today like to think too much on what has been lost over the generations. There has been so much turmoil over the ages. We've lost every home we've ever had. Each time, our people were left homeless, with often nothing but the clothes on their back. They'd wander for a time, then establish a new home elsewhere. Generations would go by with everyone focused on making the new colony a home worthy of our people...and once it was, it was usually lost not long after."

"Aye, lad. Though we pride ourselves on our craftsmanship, it's known that a lot of knowledge and secrets were lost each time. The very best that our craftsmen can produce today, when we've the materials and the space to work it, none comes close to what our forefathers could make."

"It is not just us, loathe though I am to credit such" Thorin agreed. He pulled his sword, Orcrist from the sheathe and admired it for a moment.

"He's right. The elves too lost many secrets of crafting over the years. Though there are some at least, in the world still, that might remember those lost places...but I seriously doubt there is an elf alive today that can recreate the wonders of ages past."

"When you add in the possibility of mithril, it would definitely be worth looking into if we think we can do so safely."

"What is mithril though? What makes it important enough to risk a stronghold full of orcs to obtain it?"

"Mithril! All folk desired it. It could be beaten like copper, and polished like glass; and from it our craftsmen could make of it a metal, light as cloth, and yet harder than tempered steel. Its beauty was like to that of common silver, but the beauty of mithril did not tarnish or grow dim. Khazad Dûm was the last source of mithril in the world when it was lost to us. Only small amounts of ore escaped with our people when it fell. A single item of mithril would be worth more than the whole of your Shire, so dearly is it held in these latter days when it is so scarce."

"Aye, it's true. Our people could collect great sums for mithril work back when we still had access to the mines. Today, there are those who would beggar kingdoms for it!"

"Even if Sauron made no deliberate effort to gather things from ages past, it does in fact seem likely that there may be some things at least."

"Before you all get carried away dreaming of treasure, try to keep in mind it might be dangerous! We should stay focused on what we're here for!"
"No reason we can't do both!"

Thorin rubbed his face and held up a hand to quiet everyone.

"We can make no decisions until we know what awaits us. If it comes to a choice between destroying the ring and gathering treasure, if such treasure even exists… we must focus on the ring first and foremost." he decided, though he didn't sound happy about it.

The dwarves nodded, though his command seemed to suck much of the earlier merriment out of the air.

"Buck up, lads. We haven't seen what waits yet. We might still be able to do both. One never knows." Nori spoke up defiantly.

"Nori! Really! We're trying to be heroes here!"

"No reason we can't be heroes and still get something for our troubles!"

The dwarves all started arguing, either for or against, until Dwalin eventually told them to shut up and mind how their voices carried. The reminder that they were in a dangerous area quieted everyone at once. After that, it was mutually decided to get some sleep. They had another long walk ahead of them the following day.

Dwalin assigned himself the first watch. After considering for a moment, Bilbo went to him and laid his small sword at his side, with the blade partway out of the sheath. It would serve as a far better warning than even dark-adapted dwarf eyes should any orcs or goblins come calling.

"What about you? If there is an attack, it will likely happen quickly. I might not be able to get yer letter opener back to you in time."

"I still have my conker. If worse comes to worst I can wield a frying pan like a champ in a pinch."

To his surprise, Dwalin laughed.

"Aye laddie, I've no doubt that you could at that."

Bilbo felt like he'd only just fallen asleep when a firm hand shook him awake. He sat up, dazed and groggy, only to find his little sword, which was glowing a rather ominous blue, thrust into his face. He took it without a word and looked around to see what everyone else was doing. That's when he heard it—the clash of battle. The dwarves were all hunkered down behind their boulders, watching what looked to be a sizable patrol of men on horseback battling orcs just a short distance away. He felt a presence move up behind him and turned his head slightly, only to see that it was Thorin, and he was watching the battle intently.

"Men from that Gondorian outpost I mentioned earlier."

Bilbo shivered slightly as Thorin's warm breath ghosted over his ear, and his voice rumbled through his back where they were pressed together.

"Focus, Baggins!"

Bilbo cursed himself silently. They were in mortal danger, again, and they simply did not have time for, for…whatever this was. Damn the dwarf king and his deep voice, strong arms and soothing hands anyway! He'd become
hyperaware of him since he'd hugged him on the Carrock, and their little moment of "cuddling" on the ship and the last few nights had just made it worse. No one had time for this right now!

"That's a lot of bloomin' orcs."

As they watched, one of them men was pulled from his horse and overwhelmed with slavering orcs within moments.

"We need to help them." Bilbo hissed.

Thorin glanced at Dwalin and they nodded to one another.

"He's right. If we do not, we'll simply have to deal with them ourselves. Better now while there's help to be had."

"Ye heard him. Du Bekar!"

"DU BEKAR!"

The dwarves boiled out of their sheltered camp, snarling like the wargs the orcs rode upon and crashed into the milling mass of them like a tsunami crashing across the shore. The men of Gondor rallied at the unexpected help, pulled their horses around and waded back into the fray. Thorin's sword, Orcrist, lit the night with eerie blue fire as he led the dwarven charge, the rest of the Company fanned out to either side of him, with Bilbo right behind him with his own glowing sword held aloft. To his one side was Ori, who was using his sling to good effect, pelting the orcs with stones from behind the main line. To the other side was Kili who was doing much the same with his bow, firing into the seething mass of orcs as they charged.

Bilbo kept Dwalin's advice in mind as he charged. He was smaller than everyone else on the field, and his weapon was smaller as well. He could not match an orc strength for strength, but he could still be of help to the others and keep them safe. With that in mind he started chopping at any knees he came across. His sword was a dagger for an elf, but it was sharp, well made and hungered for the flesh of orcs. Everywhere he passed an orc staggered as their knees gave out, and each time he did the orc was chopped down by the nearest dwarf.

The entire battle passed for Bilbo in a daze, taking on an unreal, nightmare quality--the eerie blue glow of the swords, the flickering torches held by the men, the cold silvery moonlight shining down on them, all added together to a seething, half-seen horror, overlaid with the screams of the orcs, the shrieks of the horses, the clash of swords and chokes of the dying. Just when it seemed they might win free of the hellish battle they'd thrown themselves into, more orcs came slavering down from the mountains. One of the riders sounded a horn, and it was answered a few moments later by another in the distance.

"Hold fast, men! Aid comes swiftly!"

Knowing that help would arrive soon rallied the warriors, man and dwarf alike and gave them a second wind to meet the new wave of orcs.

"TO ME! DU BEKAR!" Thorin roared.

His cry was echoed by the whole of the Company, even Bilbo who didn't even know what he was saying. His enthusiasm won him a quick flash of savage glee from those nearest--Gloin and Bombur, who cried out again and charged into the thick of things. Gloin began laying about with his axes and bellowing curses while Bombur began slamming into orcs with his big belly and laying them out when they staggered from the blow. There was a mighty clash as the three small armies smashed into
one another, but they were outnumbered severely, and second wind or not, the battle was slowly turning against them.

"KILI!"

Thorin ducked beneath the wild swing of an orc and searched the milling crowd fearfully upon hearing his nephew's horrified cry.

"Ori!" Dori's shriek sounded but a moment later.

The dwarves rallied and tried to push forward. Already the orcs carrying Kili and Ori were vanishing back towards the mountains. The sound of many hoofbeats charging in the distance was a welcome sound to all, as was the strident call of the hunting horn that sounded out. The reinforcements smashed into the rear of the orc army and the defenders rallied to meet them halfway. It was all for naught, at least for the dwarves. Yet another large band of orcs came charging down from the mountains, and all around the dwarves were being felled, their weapons taken, and carried off into the distance. The men of Gondor rallied and began beating back the orcish invasion, but Bilbo cared nothing for this. His friends were gone.

Desperate and afraid he donned the ring that had already caused them such trouble and chased after them, dodging orcs, horses and the swords of men as he ran.

"Please! No! It cannot end like this! It cannot! Just hold on, my friends! I'm coming!"

Bilbo honestly wasn't sure what good one little hobbit, half frozen, exhausted and with a cold could do against such a force, but he was all they had. Somehow, someway, he would have to be enough. The only positive he could find in the whole terrible situation was that they wouldn't have to search for a way into the depths of Mordor: the orcs were leading them right in, for all the good it did them.

Bilbo, though he was running as fast as his little legs could take him, soon found himself falling behind. The orcs, even laden down as they were, were all just so much bigger and stronger than he was. He didn't give up though. He scrambled up the pass after them, his feet and hands getting scraped and tender. Given his cold, he was soon out of breath as he was so congested. He wanted nothing more than to curl up in a little ball and feel sorry for himself, but he continued grimly on, long into the night until dawn broke dimly over the jagged mountains.

The orcs picked up their pace, and Bilbo struggled to keep up with them. Like all creatures of darkness they disliked the sun and wanted to be deep undercover before its hurtful rays covered the land. Bilbo mustered up the last of his strength and pushed himself to continue after them. As he sun slowly rose he could finally see where the orcs were making for with such haste. It was a large black tower that hovered over the blasted landscape of Mordor like a rotting finger pointing to the sky. It sat atop a mountain, and was the size of a mountain itself, so it could easily be seen from all over. Even where they were, still a fair distance from the towering monument, Bilbo could feel a sense of brooding menace that seemed to radiate from the stones themselves.

It was almost too much for the poor little hobbit. The land itself was sick; nothing grew. Everything was dead and brown. Between that, the tower and his own illness, he was a very unhappy hobbit indeed. He mustered up the last of his flagging strength and staggered after the orcs, up the mountain and into the dark and brooding tower.

"We gonna eat 'em now?"

"No, you nit! Azog and hisself 'ave both been looking for dwarfs. It'll be our heads if we eats 'em afore they gets what they wants from 'em. Toss 'em in the clink!"
"We gets ter keep their weapons though, right?"

"You know how it goes! Put 'em on der table. Hisself get ter look at 'em first."

"That's not fair. Hisself aint' even been here for an age at least. Why can't we?"

"You know what he does to 'em what makes him mad. You want to be turned inside out and then ripped apart, be my guest."

"On der table, you said?"

Bilbo watched the dwarves weapons being carted off with dismay. A jail break was going to be far harder if none of them were armed. He chose to follow the orcs carrying his friends. For the moment, it was far more important to know where they were to be held and what was to become of them, though the orcs' conversation at least assured him they weren't about to be eaten any time soon.

"Right. Stay strong, Bilbo. You just need to figure out how to get thirteen idiot dwarves out of a heavily fortified mountain stronghold, past thousands of orcs, across a desert, up another mountain to destroy the evil ring you were dumb enough to find and wander off with...not to mention wear. Oh, I do hope I'm not being driven slowly mad by wearing it! No problem. Oh, This is all my fault! If not for me, the dwarves would be most of their way to their mountain...to face a dragon, true, but at the moment facing down a dragon almost seems the easier task."

Bilbo Baggins was a very unhappy hobbit. The company had been trapped in Barad Dûr for days now, and Bilbo was no closer to rescuing them than he was the day they'd all arrived. The whole mountain upon which the tower sat was crawling with orcs, and his friends were locked in a cage right in their midst. He was hungry, he was exhausted, his nerves were strung tight as a wire.

Even with him being invisible, the orcs seemed to realize there was someone there that didn't belong, and he'd had more close calls than he cared to think about while creeping around and getting the layout of the place. On the plus side he knew the dwarves were relatively safe for the moment, though that could change at any moment given how many of the orcs were positively slavering for a chance to torture or eat them. The only thing holding them back was fear of 'hisself', who Bilbo assumed must be Sauron.

That was another positive--Sauron wasn't there and hadn't been for an age at least... Of course, on the minus side, he was so scary, that even being gone an age hadn't lessened the orcs fear of him.

He had decided to try something different that day. Creeping around in the mountain stronghold was too dangerous and he'd not found any real way to win his friends free. Even if he did manage to free them from their cell, there was still the fact that they were trapped in the depths of Mordor surrounded by thousands of orcs. They still needed to destroy the ring, but as things stood they had no real chance of making it across the blasted plain and up Mount Doom with so many orcs about.

Today he was going to look around Sauron's tower. He had to do something. He could feel it in his bones. Time was running out.

It was rather nerve-wracking, dodging roaming orcs every few feet, but finally he was in the clear. There was a long tunnel that led upwards to the base of the tower. Bilbo took a deep breath and scurried down it as quickly as he could go. He was nearly to the end when he heard the sound of orcs marching and shoving at one another as they returned from patrol. There was nowhere to hide.
He put on a burst of speed and dove out of the end of the tunnel just as they reached it.

"You hear something?"

"Yeah…"

Bilbo stayed very still and quiet and tried to breath shallowly as the orcs glared around the room suspiciously.

"You smell something?"

"Yeah. Smells good. They bring food back?"

"I hope so."

"We'd best get down afore they eat it all."

"They would too. Bastards."

Bilbo wasted no time once the orcs were gone and raced for the door that led into the tower.

"What on…?"

Bilbo peered up into the dim reaches of the tower.

"It's hollow. It's all hollow."

The only thing that could be seen was a giant staircase that would around the interior of the tower leading upwards into the dim reaches far above.

"Oh bother." Bilbo grumbled tiredly. "Well, nothing for it but to start walking. Those dwarves of mine better appreciate this."
A little glimpse of what's going on elsewhere, while our heroes remain in captivity in Mordor.

"By Eru!"

The elves sent out by Lord Elrond and Lady Galadriel to check on the court of the woodland king milled around in horror and confusion at the sight that met their eyes.

"I know our Lord said there might be reason for concern, but this…"

The elves shivered in dismay. What had once been a beautiful forest had grown fearsome indeed. Darkness and a feeling of creeping evil seemed to hang over the whole area. The great trees were layered in thick, cloying webs that blocked out the sunlight, and were slowly killing the healthy growth below. In its place were sickly looking fungi and small chittering creatures that watched them from the shadowed boughs. The road that had once run through the forest was all but gone in places, and a strange power crept into ones senses and tried to lead them astray.

"Watch out!"

The neat lines everyone had been travelling in broke apart into milling confusion as giant spiders began dropping down on them from all sides. After freezing for a moment in horror they drew their swords and bows and went to work slaughtering the fell beasts as they approached.

It took far longer than it should have for the attack to stop. To their dismay, at least a dozen of the horse-sized spiders fled back into the forest to lie in wait to try again after meeting such resistance.

"Someone comes."

A scouting party from the forest was headed towards them. Seeing the two groups together it was easy to see the differences between them. The elves of Lothlorien and Imladris looked soft and pampered in comparison to their woodland cousins. The woodland elves halted in the trees around them and watched them with careful, wary gazes.

"Greetings. What brings you?"

"We were sent by Lord Elrond and Lady Galadriel to offer any aid we could. The brown wizard brought word that all was not as it was in the Greenwood."

"Come. I'm sure our king would like to give his greetings."

The elves of Imladris and Lothlorien were obviously ill at ease in the forest as they travelled.

"What has become of the forest here? Everything is so dark and…"

"It has been like this for a while now. All of our settlements southward have been overrun. We're now all in the king's palace north of here. It is the only safe place left in the forest."
With the woodland elves as guides they traveled swiftly to the elven king's halls.

"You live indoors in a hall of stone? Like dwarves?"

"There's no need to be insulting…though in truth the dwarves did most of the work, back when friendship still existed among our people."

"Every time I hear that I have to wonder what our ancestors were thinking."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Imladris recently hosted a company of dwarves. They were terrible guests! They had a food fight while dining with Lord Elrond!"

"They wrecked some of our furniture!"

"Drank all our wine"

"Mustn't forget bathed in the fountain!"

"I wish I could"

"So much hair!"

"It sounds like you all have some interesting stories to share. That’s good. Some levity would be welcome."

The visiting elves relaxed slightly as the doors to the palace were shut behind them. Right here, in the center of King Thranduil's power, the air felt clean and light, but whatever darkness had invaded the woodland realm was stronger than him; the king's halls were the only spot of brightness left in the whole forest.

"Da! Da, come quick!"

"Sigrid? What is it?" Bard asked groggily as he climbed out of bed.

"What's going on?" Bain, Sigrid's brother called as he stumbled out to join them.

"Da? Sigrid? What is it?" Tilda, the baby of the family demanded as she too stumbled out to join them.

"There's things out on the plain. In the desolation. It's all dark. I think it's an army of monsters!"

Bard pushed past his eldest daughter and hurried outside, grabbing his bow as he went, his son Bain right behind him.

"By all the Valar…"

"What are they?"

"Orcs." Bard muttered. "Get armed, tell your sisters to lock the door and stay inside. PULL IN THE
The early morning crowd, who were mostly still getting ready to open shops for the day or head out fishing, began poking their heads out as he ran past, then turning to see what had him in a tizzy. They all could see it now, an endless host of orcs, wargs, goblins and trolls, marching along under a cover of thousands of giant bats. It was like darkness had become a living thing and was slowly creeping over the land. Panicked cries began to spread among the populace and several ran to help the bridge guard pull the bridge from the shore so the orcs couldn't reach them. The archers among them readied their weapons and lined up along the outer edges of Laketown to drive back any of the monsters that thought to try their luck anyway. As they watched, the ocean of monsters surged against the Lonely mountain in the distance and broke upon it like a wave…but no, they were surging upwards, looking for any small opening they could find that would gain them access to the riches within.

"Da… Do you think the dragon is still in there?"

"I have to wonder… Surely even orcs aren't foolhardy enough to wake that beast?"

"This is terrible! That many orcs living in that mountain right nearby…. And they'll keep all the gold too!"

"Bastards! That gold should be ours!"

"We can take them!"

"Those riches belong to men!"

The rising tide of greed that had begun to swell among the men of Laketown came to a sudden, abrupt halt when a furious roar shook the distant mountain.

"The beast lives." Bard whispered in horror. He spun on his heel and sprinted back to his home, startling his daughters who were clutching each other in fright after hearing the dragon's fury.

"Da…it was the dragon, wasn't it?"

"Are we going to die?" Tilda asked tremulously.

"Not if I kill it first." Bard said grimly as he reached into the rafters, sending dried herbs and hanging vegetables tumbling to the ground. He emerged with a black arrow.

"The last one. We'd best hope I get a good shot."

There was a tremendous boom and then terrible screams began to sound outside. The family traded a frightened look and hurried out to see what new calamity had befallen.

"The dragon! The dragon comes! Run for your lives!"

"Fire! Fire!"

"Dragon!"

Smaug had erupted from the mountain gates, sending the stone work shattering down the mountain and flew out in a rage, growling at the orcs which seemed frozen in terror at the sight of him. One brave, or very stupid, orc tried chucking a spear at the thing, only to have it bounce off his armored
hide without apparent harm. Unharmed or not, the action seemed to heighten Smaug's fury. Even
from where they stood so far away, they could see his breast glow from within for a moment, before
he unleashed great gouts of fire on the cover of giant bats, and hapless orcs down below.

Those right in the path of the flames burned, and died in short order, screaming. Bats fell from the
sky in the hundreds, landing on the orcs that had been far enough back to escape the flames on the
ground. The massive army became chaos in moments as the monsters trampled one another in their
haste to be away from the fire-spewing death from above. Smaug laughed as they tried to run. He
seemed to take great delight in hounding them across the plain and then setting them alight. Bard
readied his black arrow and waited to see if the beast would head their way.

The people of Laketown wept in fright, others scrambled to grab whatever valuables they could lay
hand to and tried to flee on their boats, and all the while the orcs screamed and Smaug laughed.

Some of the creatures ran until they neared the forest. Smaug set the trees alight and then circled
around to lay waste to the creatures who thought they could attack his mountain, covet his gold and
thought they would live to tell the tale.

"I am king under the mountain!" the dragon roared. The people of Laketown clutched one another as
the last of the orcs and the bats that sheltered them were set alight, and the trees blazed on the edge of
the forest. Bard held the black arrow steady, but the dragon did not approach the lake or its people.
Instead the beast cast around as though searching, let out a furious growl and shot off towards the
south.

The people had just begun to relax when Tilda screamed and pointed. "SPIDER! GIANT
SPIDER!"

"THERE'S ANOTHER ONE!"

"THERE'S MORE! THEY'RE COMING FROM THE FOREST!"

"My king! My king! Orcs! Trolls! Goblins! It's an army!"

"My king! The dragon! The dragon is awake!"

"My king! Fire! Everything is burning!"

The elves, the bulk of whom were gathered in the king's feasting hall, eating, drinking and listening
to music, froze in horror as scout after scout came charging into the room, out of breath and bringing
worse and worse news each time another arrived.

There was a moment of horrified silence and then a mad scramble for weapons and armor.
A small peek at what the White Council is up to.

Things were looking grim for the white council. Gandalf was wounded and unconscious, Celeborn, Elrond and Radagast were battling Ringwraiths, and Saruman and Galadriel were doing their best to hold off Sauron, who even reduced to a mere shadow of his former power was fearsomely strong.

The air was getting gritty and hazy and had been for a while, though the council was so beset by enemies they had ignored it as best they could.

Suddenly Radagast gasped and pointed.

"Spiders!"

Much to everyone's confusion, the spiders sped past all of them. They understood why a moment later.

"Dragon!"

The Nazgûl backed off and sunk down into the ground. They could all see the dragon's throat and stomach glowing. Saruman had a split second to make a decision--continue pressing Sauron or protect everyone from the dragon's rage.

"Gather close! To me!"

Galadriel drug Gandalf's body closer and flung herself atop him, adding the last of her power to Saruman's shield.

"What on Arda is that thing?" Elrond muttered. He had lived a long time--not as long as some, but a respectable length nonetheless. He would have, if asked, have said to know all the creatures great and small that made their home in Middle Earth, but this thing was something new to his eyes. It was small, crouched, pale as a slug, with bulbous eyes. It looked ancient beyond all imagining--there were but a few wisps of hair left on its head, and it had but a few teeth left. It crouched on all fours and cavorted like a monkey, emaciated and stretched. It was no natural creature. What was it even doing there?

He had but a moment to see the scampering beast scurry towards Sauron, and halt, looking puzzled.

"That is not Precious!" it muttered to itself.

Elrond was looking right at the thing as the council gathered close, huddled beneath Saruman's shield as dragonfire rained down all around them. They could hear the fleeing spiders screaming, the ring wraiths screamed as well, a horrid cacophony that rattled bones and chilled the blood of all who heard their cry. The crouched beast huddled at Sauron's feet, trembling and brokenhearted even as he burned.

"Precious! Precious! Where is it? Where? Where...."
Elrond shuddered and huddled closer to the rest, unable to watch as the creature—and a more wretched, pitiable thing he'd never seen—burned while still crying, reaching towards the Dark Lord.

Even beneath the shield the air was superheated, stealing breath and smoldering clothing. Saruman cried out and slowly sank beneath the force of the fire, body trembling as he fought to keep the worst of it at bay.

Finally, blessedly the fire halted. Saruman, trembling, fell to his knees, panting in exhaustion. The council looked up to the sky fearfully—all there knew all too well that they would not survive a second inferno.

"Sauron…he's fled. The dragon…"

"It's…chasing him?"

A pained groan drew their attention back.

"What… what has happened? Why…" Gandalf coughed weakly. "Why is everything on fire?"

"Mithrandir. Save your strength."

"We need to get out of here." Elrond agreed.

"The forest! We need to save the forest before it all burns to ash!" Radagast objected.

"Go rally the Ents. The rest of us need to get out of here and recover before we can really do much else. We're all exhausted."
Chapter Summary

Bilbo finds a surprise and meets an orc who targets the wrong boys.

"Crack their bones!"
"Snap their necks!"
"Rip their stinking arms off!"

Bilbo continued quietly and carefully towards the door. He'd been hearing the sound of marching feet and excited orcs for some time now. It sounded like the whole mountain was emptying out.

"Oh, if only! It would certainly make rescuing my dwarves much easier!"

"We'll show those stinking men of Gondor not to mess with us!"

"Smash their heads upon the rocks!"

"Eat their children!"

"Rape their women!"

"Cut them slash them burn them! Make them scream and cry! Smash their stupid city down! Then set it all on fire!"

Bilbo crept closer, shivering at the horrible song they sang as they marched. He hid behind the door until the last of the marching feet and the last echoes of their song disappeared into the distance and then waited a while longer to be sure all the stragglers were gone. The mountain seemed strangely quiet as he crept down into the depths. The sound of orcish curses, snarls and threats had echoed in the halls day and night in all the time they'd been stuck there. The dark caverns seemed rather eerie without it.

Heart pounding, he hurried down into the lower caverns.

"Please don't have taken the keys…Please don't have taken the…EEEP!"

"WHO'S THERE?"

Bilbo held still, heart pounding as a particularly large, angry looking orc peered around suspiciously.

Bilbo made himself as small as possible, eyeing the distance between himself and the keys worriedly. He'd have to pass right in front of the orc to get them, not to mention they were rather high on the wall. He'd probably need to climb a chair to reach them. Stupid overly large orcs!

The orc settled down and went back to glaring at the wall. He seemed restless…and angry. His fingers drummed on his knee and his glare grew darker. All of a sudden he shot up from his seat and snatched the keys.
"Can't go slaughter men, can't smash their heads or rip their arms off? Well, I ain't being left outa all the fun. If I can't smash no stinking men, I'll smash those dwarfs!"

"Oh no…no, no, no!" Bilbo muttered to himself quietly as he hurried after the orc. "Not my dwarves you're not!"

Bilbo was hard pressed to swallow down his gasp of dismay when he finally saw his friends again. After that first day he hadn't had a chance to see them. It was simply too dangerous when the place was full of orcs. They were all gathered in a large cage in the middle of the cavern. They were huddled in the center, and all of them were bruised and disheveled. By the slump of their shoulders and the grim expressions on their faces they had quite given up hope of ever getting out of there.

They all stiffened and watched the approach of the large orc warily, shifting around so the three boys were in the center.

The orc swaggered to the cage door, jingling the keys in his hand and grinning at them sadistically.

"All the rest of 'em buggered off to go kill some men. I got stuck on babysitting duty. It's your lucky day. Ain't no one around to tell me no. I'm going to save you for last. I'm going to break the rest of them one at a time and let you watch while I do so. I think I'll start with that one. I like his pretty gold hair. I think I'll rip it off him and then crush his skull. Then that one. I'll tear his fingers off one at a time and make you eat them."

The dwarves backed up against the back of the cage as the orc laughed and laughed. It was obvious from watching them that they didn't understand what it had said, but they knew whatever it was wasn't good. The snick of the lock echoed loudly in the cavern. The dwarves tensed, their hands clenching into fists, baring their teeth in a snarl. Their defiance seemed to heighten the orc's anticipation. The door of the cage swung open.

"You'll touch them over my dead body."

The orc's legs gave out as a glowing blue sword erupted from his belly and he fell forward. The dwarves seized the opportunity and surged forward, grabbing on to his arms. The orc's head went flying from his shoulders, spraying all there in thick, black orc blood.

Bilbo appeared as the dwarves heaved the orc's corpse aside and charged out of the cage, cheering loudly. Bilbo only had eyes for Fili and Kili. He took in the bruises on each of their faces, Kili's limp and how gingerly Fili moved in a glance and growled. It was a surprisingly fierce sound to come from such a little fellow.

"Oh, boys… I should have cut off his arms and legs before I chopped off his head." he grumbled, before turning to the rest. "Lower your voices. Most of them left to go fight Gondor, so we're in luck for the moment, but I don't know if any others stayed behind. Follow me. I know where they took your weapons."

Bilbo was tense as a harp string by the time they reached them. Dwarves, even when sneaking, were not the quietest of races. He was certain any moment they were going to be set on by more orcs, drawn by all the noise they were making.

"Where's our armor?!!"

"I don't know where they put that. I never did find it, just the weapons. Come on. I don't know how long it's been or if any of them are going to come back. We need to get moving. We've a long trek ahead of us."
"Yeah, we still need to get to mount doom."

"And we will. I found us a way out."

The dwarves all felt much better with their weapons back in hand.

"This way. Hurry."

Bilbo led them upward at a fast trot.

"No! No! Where are you going?!"

"It's the door!"

"There are thousands of orcs out there. No, we need to go upwards into the tower. I found our way out up there."

"That's crazy. This is the way out right here! Why would we go up into the tower? We'll be trapped up there."

"Please, please trust me! If we're to get out of here alive and make it to the volcano to destroy the ring, we need what's up there!"

The dwarves all started talking, arguing and complaining at once. Bilbo turned to Thorin beseechingly.

"Do as he says!" Thorin barked.

The dwarves all muttered, but they followed Bilbo up into the tower.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me! There's like, five thousand steps!"

"More than that. I lost count at ten thousand. I climbed it yesterday… or perhaps it was days ago… I don't even know anymore. They just go on and on and on and on and… ."

"Bilbo!"

"Sorry… it's a long trek. The air gets funny the higher up you go. My poor legs are still trembling. Before I even got halfway up I half wondered if I was the only person left alive in all the world. It was hard not to despair. I began to wonder if I would just wander ever upwards for eternity… ."

The dwarves exchanged alarmed glances. The hobbit had tears in his eyes as he stared into the dim recesses of the tower.

"And… you're sure we need to go up there?"

Bilbo's nod was firm but resigned. "Yes. I fear we'll not succeed otherwise."

"Then let us go. Time is wasting." Thorin ordered. He placed a firm hand on Bilbo's shoulder to get him moving and led the way upwards.

Kili crawled into the top of the tower, weeping and trembling. One by one the rest of the dwarves,
and a very weary hobbit crawled in after him. "Stairs. I'll be seeing stairs in my nightmares."
"They just went on and on and on and on and on..."
"Ori."
"And on..."

"You were right, Master Baggins. After a while it did truly seem like we were the only creatures left on all the earth and that we would wander upwards forever."
"I can't feel my legs." Bilbo sighed. "We don't have time to rest though... the orcs have gone to war with Gondor. He might come back, or even be back already! We're running out of time. We still have to get to Mount Doom and destroy it."

"He's right. I'm not of a mind to lurk around here any longer than we must in any case." Dwalin agreed. He sighed deeply and forced himself to his feet with a groan. One by one the rest of the dwarves followed his lead. Fili and Kili grinned down at Bilbo sympathetically; he was still sprawled out on the ground, looking sick and exhausted. They each grabbed hold of one of his arms and hoisted him to his feet.

"So... what's this thing you found that we need before we can leave?"

"I'll show you in a moment. First go over there."

"What? There?" Ori pointed to the archway a short distance away.

"Yes. You're all worried about armor, right? I don't know what the orcs did with what you had, but you should be able to find something in there to suit. It turns out Nori was right. Sauron is a collector."

Nori gained a second wind and hurried towards the archway, whooping loudly once inside. The rest of the dwarves dashed after him.

"So, how do I look?"

"Like a ruddy king, much like the rest of us."

"Bilbo! Why aren't you wearing anything?"

"It's all too big for me. I may be of a height with some of you, but even the shortest dwarf is considerably more bulky than the average hobbit."

"There must be something that will fit!" Kili objected.

"Here! This should fit... It might be a bit long, but that isn't really a problem. It just means your legs
will get the same protection your torso does!"

Kili held the shirt up in front of him and let it unroll to the ground, only for it to keep unrolling across it. Bilbo pushed the shirt down so he could see Kili’s sheepish face, and glare at Fili who was laughing so hard his shoulders were shaking. "I think not." he told them with some asperity.

They had indeed found treasures from ages past in Sauron's tower. Much to their disappointment it wasn't all mithril, though there was some pieces, and enough ringmail to outfit the whole party, minus Bilbo, with a few left over. There were a variety of weapons from the first age, enough that each of them had at least a dagger from that age, or an axe or a sword, or a warhammer--Ori and Dwalin had claimed those.  Fili found a lightweight shield that was nearly as big as Bilbo and gave him that.

"No, keep it.  If nothing else you can duck behind it and let us chop some orcs for you for once. You're making a bad habit of saving our lives."

"Well, I consider that a worthwhile endeavor, not a bad habit. Kindly do me the favor of not dying though. I'd hate for all my hard work to go to waste."

"We'll do our best."

"I should certainly hope so!"

Nori had torn down one of the long curtains that covered the windows that ringed the room. Everything that hadn't been claimed for use was piled up on it and made into a large, clanking bundle.

"Please hurry, everyone. We need to get going."

"That's the last of it. Let's go!"

Bilbo beckoned them to follow him. Outside the armory was Sauron's throne room. It was empty but for a (very large) throne, and a plinth with a large crystalline ball on it. Bilbo led them past it to the far side of the room, where there was another archway. A faint breeze could be felt coming from there as they approached.

"This tower is so odd. Just a hollow tube with a ridiculous staircase and one floor at the very top. Do dark lords really like climbing stairs?"

"Maybe they just don't trust orcs, even if they regularly work with them."

"You make a fair point."

"So, burglar, what's this thing you found we couldn't do without?"

At the end of the hall they found themselves in there was another cavernous room. Unlike the armory and the throne room, this one was missing the outer wall, leaving it open to the air around it. Bilbo gestured to the large silvery thing in the center of the room and let his discovery speak for itself.

"Uh…Bilbo? No offense… but we haven't any water up here!" Bofur pointed out.

Gloin was far less apologetic. "What the hell good does this do us?"

"Is that a ballista?" Kili pointed.

"It is. There's even an arrow for it. Just the one though. All the rest of the storage slots are empty."
Ori and Balin both looked stunned.

"Bilbo! That's…that's…"

"A flying ship from the first age. Yes, I know."

"A flying ship?!" Thorin repeated with more interest.

"I'd read about such things, but I thought they were just stories!" Ori breathed out as he wandered closer. "According to the stories, they used these to fight dragons! Once we're done here, this might give us a fighting chance against Smaug!"

"Nothing like this has been seen at any point in living memory. I'd venture to say even most of the elves have never seen its like!"

"This is great… does it work though?"

"It does. It's a fascinating piece of machinery. It's mostly voice activated! I didn't even know you could do that!"

"The gates of Khazad Dûm." Balin said quietly.

"What?"

Balin glanced apologetically at Thorin before explaining. His dislike of elves was somewhat legendary, even among dwarves.

"No one likes to talk about it now, but they were built a long time ago. We were friends with the elves then. You have to say 'friend' in Elvish to make it open."

"Yes, just like that."

"Mellon!" Ori said excitedly, looking at the door in expectation.

"Wrong language. The inscriptions and instructions are all in Quenya. That was Sindarin."

Ori looked quite bereft. "I don't know any high Elvish."

"I would have sworn I didn't either. I know Sindarin, same as you do. It's what the elves I've met wandering through the Shire all spoke, and that was what my mother taught me. It was the strangest thing. I was able to read everything."

Fili looked down at his hand and saw he was fiddling with the ring, which still hung beside the key to Erebor around Bilbo's neck.

"Were you wearing that?"

Bilbo glanced down and seemed rather startled to realize he was fondling the ring. He dropped it and wiped his hand on his trousers.

"You understood what the orc was saying earlier. I had wondered, but just figured you just realized he was threatening us. I mean, we realized that as well, even without knowing what he was saying."

"I was wearing it. I've been wearing it since you all were taken. Even being invisible they seemed to know I was there."
"You're not wearing it now. Can you still read the inscriptions that tell you how to work this thing?"

Bilbo looked at them and shook his head. "No, I can't read them anymore. I know what they say though."

"Ori, take notes. The ship will be useless to us if we won't know how to work it once the ring is destroyed."

"Good point. Well, first is 'Meldo'" The door opened and a long ramp came down.

"What does that mean?"

"Friend."

"It is just like the gates of Khazad Dûm. Not very imaginative, elves." Balin grumbled as they tramped up the ramp to inspect the rest of the ship.

Ori followed after Bilbo once he made the ship's wings unfurl, taking notes in his handy notebook, which he had somehow managed to hold on to, even when they'd lost everything else they'd had with them--repeatedly, even.

The inside was just a large empty space, with a large chair at the front end facing the large windows that covered the front.

"Be nice if it had more'n just the one seat, but it'll be better than having to walk the whole way." Bombur said, trying to look at the bright side.

"Oh, seats! Watch this!" Bilbo said, hurrying to the wall. "Hamma"

Benches that faced one another folded down from the walls.

"There's more! Watch! Sarno! A table folded down between each pair of benches. The walls were now irregular where once they'd been smooth, as they could now see the slight depressions that the furniture had rested in while it was out of the way.

"There was windows under there!"

They all pressed against the glass and could see the wide room the ship was held in. The dwarves looked impressed but wary as they found seats, and set down the large bundle that Nori had drug along with them.

"Can you make it go?"

"I think I can… Everything else still works. I was rather loathe to try flying it, especially by myself. We're really high up… and I can't easily reach the controls."

Indeed, from the opening in the wall, they could see out over what seemed to be the whole of Mordor. The mountains seemed miniscule from their great height.

"It's green down that way. Looks like farms."

"I suppose even the forces of dark lords need to eat."

"Or perhaps his evil and poison just haven't gotten that far yet because he was concentrating on sending it all northwards."
"What is that?"

The dwarves all peered into the distance. There was a large moving blur on the plains before the gates.

"Orcs…and the men of Gondor."

"I told you they marched off to war. I wasn't able to get close enough to any of you before that because they always seemed to know I was there."

"I'd like to get a piece of those bastards. It doesn't set well, letting them get away with imprisoning us." Gloin grumbled.

"We need to concentrate on the ring first and foremost."

"So let's see if this thing flies. We won't know till we try. So? What do we do?"

Bilbo gulped nervously. "One of you take the steering. I can't easily reach it."

"Dwalin is the tallest."

Dwalin stepped forward and looked to Bilbo for instructions.

Do you see that? Grab hold of it. You're going to steer. If I understand the controls right, once we're underway you should be able to just turn us in the direction we want to go. If you pull back on it we should go up, if you push forward, down. Turn to either side we should go that direction."

"I'm pulling back. Nothing's happening."

"Don't do it yet. I know. We need to lift off first. Lelya!"

The ship seemed to thrum under their feet.

"Orta."

Everyone staggered slightly as the ship slowly rose.

"Something's happening with the wings! We're moving!"

"Dwalin?"

"Right. Let me just…" He pushed forward and the ship shot forward and started downward, sending Bilbo crashing into his back and the rest against the windows in the front.

"AAAAAHRRRRH!!"

"Pull back! Pull back! Level out!"

"BLOODY HELL!"

"I'm trying!"

"AAAAAAAAHHHHHH!!!"

"WE'RE ALL GOING TO DIE!!"
"Try harder!"

"AAAAHHHHHH!"

"Smooth and steady! We don’t want the wings to rip!"

The ground seemed to be rushing up at them entirely too fast…but slowly they leveled out and soared across the blasted landscape.

"Praise Mahal! I thought we were done for!"

Everyone peeled themselves off the windows, climbed back into their seats and gathered the scattered armaments from the bundle with a shaken laugh. Dwalin, now that they were level, wiped his brow with a shaking hand.

"Not my fault. These controls are really sensitive!" he defended himself.

"We're not dead, so don't worry about it." Balin consoled him.

"Circle around and head to Mount Doom. I want that ring destroyed before our luck turns again. Things have been going well for us. Let us hope it lasts just a bit longer. Bilbo?"

Bilbo jumped and turned to look at Thorin who was watching him carefully. "Should you be doing that?"

Bilbo glanced down and realized he was slowly rolling the ring through his fingers. He let it drop and wiped his hands on his trousers nervously.

"I didn't even realize… What if I can't do it? The last person who tried this was a great king, and he failed…and he fought Sauron and his forces. He knew firsthand how terrible it all was. How can I really expect to do better?"

"I have faith in you."

"That's lovely of you to say…but it's magic, right? What if it does something to you to keep you from letting go? How could I fight that?"

"Maybe you should trick it." Nori offered. "Loopholes, right?"

"I don't know if that…"

"Couldn't hurt to try." Bofur spoke up. "Just to be sure."

"What kind of loophole will work to destroy a magic, evil ring?"

"Well…"

The three of them considered the problem for a moment.

"Maybe you can't throw it in… but…could you, I don't know…throw in something else?" Fili spoke up.

"What nonsense are you…"

"No! He could be on to something…" Kili defended his brother. "If the thing you throw in is attached to it, and you keep in mind that you're not doing anything to the evil magic ring…"
"Yeah! You're not trying to destroy the ring of ultimate evil power...you're just tossing a rock or something in the lava to see it splash... See? Loophole."

"Lads could have a point. That might work." Balin said judiciously.

"It's magic though. You'll have to make sure you don't think too much about what you're doing."

"What could I... I still have my conker. Do you think that would..."

"Yeah! That could be just the thing. Why don't you tie that ring on the end to you know, keep it safe." Bofur nodded, giving him an overdone wink.

"Yeah, keep it safe. We're not here to destroy any evil rings, nosirree, not us!"

"You might as well. It couldn't hurt." Thorin finally agreed.

Bilbo looked at all of them and nodded. He carefully took the ring from the chain, handing it and the key back to Thorin, and threaded the end of the rope attached to his conker through it. He wrapped it several times and then tied a thick knot further up to keep it from slipping...or making its way free. Who knew what kind of strange powers a ring of ultimate evil had?

Once he was sure it was secure he let it drop to the floor and held the stone in his hand. He tried not to think about Mount Doom, or rings, or Sauron...it was difficult. Who knew it was so hard to not think of something?

The volcano was getting close. They were close enough, in fact, that they could see orcs milling about on the lower slopes. They realized where they were headed, and they were already surging upwards to try to stop them.

Bilbo hurried to the center of the room and called for the stairs. A staircase dropped down from the ceiling, giving access to the upper deck. He hurried up, and tried not to look at how high up they were--which was much harder to do up here than down below, surrounded by walls.

"Oh no!"

"What?"

"The top of the volcano isn't open! We won't be able to just fly overhead and drop it in! There's a cave or something at the top!"

Bilbo climbed back down into the hold.

"I'll try to get you as close as can be. Try to be quick. Those orcs won't take long to get here at the rate they're climbing."

"Kili! Get above and ready your bow. Nori, your knives will be of use as well. Try to keep them from overwhelming us. Ori, you too. You still have your sling, correct?"

"Yeah."

"Go."

The three dwarfs scrambled up onto the deck.

"Dwalin, swing around and come at the cave from the other side. The door is on that side."
"Right. Hold on."

Bilbo went and stood before where the door would open, nervously clutching the stone and thinking about food. He actually was hungry, so that wasn't all that difficult.

"*Bilbo, now!*"

"*Meldo.*"

Bilbo took off as soon as the ramp began to lower, Thorin and Fili right behind him. While they ran for the cave, Gloin, Bofur, Bifur, Oin, Dori, Balin and Bombur charged out as well and settled themselves grimly before the cave opening and braced themselves.

Dwalin didn't know how to stop the ship, so he kept going and circled around, keeping watch on the progress of the orcs.

"*Throw it in!*" Fili shouted.

Bilbo threw the stone, but his other hand kept a firm grip on the rope.

"*Bilbo! The ring! Throw it in!*"

"*IT'S MINE! MY PRECIOUS!*"

Fili lunged and cut the rope. "*UNCLE!*"

Thorin grabbed Bilbo around the waist and hauled him back.

"You cannot have him!" Thorin growled. Bilbo struggled and as his foot kicked out, the ring went flying in a graceful arc. All three of them froze, their attention riveted to the deadly item.

The ring landed on the edge and hung there, balanced for an endless moment. The rope still tied to it continued in an arc and fell over the edge. The ring, still knotted in its length, fell with it.

"THORIN! FILI! BILBO! HURRY! HE'S COMING! HE'S ….AAAAAHHHH!"

Fili and Thorin exchanged a scared look and took off running towards the doorway, Thorin still carrying the now-limp and horrified Bilbo under one arm.

Outside, the orcs had reached the company. They were fighting valiantly, well aided by having the high ground, though they were still being hard pressed. Dwalin circled again, and Kili, Nori and Ori did their best to drive back some of the crowd. On the edge of Mordor, swiftly coming towards them was a roiling mass of shadow and fire. Malevolence seemed to pour from it in waves and press down against them. Behind them, the volcano began to rumble.

"DWALIN!"

"JUMP! HURRY!"

Dwalin swung by for another pass. The company leapt out and landed on the upper deck in a heap and went rolling across it as the ship circled and dove to escape the oncoming shadow.

"Mahal's beard! There's a dragon following him!"

"SMAUG!" Thorin growled in fury.
"We should get below! We're vulnerable up here!"

The company scrabbled for the stairs, and dove through, landing in a heap at the bottom.

"Holta!" Bilbo and Ori both shouted. The stairs and ramp retracted and the openings sealed.

Oin and Gloin had made it to the window. They were pressed against it, peering out.

"He went in the volcano! The dragon followed him!"

"OH CRAP! FLY! FLY YOU FOOL!"

"WHAT'S GOING ON?"

"The volcano's exploding!"

"Quick! Fly for the border!"

"Smaug is still alive! He's hurt, but he's still alive!"

"KILI! THERE'S A WEAK SPOT ON HIS CHEST!" Bilbo shouted.

"Wait…where's Kili?"

"He stayed above!"

"The ballista!"

"It only has one arrow left!"

"Then we'd best make it count! Open the hatch again."

Bifur and Bombur were closest, so they scrambled up the stairs, Bilbo right behind them. He was the only one who knew how to open the cabinet with the last arrow. They found Kili desperately trying to arm the ballista, but he was having some trouble. Bifur and Bombur hurried forward and helped him cock the bow string. They were just in time too. Smaug had spotted them.

"Here! It's the only arrow for it. Do your best!"

Kili got the arrow in place and wiped his sweating hands on his trousers before swinging it around to face the dragon, who was dazed, but all too quickly recovering.

"Kili! Look! He's missing a scale! Right there on his chest!" Bilbo pointed.

"Kili!" Bombur said worriedly. The dragon's throat and belly were starting to glow.

"Hold on…hold on."

The ship went sideways; Dwalin had seen the same thing the rest of them had and was trying to get them out of the way.

Smaug opened his mouth. They could see deadly flames bubbling up from his throat.

"Mahal…guide my shot." Kili whispered. The ballista twanged loudly. Once the arrow was loosed, Bifur grabbed Kili and Bilbo both by the arm and hustled them to the stairs.
Dwalin swung the ship around just in time for them all to see the dragon seize up, his deadly flames choking him and then dying out. He began to fall from the sky, twirling in a strangely graceful spiral towards the ground.

"I… I did it."

"Yes you did."

They all just looked at one another for a long moment as the events of the last minutes finally sunk in.

"You killed Smaug!"

"Let's hear it for Kili Dragonslayer!"

"Woohoo!"

THUNK. THUMP. BOOM.

"What was…"

"The volcano exploded. It's raining boulders and lava!"

"Get us out of here!"

"Gladly."

Bilbo splayed out on the floor and stared at the ceiling, numb.

"Horta. Ambe… Horta."

Dwalin cursed as the boat suddenly sped up and shot like an arrow loosed from a bow towards the mountains.

He pulled back on the controls and lifted them over. His shoulders slowly unknotted once they were clear.

"Some warning next time would be nice. Geez." he muttered.
To Erebor we go

Chapter Summary

Our heroes make their escape from Mordor and try to get back to their original quest - reconquering Erebor.

"It was real nice of those weird people to leave all that food for us."

"Maybe they were thanking us for taking out Sauron?"

"Either that or they were just terrified. That big tower crumbled, the volcano exploded...and they were probably able to see Smaug go tumbling out of the sky, even if not very clearly. Right after all that happens, we swing around and start heading towards them. I think I would have left a pile of food in a field and hightailed it the other way too."

"These orange things are actually pretty good. Sweet."

"Save the seeds." Bilbo replied absently. "I might be able to cultivate some in a greenhouse or something. It was a bit warmer there than it is in the Shire...or Erebor, for that matter. If I remember the map correctly, it's slightly north of the Shire, isn't it?"

"Aren't you going to eat, Bilbo? Worry about planting later."

"I'm not hungry."

"AHHH! OIN! OIN! Bilbo's dying!"

"What?!"

"Mr. Baggins, are you injured?"

"It was that damned magic ring! We should never have made you hold on to it!"

"DON'T DIE, BILBO!"

Bilbo looked around in alarm at all the dwarves suddenly crowding him, and tried to slap Oin's prodding hands away, but he was persistent.

"DWALIN! PAY ATTENTION BEFORE WE FALL OUT OF THE SKY!" he suddenly squeaked in alarm, when he realized the dwarf in question was watching all of them instead of where they were going.

Dwalin jumped and turned around from where he'd been watching and pulled the airship up slightly before they ran into the mountains around Mordor.

"Bilbo, let Oin examine you. If there's something wrong let him take a look before it gets worse." Bofur chided, once their flight was steady once more.

"I'm not injured."
"Then why aren't you hungry?"

Bilbo sighed and stared at his lap miserably.

"Bilbo? We can't help if we don't know what's wrong." Fili said gently.

"You must all hate me. I tried to keep the ring…"

"Ach, laddie, put that thought right out of your head now." Gloin huffed. "It were magic, weren't it? Can't be helped."

"You even said as much before we went in." Fili reminded him. "That man-elf did the same thing."

"Isildur didn't whack Elrond in the head with a shield and try to kick him." Bilbo muttered ashamedly, peering at Thorin, who had a slight bruise on his cheekbone from the aforementioned shield.

"No…but he also didn't try to wrestle him away from the ring while it was controlling him, as far as we know." Kili pointed out.

"We expected the ring to have some tricks left, which is why we took precautions, and why Fili and I went with you. Put it out of your mind. None here doubt your sincerity in wanting the thing destroyed."

"Plus, you found this ship! We couldn't have done it without that!"

"You spotted the weak spot on Smaug too!"

"No one here hates you, Bilbo. I've no doubt any of us that tried destroying it would have fared the same." Thorin added with finality. "Eat something and lay your mind at ease."

Bilbo took the orange Thorin handed him and smiled at all his friends, who smiled back. The moment was shattered when Bilbo's stomach suddenly started growling. The whole group began laughing.

"Blimey…It sounds like he's got a warg in there!" Nori cackled.

The group spread out again, retaking their former seats as Bilbo began peeling the fruit he'd been given.

"Gondor's a bit of a mess, huh?"

"Yeah. There's just orcs pouring out in all directions, trying to flee the lava and all. Heh, look there. Bunch o' the bastards got squashed by flying boulders!"

"Couldn't have happened to nicer fellows." Dwalin growled.

"That's a lot of orcs. I don't think I'd fancy livin' there in the coming days."

"Well, the men of Gondor are out in force to meet them as they flee. I'm sure they'll be fine."

"I guess we got our revenge on them for taking us prisoner after all!"

"We might have to stop at some point and give this here ship a wash. All the smoke in the air from the volcano is making it hard to see."
"Once we're away from Mordor it should be better. We can stop in the river if we really must."

Bifur finished eating and licked the sticky juice off his fingers, before heading over to take over the controls so Dwalin could eat as well.

Dwalin waited a bit to make sure he had a handle on things, then headed over to join his brother, Thorin and the hobbit at one of the tables, making quick work of his own orange and the dried meat the people of southern Mordor had left them.

"If we keep on like this, we should be able to reach Erebor by Durin's day." Dwalin muttered once he'd sated his hunger a bit.

"Yes… but what will we find when we get there, that is the question."

"Yeah… If Smaug was way down here…"

"Those orcs we saw while we were on the river might well be…"

"Inside Erebor." Thorin sighed, sounding ill.

Everyone exchanged glum looks. Even with the ship, it was going to take a while to get to the lonely mountain—which meant, of course, they had hours to worry about it before finding out one way or another whether the whole quest to retake Erebor had been in vain, even with the dragon already dead.

"Mahal's beard! Would ye look at that! It's like the whole buggerin' world went nuts while we were all trapped in Mordor!"

At Gloin's cry, the dwarves rushed to the windows to see what had startled the normally taciturn dwarf so much.

Once they'd left Mordor, he'd begun following the River Anduin northwards. They were now level with the grasslands of Rohan, nearing their northern border.

"Good gracious!" Dori exclaimed in horror.

"What the hell are they fighting? They look like…"

"Spiders!"

"Giant spiders… Look at the things! Some of 'em are as big as the ruddy horses they're riding!"

"They seem to have things well in hand even so."

"I think some of those people down there fighting the spiders are elves."

"Lothlorien lies not far from Khazad Dûm which lies not too far north of here. It is possible."

"Where did the beasts even come from?"

"Do you not recall? Beorn said the forest was full of the things. He said it was too dangerous for himself and his companions to enter. It seems things were even worse than he told us if they're leaving the forest to come this far south."

"That's probably why there are elves here. They must have seen the things leaving the forest and
heading towards Rohan."

"Let us hope they've not ventured north as well."

"Indeed. I've no wish to try to root such beasts out of Erebor."

"Aye. Stinking orcs would be bad enough!"

Rohan was soon left behind. The southern end of the Misty Mountains could be seen ahead in the distance.

"I hope some of the men of Dale are still in the area when we return to the mountain. I'm so hungry I could eat a horse."

"We all are."

Bilbo's stomach chose that moment to make a loud growl that reverberated through the whole room. Everyone fell silent as the growl went on and on, then laughed heartily once it had finally fallen silent.

"Oh! Goodness! I guess that bit of stuff we got from Mordor wasn't quite enough to hold me." Bilbo tittered in embarrassment.

"We'll have to restock at the man village before we head to Erebor."

"I'm almost afraid to see how much you're going to eat. You'll probably scare the men!"

"Ha, ha." Bilbo retorted dryly. "You aren't wrong though. I've been working on short rations as it was—we hobbits normally eat as much as seven meals a day! These last few days I've not had anything but that bit we got earlier, same as all of you. Frankly, I'm surprised I'm still walking around, especially given how I've been running around all this time. I've also realized how very lucky I was that my stomach waited till there weren't any orcs around to start misbehaving."

"I simply cannot believe how swiftly this thing travels!"

"What was that?"

"Look! There's Mirkwood just up ahead. It's just a greenish blur off in the distance, but still… When I think of how long it took all of us to cross this same distance on foot…"

"Yeah, wow. That probably is Mirkwood. It's only been a few hours at most."

As they drew closer and began to be able to make out details, the dwarves and hobbit all pressed closer to the windows to get a better look.

"Bloody hell."

"Language! But you're not wrong…" Dori muttered, giving Ori a disapproving look as he did so.

"What a mess… When we passed by here before it was ominous, but still intact. Look at it. It looks like a large swath of it burned down."

"Well…Smaug did come through here. It seems he went on a bit of a rampage before reaching Mordor."
"I just hope no one tried to take over our mountain. It's a very real possibility with the dragon just leaving like he did."

"If they have they will soon regret having done so."

"That's right! We'll show them what for!"

"Um… guys? I think some of the trees down there are walking around."

"Ents. I'd read about them but…"

"There are walking trees in the Shire. Not where I am, but in the old forest near Buckland. They're dangerous. I only saw them but once when I was still a faunt. I snuck past the great hedge that's meant to keep them out while we were visiting my aunt and cousins. I'm just as glad we're up here."

"More orcs. Dead ones. Great piles of the beasts."

"Did the trees kill them?"

"I did say they were dangerous."

"Well, if they're killing orcs they can't be too bad."

"Is it just me… or…"

"It's not just you. The river goes into the forest now."

"Do you think they pulled the river off course?" Bilbo wondered.

"How could trees do that?"

"If those are what I think they are, it might be in their capabilities. They were created by the Valar to protect trees. If they needed to divert the river to save them all from burning, maybe they could have done it." Ori said musingly.

Dwalin tilted the ship so they could start moving to the other side of the forest--the side Erebor was on.

As they passed overhead, they could see the trail of destruction and burned trees that dotted the whole forest. The parts that were left, many of them were still covered in spider webs.

The whole company shuddered in horror. The original plan was for all of them to travel through that forest on foot. They probably would have ended up getting eaten.

As they reached the other side, they saw some green leading away from the forest and then another river-- one which eventually led to Esgaroth and the Long Lake, and then towards Erebor.

"Looks like this river got diverted too. See? It's all bent up ahead. Smaug wasn't playing around, was he?"

"It certainly explains why all those spiders fled southward."

"They gonna put them back? It's just… be a bit of surprise, wouldn't it? Some poor shmuck sailing down, ends up smacking into a tree or running aground… Like those guys."

"I couldn't say. The little I know of them is from old stories. Wait… what guys?"

"There is a grounded ship down there."
"You're right, there is!"

"Look at it! It's full of gold!"

"Those bastards robbed Erebor!"

"Take us down there! They won't get away with this!" Thorin ordered.

"Oi! Bilbo! A little help here? How d'ya stop this ruddy thing?"

With Bilbo's help, Dwalin guided the ship in for a landing. The men on the boat--and a greasier, creepier lot none of them had ever seen--gaped at the ship in astonishment, even halting their efforts to get their boat moving again to watch them. As soon as the ship touched down, the dwarves charged out in force, cursing the men and calling them names unrepeatable in polite company. Two of the men squealed in terror and immediately bolted. The last man, the fattest, greasiest and creepiest of the lot, flung himself atop the gold piled on the dirty, fish-smelling boat.

"It's mine! All of it! Mine! You can't have it! Thieves! Murderers! I'm the Master of Laketown! That makes it mine! Go away, wretched little half-men! You can't have it! My gold! Mine!"

Gloin huffed at the man in disgust and tucked his axes back into his belt.

"I'll not dishonor my blades with the likes of him!"

Bifur, Bofur and Bombur traded a look and nodded. Bifur grabbed the man's feet, while Bofur and Bombur each grabbed an arm. They heaved him up, swung a few times and sent him sailing right off the boat. He landed with a mighty splash and began flailing around begging for help and cursing the dwarves, who had formed a line and were quickly and efficiently passing the golden coins, plates, candlesticks etc. from one to another and piling it all in the flying ship.

"Put that back! Thieves! Reprobates! That gold belongs to Lake Town! It's mine! All mine!"

He managed to pull himself part way up on to the boat several times, only to be met with a kick to the face each time. He remained undaunted; watching the gold disappear seemed to fuel him to ever louder and more desperate demands for its return. He was easily ignored by all of them. As the last of the gold disappeared into the flying ship, the man staggered ashore and lunged for the nearest dwarf. They could only assume he'd thought to try to steal the flying ship from them. A firm strike to the solar plexus from Ori stole the man's breath away. Dori, enraged that the wretched man had targeted his little brother picked the unfortunate fellow up over his head and tossed him back into the river, while Nori laughed delightedly in the background.

"Filthy wretch." Thorin muttered disgustedly. "Let's go."

"What if that was actually his gold?" Bilbo wondered as the last of them trooped inside.

The addition of the gold made it a tight fit, but Erebor wasn't too much further away.

"Tis unlikely in the extreme. You heard him. He was the master of Laketown. That must be where the people of Dale fled after the dragon came. There was a large lake just past Dale, between Erebor, Dale and the forest. When the dragon went on his rampage, that coward and his thugs robbed the town and fled like the cowards they are, leaving the people destitute. We know not what condition the city of men was left in, and winter is swiftly approaching. Those that remain will need this to see them through the coming months, I've no doubt. And men have the nerve to call us greedy. Wretched beast."
Bilbo just nodded; they'd know the truth of the matter soon enough. They got back underway and continued northward.

"I do hope Beorn is alright."

"Yeah, I didn't even think of that. He might not have been back by the time all this happened. It took us a couple days to sail down the river. It would have taken him longer to return since he'd be sailing against the current." Fili agreed.

"In that case, I hope his animal friends are alright." Ori fretted.

"We'll have to go check on him once we've secured the mountain. It would be a poor repayment for his help if he lost his home and his companions because he wasn't there to protect any of it."

As they got back underway, Bilbo shuddered when he got a good look at the lands on the other side of the river.

"It looks as bad as Mordor!"

"Aye. The Brown Lands, they call them. Word is it's been barren since the last alliance. Supposedly it used to be a lush and fertile land, filled with endless gardens of plenty."

"Even reading stories of the last alliance... It all sounded terrible, but seeing this, and that horrid marsh, and Mordor itself really makes it all real, doesn't it? So much devastation, even so many centuries later. What was that horrid dark lord even trying to accomplish? Surely even a madman couldn't look at all this and think it better than what was there before?"

"Dunno. Maybe he did. His own place looked like this. Can't see the sense of it meself. It's all just dead, innit?" Bofur agreed.

"Dead, sick, tainted. It's an abomination, that's what it is."

"Erebor." Thorin said reverently.

Everyone moved to the front window, and there she was. The mountain was still far enough away that it was still little more than blip in the landscape in the distance.

"It seems a long time indeed since we last had clear sight of her. I only hope we are not too late ere we reach her."

"By my reckoning, we've still a few days before Durin's day is upon us. At the rate we're travelling we should certainly be there in time. Think of how far we've come already. A distance that took us a week at least on foot was covered in mere hours." Balin assured him.

"I wonder if Holman Gamgee or Farmer Maggot or Farmer Cotton would have any ideas on how to heal this land? It isn't right. It isn't right at all."

"Still fretting about the Brown Lands, Master Baggins?"

"You know... they might actually be able to heal now, if it's even possible, I mean."

"How so, Ori?"
"Well…they got ruined during the battle with Sauron, right? He's dead now, really dead I mean, not just mostly dead like he's been. Maybe now he's gone, whatever strange magic was keeping everything like this will go away in time, and the land can heal and grow stuff again."

"We can only hope the same logic holds for the dragon as well. From all we've heard, nothing has grown in the land Smaug devastated during his first attack. They call it 'the desolation of Smaug' in fact, because what was once a lush valley filled with grassy fields and the smell of pine trees became little more than a grey, blasted plain."

"That's… worrisome. It will be rather difficult for your kingdom to thrive there if food won't grow in the lands around the mountain."

"Should worse come to worst… Dale was once the center of trade for the whole region and could be again…but yes, it is a concern. What food could be brought from a distance will be limited by how long individuals food stuffs will last versus how long the trip to bring it to the mountain takes."

"We've got this ship now." Dwalin pointed out.

"And it will be a great help, but it's no long term solution. We've only the one, and the amount of cargo it could hold is not limitless. So long as there are but a few of us in the mountain it should more than serve, but it will not be able to keep up with demands for the whole populace of the mountain."

"Well, with winter fast approaching I can't do much to help right now…but come spring, I'll see if some of the farmers I know will come take a look around. Holman Greenhand and his apprentice Hamfast Gamgee both have green thumbs like you wouldn't believe. If the land around your mountain can be made to produce again, they'd be the ones to figure out how to make it happen. Any of the farmers, really. The Shire didn't look like it does now when we first arrived there, you know. All our stories agree on that much. It's so green from generations of hobbits tending the land that made it look like it does."

"That is hopeful news indeed."

"Yes, it is. I will admit I was more focused on actually winning back Erebor from the dragon. That task in itself seemed monumental enough that I confess I haven't spent a lot of time worrying about what would come after. It is only now, when we are so close to actually achieving our goal that such worries have begun to rear their ugly heads."

"Heavy is the head that wears the crown." Bilbo murmured quietly.

Thorin heard him and sighed. He glanced down in surprise when Bilbo laid a hand on his arm and squeezed gently.

"Promise me that you will put these worries for the future out of your mind…for today at least? We've all been through so much getting to this point. Promise me you'll at least allow yourself a few hours to simply be pleased at our victory and the return of your lost home."

Thorin covered his hand for a moment and squeezed.

"I'll do my best."

"That's the spirit, laddie!" Oin nodded. "We'll have to see if we can get a cask or two of ale as well as some food. Have a proper victory celebration!"

"Yes! A party!"
"We could use one, after the last few months!"

"I'm all for that." Dwalin called back from the front of the ship. "Some spirits and some pipeweed and a good solid meal. We all deserve it."
"Hear, hear!"

"We're almost there, lads. Should just be a few more minutes. Burglar, get yer ass up here. I don’t remember the ruddy Elvish to stop this thing."

The rest of the dwarves hurried to the nearest windows, all eager to get their first up-close look at the mountain they'd all been striving towards all this time.

"Looks like there was a fire up here too. The whole northern end of the forest is just charred nubs."

"Couldn't have happened to a nicer elf." Thorin muttered gleefully. He continued grinning even after Bilbo elbowed him, but he did try to tone it down a notch.

"Sweet, blessed Mahal!"

"By the Maker…"

"Yavanna's tits!"

The dwarves froze and turned to look at Bilbo in astonishment. He was still pressed against the window staring in horror at the plains around Erebor and didn't notice at first. When he did he flushed bright red.

"Goodness. Pardon me!"

"Mahal's balls." Gloin offered stoutly. "Tis a sight that calls for strong language. The roving bands that were hunting us were quite bad enough. We'd have stood no chance against these numbers, and that's if any of us even survived first contact with the stinking wyrm! Finding that cursed ring likely saved all our hides. Even if we'd had enough forewarning to call to Dain and his lot, we'd have stood no chance against these numbers!"

Bilbo shivered as he looked down at the charred corpses of unnumbered orcs--there must have been several thousand at the very least--that were strewn across the blasted ground. Here and there much larger corpses stood out like small charcoal hills on the plain. Trolls, most likely. He counted at least four. They'd had trouble enough with three! Goblins too, thousands of them. They'd only escaped either before with Gandalf’s help, and even the wizard likely couldn't have done to protect against all the threats that had lined up to see to their end, not with all of them there together and in such numbers.

"Are those bats?"

"Yeah, looks like. Giant sized, just like those stinking spiders we saw."

"I guess we know now what the ruddy hell Smaug was doing way down in Mordor when last we'd heard he was snoozing for sixty years in our mountain."

"Aye. He must have thought Sauron sent this army to take the mountain from him."
"So he laid waste to the army and then went looking for Sauron. Cheeky beast."

"You must admit it all worked out well for us."

"Aye, that it did. Damn convenient, yer enemies takin' each other out before you even lay eyes on 'em."

"If only more of 'em would do that!"

"That must be Laketown over there. We should grab some food before heading to the mountain."

"Probably not a bad idea. It's been a long couple of days."

Dwalin landed the ship in the lake, and with a bit of judicious steering managed to bump gently into the side of the floating town. Fili and Kili leapt out and tossed some ropes they found attached to the dock up to Bifur and Bofur, who secured them to the railings on the ship so it wouldn't drift away while they went in search of food.

"The place seems to be deserted."

"Aye. You'd think someone'd have come out to investigate the flying ship, and that's even without the almighty splash we made when we landed."

"Probably fled during the dragon's rampage."

"Might have gone to seek shelter with the elves for a bit. So many monsters running amok. This don't look like a town o' warriors."

"Aye, fishermen and shopkeepers...poor ones at that."

"Might just be so run down on account o' their lord making off with their treasury."

"Most likely, yeah."

"Well, spread out. See what they left behind. Hopefully there's at least some food still here."

"We should keep track of what we take and where we take it from." Bilbo scolded.

"We're not thieves, especially to steal from such folks as already has very little!" Gloin scolded in return. "We'll give them fair return for what we take."

"I wasn't trying to imply you were, really. With this place being abandoned, I know there's many who would see no problem in looting whatever was left and feeling perfectly justified in doing so. It just didn't sit well with me."

Before long the dwarves began trooping back, each with food or ale or spirits tucked under their arms. Bilbo returned after a while, staggering under a towering pile of blankets and a small cask of pipeweed that he had tucked under one arm.

"Some help? I can't see where I'm going!"

"Blankets?"

"We don't know what condition anything in the mountain is going to be in. It's getting colder every day. In fact, it's snowing."
"It was a good thought, laddie. No fires have been lit in Erebor since its fall, and the great forges have lain cold all these years. The mountain is likely to be both cold and drafty until we rectify that."

"I need to go grab some more. I couldn't carry enough for everyone in one trip. I think I'm going to see if I can rustle up a change of clothes while I'm there as well."

"You'd be better off waiting on that until we get to the mountain. You aren't likely to find anything that will fit you in a man village."

"Oh… yes, that's true isn't it? I do hope there's something wearable that will fit me left in the mountain. What I'm wearing is just about falling off me, it's so threadbare."

It didn't take much longer, and they were ready to be underway once more. From Laketown it was a short flight to the mountain.

"Well. It looks like we needn't worry about the secret door."

"Bastard! He destroyed the front gates!"

"What a mess. That's going to take some doing to fix."

"We'll make a wall to block access. Word will begin to spread far and wide of Smaug's defeat. We were very lucky in finding this ship. It was the only thing that allowed us to outpace the news spreading. Had we needed to make the return journey on foot we'd have found Erebor looted and empty as every man and elf in the area hurried forth to help themselves."

"We'll need to send word to Dain as soon as possible so he and his men can be in place before looters start arriving."

"Aye. Even with all we've done and gone through already, even though we're about to enter the mountain again, our worries aren't over yet."

"But tonight we will celebrate." Bilbo reminded him. "Our worries and problems will still be there tomorrow."

"Yeah! Let's look on the bright side. Smaug destroyed the front gate…but at least this way we don't have to leave the ship outside."

"That's right! It'd been stolen the moment we took our eyes off it!"

"Only if the would-be thieves know Quenya."

"There's elves a plenty in those woods. They'd have taken it for sure."

"And before you go feeling guilty or even dare suggest we should give it back to the stinking weed-eaters, remember: finders keepers. If they wanted it so badly, they could have gone to Mordor any time in the last few thousand years and taken it. They didn't. It's ours now."

"Here we go, lads! Next stop, Erebor!"
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Our heroes finally reach the lonely mountain and the kingdom of Erebor.

Bilbo stayed back as the dwarves descended into their mountain, a place less than a third of them remembered, but all of them had dreamed of for countless years. His eyes filled with tears as Balin and Dwalin grew choked with emotion. Thorin stepped forward as though in a daze and reached out to touch the nearest wall.

"I remember this…these walls, this stone… Do you remember, Balin? Halls filled with golden light? We're home."

"We're home." Balin agreed, wiping his eyes.

As joyous and relieving as those first moments inside the mountain were, reality was quick to intrude. After the initial awe at the size and grandeur of the place to the eyes of those who had never seen it before, details started to jump out at them. Scorch marks. Cracked and shattered stonework. The reptilian reek of dragon in the air. Bodies. Those were the worst. Though they all knew dwarves had been lost when Smaug seized the mountain, the bodies were a stark reminder of what that actually meant. Young, old, male, female, individuals and groups. Pinned beneath stonework, burned alive on the stairs, gathered in a group in a windowless room cowering and gasping for air. The lost citizens of Erebor told a story of the last horrid day when they lost everything in a few hellish moments.

"Dwalin. Take Kili and Bifur to find the armories and see if we've any arrows or bolts. We'll need someone keeping watch while we repair the gate…"

"What the…" Bilbo murmured in astonishment as the (very) large raven soared into their midst and alighted on Thorin's arm.

"Roac! You're still here?"

"It has been many years, Thorin son of Thrain son of Thror. You are foolish though, to stay here in the open. Smaug was already in a poor mood when last any in these parts saw him."

"He was in a poor mood when last we saw him as well. Have no fear of his return though. My nephew here will now be known as Kili Dragonslayer. He laid low the beast with his last arrow in the depths of Mordor."

"Mordor! Why would any of you be in that evil place?"

"Our burglar here found Sauron's ring in the depths of a goblin cave we were briefly held captive within. We decided to see to its destruction before reclaiming Erebor."

"These are glad tidings indeed! Too long has the wretched wrym crouched here. I will spread
"I thank you for your enthusiasm!" Thorin laughed.

"But perhaps it would be best if you held off on spreading the glad tidings until you do a small favor for us?" Balin interjected smoothly. "Could you take word to Dain Ironfoot in the Iron Hills and give him the news first and tell him we would much appreciate his aid?"

"Aye, Balin is correct, much as I wish it were otherwise. Sadly enough, seeing the old place, it seems killing the dragon may well have been the easy part. We have a lot of work ahead of us to make Erebor a welcoming home once more."

"Aye. And we'll be vulnerable here until we have reinforcements. Once word of the dragon's demise spreads, I've no doubt we'll have any number of men and elves trying to steal Erebor out from under us…especially given the devastation we witnessed on our way in." Dwalin growled.

"RAAAWK! I will do this favor for you, in memory of the longstanding friendship between our people!"

"Our thanks, friend."

Roac flew upwards in a flurry of black wings and disappeared out into the sky beyond the mountain's fastness.

"Well, that's one less worry. Let us break our fast and then to work. I have not come all this way only to become spider food in the final act!"

"Nor have any of us."

"Where is the nearest kitchen?"

"… Hmm… Probably the guardroom mess hall for the front gate guard station."

"Well then, I'd best get started. It will be hard to make dinner if there's nowhere to cook…and I refuse to cook in a dirty kitchen!"

"We're going to need somewhere to sleep as well." Dori agreed.

"I'm hungry now though!"

"We got a bag of apples. We'll eat those now and then get started."

"Do you smell something?"

"Aye, now that you mention it…"

"I guess it's dinner time. Good time for it."

"Yes. We've finished the wall…and I'm starving."

"Same here."
The dwarves set aside their tools and wandered after the smell of cooked food, which led them in time to the guardroom mess hall, which used to be used by the gate guards back when Erebor was still a working kingdom. The place looked far different than it had the last time they saw it. For one, it was clean. The group of dwarves crowded the doorway as they gaped into the room beyond. The long tables and chairs which used to feed the guards between shifts had been scrubbed till they shone. The floors were swept, and the cobwebs and dirt that had hung from the walls had been removed and the wall lamps cleaned of filth and filled with fresh oil. There were stacks of clean plates, cutlery and trays waiting on the long table against the wall that was meant for such purpose. This one spot in all of Erebor looked how it was supposed to; the way it had long ago. After gaping at the surprising cleanliness around them, they staggered onward to find the source of the delicious smells. They found Bilbo in the kitchen beyond, flitting from pot to pot and checking on the progress of dinner. The kitchen had undergone similar treatment to the dining hall. Every inch of the place had been scrubbed and swept. The stoves and ovens gleamed, the pots and pans sparkled and hung arrayed on their hooks waiting to be used. Through a doorway at the rear they could see that all of their food supplies had been moved into the pantry there and neatly stored on the shelves.

"Are those cookies?" Dwalin asked suddenly.

Bilbo jumped, having been too focused on dinner to hear their approach.

"Oh, goodness! You're here already. Dinner isn't quite done yet, though don't worry it should only be a few more minutes. And yes, those are cookies, but anyone who tries to so much as stare too hard at them until after they've eaten their dinner will feel my spoon!" he warned waving a long spoon at them threateningly.

"Where are Dori and Bombur?"

"Making the beds. The sheets and such have only just gotten dry. That tumble-drying machine for laundry is really quite something. I've never seen anything like it before. In the Shire we just hang laundry outside to dry. I guess that isn't possible in here. In any case, we've still a bit of time till dinner is ready. In fact, you can all take the time to clean up while you're there."

The dwarves decided to do just that. The guard barracks had been similarly transformed—as had the communal showers attached to them. Everything was clean, the beds were freshly made with new sheets, with their blankets Bilbo had taken from Lake Town were layered atop them, and the bits and pieces that had survived the trip with everyone were laid out or neatly stacked on the footlockers at the base of each bed. There were even piles of fresh towels waiting, and piles of clean clothing.

"Where'd you all get these?"

"I went and had a look around the market district. Everyone left in such a hurry, there was a lot of everything left behind. The food was all long gone, of course, and some of the clothing and such had begun to rot, but a lot of it was still in relatively good condition, the stuff that had been properly packed away, anyway."

"We might all actually find something to fit in here!"

"They even found clean socks!"

It was a very cheerful group of dwarves that trooped back downstairs, clean and freshly dressed, only to find that dinner was done. The dwarves all cheered and went to grab trays so they could grab some of it.
"Mmm. This is really good. This place looks great too."

"That was all Bilbo. We were busy in the laundry room while he did all this. We were as surprised as you were."

"I'm a hobbit, not a dwarf. I don't know anything about stonework, or defenses, or engineering, or mining. I do know all about food, and hot baths, and clean sheets and other things that makes life comfortable and worth living. I'm just doing my part...you know, since I can't actually fulfill my contract, what with the dragon being dead already."

"Nonsense. You burgled the most important thing you could have! The ring. That led directly to us reclaiming Erebor with little fuss!"

"You saved Thorin's life!"

"You spotted the weak point on the dragon that allowed Kili to kill it."

"You kicked Sauron's ring into mount doom."

"Our side trip meant we weren't there when the orc army came calling and roused the dragon to burn the countryside a second time."

"So far as any of us are concerned, you have more than fulfilled your part on our quest." Thorin objected.

"If it bothers you that much though...well, you were originally hired to find and retrieve the Arkenstone. Now that your cleaning project has been finished, you could begin searching for it tomorrow. There are other things of more importance at the moment, but later it will be needed." Balin interjected.

"Why though? What's important about a particular jewel? It is a jewel, right?"

"The most wondrous and beautiful jewel you could imagine. The heart of the mountain, it is called. It used to hang atop Thror's throne, when Erebor still stood. All the dwarf clans swore on the Arkenstone to follow the king under the mountain, who in effect became Low King of all dwarves."

"The clans were able to deny me when I called for aid because I was not in possession of the Arkenstone, and therefore they did not have to heed my word. Dain Ironfoot, who even now should be on his way with a number of his people to help us, is our closest ally amongst the dwarf lords. He is cousin to most of us here, and he gave aid and took in many of our people when Erebor fell. Even he refused to come battle the dragon or risk waking it. He did agree to lend aid once the dragon was gone...and I was in possession of the Arkenstone once more. So you see, you still have an important task to see to ere your contract is fulfilled if it makes you feel any better." Thorin concluded.

"Oh. Well, in that case, I'll get right on it."

"You know...when you think of it, it's a bit crazy that we've been here for hours and hours now and haven't gone to look at the treasury."

Thorin held up a hand before they could get too excited.

"That was done with purpose, I'm afraid. I wanted to make sure that the important things, like securing the gates against giant spiders, elves and men, was done before we ever set sight on it. Just in case."
"You fear the gold sickness." Balin said quietly.

Thorin nodded, his face grim.

"I have always done so, but I always told myself that I would not fall as my grandfather did. However, as we traveled southward with Beorn, I realized I had been on the verge of falling for many, many years already. The gold was calling to me even as I worked the forges in the city of men. It called a bit stronger when Gandalf came to urge me on the quest. The call had been getting a little stronger every step we took closer to our goal. When we were climbing aboard Beorn's ship, I had to force myself to keep walking, as I very nearly turned around to charge headfirst into the forest, heedless of any danger or hardship that might arise as a result. I reminded myself that what we were doing was far more important, and that hopefully the mountain and the gold would still be there when we were done. It was a very near thing even so. As the ship began carrying us southward, the further away we traveled the more desperate the call seemed, and that is when I noticed it where I had not before. It was so much a part of me I did not notice anymore. That experience has made me wary of venturing forth to where the gold lies. If I should become lost in the madness, if any of us should, we none of us would finish the things that most need attention right now, and all would be lost."

Bilbo reached out and laid a hand across Thorin's clenched fist.

"You all told me just a few short hours ago that I shouldn't feel bad that I was seized by the ring the moment I wanted to destroy it. No more should you feel bad about gold sickness. From what Ori said, it all flowed from the same place. If anything, you should be proud that you resisted the call while Sauron was still alive. You should be equally proud of the dwarf lords who held his rings and didn't succumb beyond getting a bit distracted by shiny things. My point is, be proud of the struggle you've already won. Sauron is dead. The dragon Smaug is dead. You already resisted while both were in the world and working their wickedness. I think you'll find it far easier now that they're gone. I don't want you to be afraid. Not here, in your own kingdom, your home, not after dreaming of it for so long, and certainly not after all we've all gone through together to get here. It would be like letting them win, now after everything, after they've been vanquished by our hands. You're stronger than that, and I believe that you will conquer this, if you have not already."

Thorin squeezed his hand back and nodded. Their gazes locked and the rest of the dwarves averted their eyes from the raw look on Thorin's face as he stared at their burglar.

"Hey. Where's our cookies?" Dwalin demanded once the mush factor got too much for him to deal with.

The rest of the dwarves laughed, and Bilbo huffed good naturedly and went to fetch them.

"Everyone gets three. Don't complain! That still adds up to quite a lot of cookies, you know! I didn't dare make more. This was a bit of an extravagance as it was. I didn't want to use up all our supplies on sweeties, after all."

"Thank you, Bilbo." Kili chirped.

"Mmm. These are good. Yeah, thank you, Bilbo." Fili agreed cheerfully.

"Are our supplies really so low as all that?"

"Well... We're fine for the moment, but there really wasn't a lot of food left behind when the Laketown people fled. We probably took everything that was left, and that won't last forever. Say... has anyone thought to send word to your families back in the Blue Mountains that we've succeeded?
I'd imagine they're all waiting rather impatiently to hear if we've lived or died."

There was a collective wince around the table.

"What? None of you? Goodness."

"You know, the lad brings up a fair point. We've the ship. It shouldn't take too long to make a trip to the Blue Mountains."

"We could even bring back some engineers, stoneworkers and miners with us, so we're not completely dependent on Dain's people."

"Not to mention outnumbered."

"We could bring our stuff along so we're not still living like we're on the road. That'd be nice."

"Aye, that's a good point. I do miss me pipe something fierce. More'n that I miss me wee lad and my wife. They're probably fretting something awful by now, wondering what's become of me."

"My wife told me she was expecting just before I left. I've a new son or daughter by now that I've never set eyes on." Bombur said shyly.

"I daresay your mother has been chomping at the bit, not to mention sharpening her axes and preparing to come after us. We could send letters, as well as money enough to see all the families that wish to return well-provisioned for the move."

"Aye, that's good thinking, laddie."

"We could buy food in the Shire markets. They're always well provisioned...though we might want to hit all the markets so we don't unduly stress any one. Anything we can't get there I'm sure we could get at Laketown, or even Gondor or Rohan, though that would be a long trip to make regularly."

"Ah, yes. I imagine you're eager to get home at last." Balin told him.

"Well, truthfully, I am rather worried about my smial. I imagine everyone back home thinks I'm dead. I left rather suddenly, after all, and I've been gone quite a while now. No one even knew I was leaving, not even me."

"Surely you left word with someone?"

"When did I have a chance? Goodness, I didn't even know there was a quest until you all showed up at my door! Gandalf had shown up earlier in the day and said he was looking for someone to share in an adventure and I told him no! I certainly wasn't expecting him to show up later with thirteen dwarves in tow! I made a very impulsive decision that morning to follow all of you. I basically grabbed whatever was nearest to hand, and the contract, and ran out my front door!"

Shamefaced glances were traded around the table at this revelation. At the time, they had all thought it great fun to tweak the nose of the fluttering, squeaky little man Gandalf had found to join their quest. It certainly explained why he'd been so upset all night. More than that, they had thought him wishy-washy and not a hobbit of his word. They had all believed he'd already agreed to take part, only to change his mind when it was time for the contract to be signed, and then changed his mind again a few hours later. None of them had trusted him in the least, both for that and for how unprepared he'd actually been for months of travel through rough terrain. They had warmed up to him gradually after he'd faced danger with them on the road and hadn't faltered or abandoned them…
but those first few weeks, none of them had been particularly kind or welcoming. Looking back, their behavior seemed rather shameful in retrospect. Frankly it was a small miracle that he'd not only come with them, but stuck it out all the way to the end, even with all the danger they'd faced.

"My cousin Lobelia has been eyeing my smial for years now, constantly trying to convince me I don't deserve it. Can you imagine? My father built Bag End for my mother when they married."

"Ye locked the door didn't ya? You think she'll knock it down to get in?"

"It isn't locked. Goodness. No one in the Shire locks their door. We leave that sort of behavior to the Bree Folk. More man than hobbit, that lot."

"So wait, anyone could just walk right in?"

"That would be terribly rude. I mean honestly! Who goes around just barging into other people's homes?"

"Lots of folks all over."

"Well, not in the Shire. The very idea!"

"But you said ye was worried you'd be robbed!"

"Well, it's different if the person is dead, isn't it?"

"You're not dead though."

"Yes, but no one knows that."

"You can't leave us though, Mr. Boggins!"

"Yeah! You have to stay with us!"

"Boys, even if I leave, it doesn't mean I can't come back… well, that is, if that's alright. I mean, I don't want to impose or anything."

"Ah, stop that." Bofur said kindly, slinging an arm around his shoulders. "Yer not an imposition and ye never could be. I told ye before, back in that goblin cave. Yer one of the company, and ye belong with us."

Thorin grimaced and looked at his heir with affront when he was firmly kicked in the shin. Fili was unrepentant, he simply raised his eyebrows and gestured at Bilbo with his head, while Kili, cottoning on to what he was doing, unleashed the dreaded puppy-dog eyes. He was really too old to be pulling that sort of crap…especially as it was still so effective. Fili narrowed his eyes, and he just knew he was preparing to kick him again. He glowered at them both and cleared his throat.

"Bofur is right. You are not an imposition. You are welcome to stay as long as you like, and visit as often. You will always be welcome in these halls, both as our friend, and as a member of this company."

"Ya know… if this place is going to start filling up with strangers, we should probably all pick the quarters we want before anyone else gets here."

"Well, some of the choice quarters…” Balin began.

"Once belonged to people who flatly refused to be part of reclaiming the mountain. If they find
themselves displaced and need seek quarters elsewhere that's their own fault for not answering when I called." Thorin interjected firmly. "I do ask though that if there are any personal effects within that you carefully package them to be returned to the family if and when they return."

"The dwarf lords won't like it."

"The dwarf lords can suck my..."

"Alright, that's quite enough, we get the idea!" Bilbo spoke up firmly. Thorin, Fili, Kili, Bifur, Bofur, Nori and Dwalin all sniggered.

"Honestly! I'm surrounded by children!"

"You need to find a room too, Mr. Boggins. So you have someplace to stay when you visit."

"Oh, well, that's not really…"

"We insist." Fili argued."Can we do that tomorrow before we start something else?"

"Can you show us our mother's room? Oh, and yours too! You can come with us." Kili told Bilbo.

"I'll be searching for the Arkenstone, remember?"

"Oh. We'll pick out something for you then."

The rest of the evening was spent by everyone imagining where in the sprawling city they would most like to call home, while those who had lived in Erebor gave suggestions on where they might find such a place.

"Good, merciful heavens!" Bilbo said in awe as he descended into the treasury of Erebor.

It was located in the lowest level of the mountain before one got to the mines. The king's throne sat overhead on a wide bridge that crossed the chasm above, that widened behind it and led into the royal family's quarters and that of their servants and personal guardsmen. The treasury took up the whole center of the mountain by the look of it—a great, shining sea of gold that rose in high swells near tall enough to be considered tall hills or small mountains. On and on it went, filling the whole of the sizeable expanse. He could well believe it called a dragon out of the northern wastes to claim it. He had never even imagined so much gold existed. To see it all in one place, and to know there were rivers of it that had yet to be mined in the tunnels underneath simply boggled the mind.

"Goodness! Thorin could probably hand it out by the barrel-full to all comers and still have enough to make wealthy men envy and poor men weep in despair!"

He shook off his musings with difficulty and descended the rest of the way to begin his search. Hopefully it wouldn't take too long; Thorin had invited him to join he and the boys in their inspection of the royal palace. There were some murals of their history and some fine examples of early dwarven tapestry arts displayed within to hear him tell it. He would like to see them. He recalled Thorin's story of dragging his grandfather from the treasury. The stairs he'd just come down were scorched and even melted in a few places, which meant they were likely the very stairs they'd used. Hopefully the Arkenstone would still be in the area and not churned under the gold by the dragon in the years since. He shuddered at the very thought; he could likely spend the rest of his life digging through the sheer amount of gold were that the case, and he had better things to do with his time, thank you.
He wandered somewhat aimlessly, picking up random uncut diamonds as he found them, peering at them curiously before tossing them aside. He'd seen what the dwarves considered 'shoddy work', so a gem considered the most beautiful in the world was likely something to see... or so he hoped. Honestly, he hadn't seen all that much difference between the gems they'd shown him at different times beyond that they were sometimes different colors. The 'inferior' gems had often sparkled as prettily to his eyes as the 'superior' examples had. He made a point to not say that out loud anymore; it simply wasn't worth the headache or the hours of lectures on why a particular gem was vastly superior to others, or a true testament to the jewelers art, to bother.

A faint gleam across the way caught the corner of his eye and he turned to look. There, in the hollow between three golden mountains lay a gem that seemed to glow from within with its own subtle radiance, reflecting and refracting the wealth around it into golden-tinged rainbows. He slid down the mountain he currently stood upon and picked his was carefully across the shifting coins to grab it. It was about the size of his two fists held side by side, and it really was quite lovely. He could picture it, ensconced on the throne above Thorin's head, shedding its radiance down upon him, glinting on his crown and highlighting the silver in his hair. He could picture it so clearly... and goodness, what a marvelous picture it made. His heart lurched in his chest and his stomach filled with butterflies as he pictured him doing that thing, where he peered up at you through his eyelashes and then smiled... He didn't smile often... but when he did, it took one's breath away...

"Oh no." Bilbo murmured. "I've gone and fallen in love with the old grump, haven't I? Bilbo Baggins, you are a fool."

It would just figure, wouldn't it? Oh, he'd messed around a bit in his tweens, had a few encounters here and there afterwards... There weren't many 'confirmed bachelors' in the Shire. He'd done the rounds, as had they all. None of them had ever fit, and all the folks his age had paired off by this point. He'd more or less resigned himself to not having such things in his life. He had to go and ruin it by setting his cap for someone unattainable.

Goodness, for all he knew there was a dwarven princess waiting around somewhere for Thorin to return triumphant and sweep her up in those big, strong arms of his... and he really needed to stop before he depressed himself. He might even be married! It isn't like it had ever come up. Thorin was a private person. He could even have children for all he knew... though that seemed less likely, now that he thought on it. Had he sons they would have been part of the Company. Goodness, maybe she'd died! There had been so much tragedy in Thorin's life... He'd gotten the impression that dwarves were pretty faithful most times, and they didn't seem to remarry if their spouse died.

"You really are a fool, Bilbo Baggins. Bad enough to go pining after a king like a twitter-pated tween, let alone one who might be in mourning for a lost love!"

Bilbo shook his head at himself and tucked his inconvenient feelings away. He wasn't a child. He was a middle-aged, respectable hobbit. He would do what hobbits did best: get on with things. He wasn't about to let a little thing like a...a crush ruin their newfound friendship or make things awkward. Thorin's regard had been too hard won, and he treasured it too much to ruin it all now.

Having decided, he nodded to himself, straightened his shoulders and headed for the royal family wing. He had a stone to hand over and some murals to see. The rest would sort itself out. It was strange walking across the bridge to the throne. The whole area was open, not a handrail to be seen. The whole treasury was visible from it. It must have been quite a show, back in the day, the wealth and power of Erebor on display for all who came before the king under the mountain.

There were several large balconies jutting just overhead from mezzanine, he supposed so the people of Erebor could all get a good seat from which to watch when their king made decrees or when
exotic visitors came to see him. He turned in a slow circle to look at it all, but soon had to stop as he
was getting dizzy trying to take it all in. It really brought home just how hopeless his foolish crush
was. Thorin was a king, the high...or rather low king of all dwarves--that whole "under the
mountain" thing. He was a simple gentlehobbit of the Shire, middle-aged, boring, not very important
in the scheme of things.

Behind the throne there was a golden archway. Bilbo stepped through carefully, listening to see if he
could get some indication of which direction Thorin and the boys were. He heard a faint murmur of
voices in the distance and started towards it, running one hand along the wall to keep himself
oriented. It was rather dark, even with the Arkenstone in his hand, and silly him. he hadn't thought to
bring a lantern or anything. He came to an open area, a crossing hallway, unless he missed his guess.
He could hear the boys more clearly now.

He turned towards their voices and kept walking. His steps sped as he spotted a bit of light up ahead
spilling very faintly out of an open doorway, then slowed as he realized the boys' voices were still
further ahead. He turned to look inside the lighted room as he came abreast of it and felt a terrible
pain in his chest when he saw Thorin within. His lantern lay on a dusty end table in what looked to
have once been a family room. He was on the floor, peering up at the wall looking pensive and just a
bit bereft.

He stepped inside carefully and looked around. Everything was filthy, covered in decades of dust,
long cobwebs hanging from the ceiling. There a chair was overturned, there a book face-down on
the floor, signs of the urgency with which the last occupants left. One side of the room was
dominated by a large fireplace. Above it was a dust encrusted portrait of a family.

Thror and what he assumed was his wife sat in the center. Thror had a mighty beard that all but hid
him from sight, layers of beads covered it. On his head sat a heavy crown that covered his forehead
and the tops of his cheeks, so all that was left to see of him was his blue eyes. Thorin's eyes; they
were just the same. The dwarf woman next to him was bearded as well, though hers was a downy
fluff that ran along her jawline and hung down but a few inches, though those inches were braided
and bedecked with jewels nonetheless. To the left stood Thrain, Thorin's father. He looked like an
older, greyer Thorin, and had a face as gruff as Dwalin's. His head was even tattooed--his forehead,
just above his nose. On the other side, to the right of the queen, stood another dwarf woman he
assumed was Thorin's mother. She had golden brown hair, elaborately styled and braided, and her
downy beard, like the queen's was bedecked in twinkling jewels. In front of her stood a small boy
and an even smaller girl.

The boy had golden brown hair like his mother, and the same brown eyes. They both seemed
cheerful sorts, rather in contrast with the rest who looked carved from stone. The tiny girl was dark
haired and blue-eyed like Thorin (and Thrain and likely Thror before it had all turned to silver). She
was very cute, only a toddler, in a fancy jewel encrusted dress that made her look every inch the little
princess. She stood solemnly, one tiny hand gripping the skirt of her mother's equally elaborate
gown. On the other side, in front of Thrain, stood a small dark-haired boy. It was Thorin, with his
family intact, before dragons and warfare, exile and hardship.

He looked softer, innocent. He stood at attention, a tiny boy, trying so hard to be dignified and live
up to the expectations that likely were already weighing his tiny shoulders. He was young enough
that no beard graced his face. A part of Bilbo wished he could gather up that tiny boy, hug him tight
and shelter him from all the bad things that would happen to him and to his family in just a few more
years. He couldn't do that, of course. He could, however, be there for the Thorin that was here now.
He moved quietly into the room and sat down next to Thorin, close enough that he could feel the
warmth of his arm, but far enough away not to crowd him.
They sat in silence for a long time. Bilbo was content to do so for as long as Thorin needed, if only to let him know he wasn't alone, though he wondered for a bit if Thorin had even noticed his presence, so quiet and still was he.

"This was my mother's receiving room. I spent a lot of time in here as a child. She taught me to play the harp right over there. In the mornings she would sit there and do our hair, one after another. We weren't allowed to leave till she'd made all of us presentable. She was our first tutor. She taught us our letters, told us stories. History and tales of our people.

That table over there. Frerin was always knocking it askew. He was always running indoors, no matter how many times she scolded him not to. He would wake in the morning full of energy and leave his room at a run. He always took the corner too fast and would run into the table. There used to be a vase on it. For years I can remember every morning hearing the table get knocked aside and the sound of the vase wobbling on top. My mother would say Frerin! What have I told you? And he would laugh and say 'Sorry amad, it won't happen again', but it always did. Every morning." he smiled reminiscently and Bilbo wondered if he was seeing that long ago sight; a small laughing boy, greeting each morning at a run." Thorin's smile faded and he sighed sadly.

"For weeks after Erebor fell I kept expecting to hear that each morning, but it wasn't my room and there was no wobbly vase on an end table. Instead it was a rough camp of refugees. Frerin didn't leap out of bed in the mornings anymore, eager to greet the day. He was usually clinging to my arm and whimpering in his sleep when I woke. He'd never been out of the mountain before Smaug came. He found the open sky and the lack of walls terrifying…"

Fili held up a hand for silence.

"What?"

"Listen. You hear something?"

"Sounds like uncle."

Curious now they left the room they'd been rummaging in, their great-grandfather, the old king’s unless they were very much mistaken, and padded quietly down the hall. Fili held a finger to his lips for silence and they peeked carefully around the doorframe to the room inside. Thorin and Bilbo were seated within on the floor, leaning against one another while Thorin reminisced about his childhood in Erebor.

These were stories they had never heard--the minutiae of everyday life, childhood antics, their uncle who was lost in Azanulzibar. They only really knew he existed because their mother mentioned him; Thorin never spoke of him. They had heard about the beauty of Erebor, the grandeur, wealth and might of the lost dwarven kingdom.

They never knew that their mother as a little girl used to have a tiny silver tea set and used to make their grandfather and great-grandfather have pretend tea with her once a week. They didn't know uncle Frerin had played the fiddle like they did, or that he was an archer like Kili was. They barely remembered their grandmother, and what they remembered was not the plump, laughing mother they heard described here; they remembered a woman hardened by loss and privation, a sickly presence with terrible burns down half her face that haunted their earliest childhood, who was gone before Fili had reached his first decade.

Their mother had been young enough when Smaug had come that she barely remembered more than
small bits and pieces of her childhood; all but the first decade of her life had been spent on the road searching for a new home, and later in the Blue Mountains. They found themselves wondering if this was the first time their uncle had really talked about any of it. He was notoriously private, and the few who remembered Erebor had their own tragedies and losses to remember.

When he eventually fell silent, Fili motioned for silence once more and gestured Kili to follow him away from the door. When they were about halfway back down the hall, he said loudly. "There's a light. That must be where uncle is!"

"I wonder if Mr. Boggins ever showed up? Even a special jewel like the Arkenstone will probably be hard to find in a whole treasury. Like a pin in a grass pile."

"Needle in a haystack." Bilbo corrected absently as they entered the room.

Bilbo and Thorin were both standing now, and their uncle was across the room idly shuffling through the contents of a drawer. "And yes, I found it. It's over there." he waved vaguely towards the side of the room, his eyes still on their uncle.

The Arkenstone was discarded on one of the end tables amidst the dust, set alongside their uncle's lantern.

"So, this is the Arkenstone. Neat."

"It glows!"

"Yeah, weird. Wonder why it does that?"

"Cave fungus got mixed in when the stone was being formed?"

"It would be dead in that case and likely wouldn't be glowing still." Bilbo disagreed.

"Trapped gas maybe?"

"Magic?"

"Does anyone know?"

"No. It was just taken as a sign from Mahal and no one really inquired further." Thorin replied. "Your mother's room is down at the end of the hall here. You said you wanted to see it."

"Mum was still pretty little when Erebor fell, wasn't she?"

"Yes. She was quite young."

"How old was she?"

"Ten."

"Really little. How old were you?"

Thorin gave them both a searching look before answering. "Twenty-four."

"And...our other uncle?" Kili asked hesitantly.

"He was nineteen."
"When do dwarves come of age?" Bilbo asked.


"Thirty-three. I was just trying to get a rough idea of how old it would be in hobbit terms."

"Thirty three?! How… how old are you, Mr. Boggins?"

"I'm fifty one, if you must know."

"Fifty one!" Fili and Kili said in shock, and Thorin muttered in dismay.

"Which makes me very much middle-aged in hobbit terms, thank you. Hobbits on average live to be about a hundred, though my grandfather the Old Took lived to be a hundred and thirty, but then the man never did things by halves. He had twelve children, and even for hobbits that's a lot."

"So little time?" Fili said with dismay.

"It's an acceptable span. We live quiet, sedentary lives for the most part. A hundred years of quiet and gossiping neighbors and interfering relatives is plenty for anyone. Why, how long do dwarves live?"

"Average is about two-hundred and fifty. Some have been known to live to three, even four hundred, though it isn't as common nowadays. The first Durin is supposed to have lived for five hundred years."

"Five hundred. Goodness. It seems a terrible long time to me. Not as long as elves…honestly, part of me really can't wrap my mind around the thought of living more or less forever. I suppose if you had a happy, interesting life it wouldn't be so bad."

"But if your life is one of tragedy and sorrow, sometimes even a much smaller span of years seems long indeed."

The boys looked stricken by Thorin's quietly muttered words. Bilbo bristled but a moment later. Even if he was fond of Thorin, no one put that look on those children's faces while he was around.

"Thorin Oakenshield! I will not have you shuffling about and muttering such things, do you hear me? You have just gotten your kingdom back, and yes you've lost a lot, but you still have a lot to be thankful for. You've a good few decades if not longer left in you, and you will be happy, do you hear me? Even if I have to grab you by your beard to shake some sense into you! See if I don't!"

"Mr. Boggins!" Kili squeaked.

Bilbo halted his tirade and turned to look at the boys and found them both staring at him, red-faced and wide-eyed.

"I…said something unfortunate, didn't I?"

"Not at all, Bilbo. If you want to grab me by my beard, by all means…"

"UNCLE!" the boys wailed.

Bilbo covered his face as his face and ears went scarlet. Thorin laughed, deep from his belly and wiped tears from his eyes as the boys fled in embarrassment.
After touring the royal quarters, they and the company met up again in the guard barracks they'd taken for their home base in the mountain.

"Did everyone find something to their liking?"

"Yes."

"Definitely."

"Lovely place."

Everyone nodded and exchanged a glance, but they each seemed to be waiting for someone else to speak. Thorin looked at them all suspiciously.

"And?" "We thought, since we're taking a day off to explore and all, that we should take a look at the treasury." Balin spoke up.

Thorin's hands tightened where they rested on the table, but he made no objections.

"We need more supplies, especially as Dain and his men will be here soon. We should send money to our families to provision themselves and ready them for the move."

"What about the rest of the refugees? I imagine they'll all need provisions. It's quite a distance they'll have to cover, after all… unless you mean for them all to come by ship. We'd only be able to bring a few at a time that way, especially if they've a lot of belongings to bring with them." Bilbo wondered.

"He's right. Yeah, money sent to Dis would be enough to get wagons and ponies or mules to pull them, but most families will need something extra to see them across the mountains…and to establish themselves here, for that matter. A party of any size will burn through their supplies pretty quickly, and we saw ourselves that it's rough country. Not a lot of places to resupply along the way." "Aye, and while there's lots to be had within the mountain, there's a lot gone to rot as well. Things will get left behind to save space on travel, and need to be replaced once they're settling back in."

"I suppose we could offer a small sum to returning families…though we'll not tell them that until after they've already committed to doing so. I want people who are planning to return, help rebuild and live a life here, not opportunists that see a way to make a quick profit but have no commitment to or attachment to Erebor."

"To figure all that, we'll need to see what we have to work with."

The group fell to arguing about what was a reasonable amount to give the returnees and Dis without straining the budget, but they stopped when Bilbo snorted in disbelief.

"There's a ridiculous amount of gold down there. You could probably invite every dwarf in the Blue Mountains to come in with a wheelbarrow to fill and still have a ridiculous amount of gold down there."

"There's quite a lot of dwarves in the Blue Mountains, and also the Iron Hills. They took in quite a few refugees when Erebor fell, but could not take us all. The wounded and those with child or with very small children were given first priority, but even then he could only take so many without straining things too much for his own people."

"I'll grant you that hundreds or thousands with wheelbarrows would make a noticeable dent, but there would still be a ridiculous amount of gold. I think Smaug actually put more gold into Erebor
than you may have started with. There was a pile of Elvish looking stuff on top of one of the
mountains. There was also a sizeable hill near the door that I believe belonged to Dale. He was a
dragon. He likely had a hoard already before he came seeking this place. If he did, I highly doubt he
left it wherever he'd been living before. There's a lot of gold."

"We have not calculated shares for the quest, nor reimbursements for expenses incurred on the quest,
not to mention we do still have to support the kingdom afterwards." Gloin reminded him.

"Ridiculous. Amount. Go see it for yourselves if you don't believe me! Do keep in mind, If any of
you start acting strangely, I'm going to fetch the large frying pan from the kitchen and wallop you
until you stop. Fair warning."

He expected some spluttering, not the fond, approving glances his words sparked. Bilbo had to push
down on the urge to roll his eyes. It did just figure dwarves would see someone offering to wallop
them in the head with a large, cast-iron skillet as a sign of affection.

"I'm going to get started on dinner. Have fun."

Thirteen dwarves descended down the stairs towards the treasury and came to a staggering halt on
the landing just above it. As far as the eyes could see in every direction, several feet thick in places,
towering far over head in mountains elsewhere. It was a sea, nay, an ocean of gold.

"Sweet merciful Mahal."

"Boys… ye realize what this means, don't ye?" Nori said with joyous tears in his eyes.

"We're stinking rich." Bofur muttered, clutching his hat to his heart.

"HA! The stinking rich would fall on their knees and weep at the sight of all this." Gloin muttered,
sounding faint.

"He's right. We're filthy, stinking rich."

"And how."

Laughing, the group descended and scattered in all directions, whooping and tossing piles of gold in
the air. Thorin descended slowly after them and felt the tightness in his chest and shoulders ease. The
gold was astonishing, plentiful beyond his wildest dreams…but that was all. He felt no desire to lose
himself in it. It meant an end to hunger and worries for his family, for his people. Bilbo had spoken
truly. There really was a ridiculous amount of gold here, and would be still even once the company
took shares, and Dale was repaid and money sent to his sister and the returnees.

He saw a chest half-buried in the gold and moved towards it, only to spot the elven king's sigil atop
it. He opened it and found it full of silvery white gems that sparkled like stars. He sighed. He could
very vaguely remember Thranduil coming for it only to have it snatched away. His grandfather had
been ill enough by that point that he could not bear to part with any of the riches the mountain
produced. It didn't excuse the bastard for what he'd done. He closed the lid with a thud and strode off
angrily into the sea of gold.

The rest of the company was wandering aimlessly, picking through the piles to peer in interest at the
baubles and finely wrought crafts hidden among the coins. A flash of silver among the endless gold
captured his eye and he bent down to inspect it. Once worked free from the surrounding gold he found
himself holding a shirt of finely wrought mithril ring mail studded with pearls. He held it up and
smiled. Made for an elven prince, a child, before Khazad Dûm fell and never claimed, it had been one of the few pieces of mithril that had escaped the mountain. It should be just about the right size.

Smiling to himself happily at his find, he tucked it away in his pocket and called the others. It was a long walk back to the guard barracks. Dinner should be almost ready, and Bilbo was waiting for them… probably with the frying pan close to hand.

Thorin finally had a chance to hand over his present after dinner. Dori, Balin, Bifur and Oin had headed upstairs to shower and change clothes. Fili, Kili and Ori had wandered off to explore a bit more. Dwalin, Gloin, Nori, Bombur and Bofur had gone back down to the treasury to look around some more since they hadn't gotten much of a chance to earlier.

Thorin slowly packed his pipe and smoked it as everyone wandered off in their separate directions, and listened to Bilbo bustling around in the kitchen, cleaning up from dinner earlier. He sang while he washed dishes. It was rather endearing. When he was sure everyone was gone and wouldn't interrupt, he carefully tamped out his pipe and wandered into the kitchen. Somehow he ended up helping to wash the dishes, or at least dry them and put them back on their hooks.

"Ah, thanks for the help. It would have taken much longer otherwise." Bilbo said cheerfully when the last pan was put away.

He stretched and cracked his back, smiling in relief once he'd done so.

"I think I'll go shower and then I'm for bed, I think. I think the lack of sunlight is messing with my sense of time."

"Hobbits require sunlight?"

"Well…yes, I suppose we do. We're rather sedentary folks, but we do spend a good deal of time outdoors, whether gardening, farming, taking long walks, or during parties, which are always held outside. Our homes are underground, yes, but we've windows to let in sunlight. I don't think I've ever gone without for so long."

"I see."

Thorin shook off his worries about the hobbit's lack of sunlight for the moment and thought of his gift.

"You realize you will likely be the one taking the ship to the Blue Mountains."

"I am?"

"You're the only one who can be spared from repairs. We'll have to do something with the captain's chair so you can pilot it successfully. Dwalin will not leave me here alone with Dain and his men expected soon. Gloin and Bombur will likely accompany you as they both have wives and children left behind. Fili and Kili cannot leave for much the same reason I cannot. I am king here, Fili is my heir. Our presence is somewhat mandatory I fear. Kili does not need to be here, but he will sulk something awful if he is the only one to leave."

Bilbo snorted but agreed it was likely true.
"When you do go out on the ship I would feel better if you were to wear this." he explained, pulling the mithril shirt from his pocket. "It's lovely. Is this mithril?" "Yes. You did not find anything suitable in Sauron's keep, but this should fit."

"It's rather grand. Thorin this is really…"

"It is a gift, and you wearing it while out in the world in the service of the company and the kingdom of Erebor is non-negotiable. A flying ship such as you found has not been seen in this world long enough that most believe their existence was simply a fanciful story told to children. You have seen enough of the world by now to realize there will be those who will try to take it from you. If I could I would send a whole troop of soldiers along with you, but we have none to send. This is all I can do to keep you safe."

"In that case, thank you." Bilbo replied softly, clutching the shirt to his chest. How in the world was he supposed to get over his stupid crush if the king kept doing stuff like this? Damn dwarves.

"What in the…"

"Is it a bird, papa?"

"Too big, too shiny. If that's a bird, it ain't like no bird I ever seen before."

"What'ya looking at, Ernest?"

"Strange big, shiny bird…thing."

"Huh. Never saw anything like that before. It's big. Real big."

"Why are you all standing around staring at the sky?"

"Look."

Goodie Bellflower shaded her eyes and stared upward.

"What in the…"

"That's what I said!"

"Lads…that bird or whatever is coming right for us."

"Good heavens! You're right!"

"Everyone hide! Giant bird! Incoming!"

"Hide your children!"

"RUN!"

All around hobbits looked to the sky, then to the panicked hobbits running down the lanes and screaming, dropped their tools, gathered their children and ran to the nearest smial or bushes to hide. A couple of the braver bounders slithered beneath nearby bushes to watch and wait.
"George…is it just me, or is that some kind of a ship?"

"I think it is. Who ever heard the like?"

"My ma used to tell stories about flying ships. Elves had 'em. Thought they were all lost now."

"Really? Elves? I thought they danced around in the forest? I never heard tell they went flying about all over!"

"I told you, they lost 'em."

"How d'ya lose a flying ship?"

"I dunno. Dragons ate 'em or something."

"Blimey!"

"Hey George?"

"Yeah, Fred?"

"They're landing here, aren't they?"

"Sure looks that way."

"Why are elves coming here?"

"Dunno. Maybe They want some of Farmer Maggot's pumpkins?"

"Or Farmer Cotton's apples. Could be. Seems strange though. Don't they have their own?"

"Guess not."

They crept closer to the party field and peeked out of the bushes very carefully as the silvery ship landed with a soft thud on the green.

"Those aren't elves."

"Sure ain't. What are dwarves doin' in the Shire?"

"And why do they have an elf ship?"

"Shh."

"I thought you said there was hundreds of you little buggers in these parts. We just flew over a good portion of the Shire and I ain't seen a one. "That's because you're as blind as the men that sometimes come through."

Fred and George exchanged an incredulous glance before looking back at the strange ship and its stranger occupants.

"Ya got some nerve. I happen to see just fine."

"Oh? Wanna bet on that?"

"Aye. I'm that confident. How's ten sound?"
"Yeah. Ten for me too."

"Done."

Bilbo Baggins hooked his thumbs into his suspenders and rocked back on his heels.

"Freddie Bolger, Georgie Widebottom! Do come out and say hello!"

The boys exchanged a look and shrugged, before wiggling out of the bush and trotting out to the field. Gloin gaped at the two hobbits that had been hidden just a few short feet away and cursed loudly, while Bombur just sighed sadly and began digging in his money pouch.

"Golly! Is that you, Mr. Bilbo?"

"Wow! Is that a flying ship, Mr. Bilbo?"

Gloin looked ready to weep as hobbits seemed to appear from thin air all over the place, most of them little more than tots by the look of them.

"Can I see inside?"

"Can we go for a ride?"

"Mr. Bilbo, I should tell ya, they think yer dead hereabouts. Those Sackville-Bagginses are planning to auction all yer stuff! I told them you wouldn't like them tromping about in your smial. I told them, 'Mr. Bilbo wouldn't like you tromping about, and that's a fact', but they said they'd call a shirrif if I kept on! Can ye imagine? A shirrif! On me!"

"Where'd you get it? Are there elves inside?"

"Are you a dwarf, mister?"

"Can I touch your beard?"

Over the next hour an impromptu party broke out around them as more and more hobbits came to gape at the ship, gape at the dwarves, or congratulate Bilbo on not being dead. Somehow, in the all the chaos, Bilbo managed to acquire a cart and pony for Gloin and Bombur so they could head off to Bree for supplies, and got a bunch of volunteers from among the tweens to head off to the various markets throughout the Shire to buy food to load on the ship while he himself bought supplies to last them for the week they planned to spend in the Shire while he got his affairs in order before they all headed out to the Blue Mountains. When Gloin and Bombur left, Bilbo was surrounded by a pack of curious children while he told the tale of their many adventures since he'd left the Shire over a year ago.

"Alright, there ya go laddie. Both yer front and back doors now have fine dwarven locks on them. That should put an end to yer troubles with that cousin o' yours." Gloin announced, handing him two keys.

"Which is for which?"

"The same key'll work on either, they're a set. Nori put 'em together afore we left Erebor. It's just customary to make two keys in case one gets lost."

"Oh, good. I'll leave the other with Hamfast. His feelings would be hurt otherwise. Besides, he and
his family have been the ones looking after the place for me. Thank goodness, or I'd have had a lot more work around here getting it cleaned up otherwise."

"Aye, they seem decent sorts."

"Are you all packed up, Bilbo?" Bombur asked as he brought out the last of the food for their dinner that night.

"Yes. I've been going through room by room and packing what I wanted to take with me and loading it onto the ship each night as I went. I'm all ready to go."

"Good, good. I know it needed doing, but it's been torture being so close to the Blue mountains and my family and not being able to see them. I'm eager to get going."

"So am I, to be honest. I also want to get back to Erebor. Dain and his people should have arrived by now. I hate that we're not there to help out."

"We'll be back soon enough, but I know the feeling."

"Well, we can head out first thing if you both like. The last of the food we bought was delivered this afternoon. I've gotten visits from all my relatives. My smial is clean, organized and I'm packed for the trip. We've gotten everything we needed to do out of the way. Time to move on."

"There it is, right there."

"Where…oh, I see it. The gates here are quite a bit smaller than Erebor."

"Aye. The mountain isn't near so grand, and it's riches were already long emptied before we arrived here. The clans of these mountains moved on to better prospects further south, but it was a mountain and it had shelter for all of us, and so we stayed and were grateful, but it did mean hardship for many of us until we could find new work. My cousins for example. There's nothing here to mine, so they had to become toymakers to support themselves. I'm an architect, but I made my living as a cook. Thorin was our king, but in exile, so he worked as a blacksmith. Dori was part of the weaver's guild, but he ran a tea shop. Ori was lucky in that Balin took him on as an apprentice and so he was able to train as a historian and scribe. Nori is a locksmith and jeweler, but with no gold and jewels to work on he wasn't able to use his training and worked a bunch of mad schemes to get by. Fili and Kili helped out their uncle doing blacksmithing work and learned the jeweler's trade and etching from their mother, but again weren't able to do much of that, just blacksmithing in the towns of men. We're all getting by alright now, but it was difficult years for a while there while everyone tried to find some niche that would allow them to survive."

"You should all be proud of it, that struggle. There are many that would not have thrived under such circumstances. That you did speaks well of all of you."

"It's kind of you to say."

"Are you alright? You seem a bit nervous. Excited to see your family again?"

"Oh, aye. I am. It's just...well, when my wife told me we were expecting another child, that's when I went and signed up for the quest. I didn't tell her I was joining, just that I had something in the works to bring in some extra money and make our lives a bit easier when the little one came along. Money was already tight, you see. I left a note with a friend for my wife, with instructions not to give it to her until the day after we left, and my brother and I went to stay with Bifur until it was time to leave.
She’s probably not best pleased with me."

"Ah. Well… Good luck with that."

Bombur just nodded back, looking gloomy.

There were guards near the entrance to the mountain. One stood gaping at the ship and at the three of them as they approached, while the other went running inside, shouting. There was already a crowd gathered by the time they reached the entrance, craning to see outside and looking at all of them in interest.

"Da? DA!"

"GIMLI!"

"YOU'RE BACK! YOU'RE ALIVE! HOW'D IT GO? DID YA GIVE THAT DRAGON WHAT FOR?"

"AYE, LADDIE, ALL THAT AND MORE BESIDES! OUR OWN PRINCE KILI KILLED THE BEAST! EREBOR IS OURS ONCE MORE!"

"WHO000!"

Gloin and his son, who looked like a miniature Gloin minus the voluminous beard, laughed and bashed their heads together and then sobbed on each other's shoulders. All around the crowd erupted in murmurs and began demanding answers. Suddenly a stentorian voice cut through the rising excitement.

"BOMBURRRRR!"

"Now, now, beloved! I'm fine, see? Our quest was a success!" Bombur said nervously, backing away from the tall, lanky dwarf woman that was striding towards him, fire in her eyes and a long, sharp axe in hand.

"A NOTE! YOU LEFT ME A NOTE!" she shouted, swinging the axe and snarling.

Bombur danced around the axe, waving his arms and trying his best to placate her, but she wasn't having it. Finally, he took off at a run and she darted after him, axe raised to strike. Bilbo had frozen in horror at the sight and wondered if he should try to go help his friend, but the crowd seemed unconcerned. In fact, many were laughing and making bets on whether or not they'd have another child on the way soon.

Just then a dwarf woman who looked a rather lot like Thorin and Kili strode out and looked around.

"What in Mahal's name is going on out here?"

"Princess! They succeeded! The dragon is dead! Erebor is ours once more!"

She searched the crowd and saw Gloin and his son still sobbing over one another and then looked further, her face paling in worry when she saw no others of the company that had left so many months ago. Bilbo hurried towards her. He couldn't leave the poor woman wondering over the fate of her family.

"Excuse me. Princess Dis? Bilbo Baggins, at your service."

She focused on him and frowned.
"A hobbit? What brings one of your folk so far from your home?"

"I was the fourteenth member of your brother's company. Gloin, Bombur and I came to bring word of the successful end of our quest, oh and to bring you these. Fili and Kili originally just wrote a short note that said they were alive, but I made them sit down and write you a proper letter, your brother as well. Honestly! Gone for months and all they were going to say was 'still alive, send stonemasons and engineers'! Well, I told them if you were anything like my mother when she was still alive that you'd probably skin the lot of them for it and they would completely deserve it!"

"They're alive then?" She said with relief. "And the rest of the company?"

"Everyone is fine. No major injuries even. The dragon is dead, so is the orc army that was hunting us, and the goblins that held us captive, and the trolls that tried to eat us were turned to stone…” Dis' eyes got bigger the longer he went on. She snagged him by the shoulder.

"GLOIN! QUIT YOUR CATERWAULING! Go fetch the other one. By the sound of it you all have quite the tale to tell. I want to hear it, as do we all, I shouldn't wonder. You will tell it. From the beginning. ALL of it."

"Aye! At yer service, princess!" Gloin agreed immediately. "I'll just go fetch Bombur, shall I?"

"And make it snappy!"

"Right away!"

Most of the crowd scattered, presumably to gather their friends and relatives, and Dis began dragging Bilbo along with her.

"I can walk you know." Bilbo huffed rather testily.

She seemed to realize what she was doing for the first time and let go, smoothing down the fur edging on his cloak in apology. She focused in on the cloak then and frowned slightly, her hand lingering.

"This…looks…familiar?"

"It used to be Thorin's. We found it in his closet in Erebor. It doesn't fit him now. It was well packed away so it was still in good condition after all this time. I didn't have anything warm for the cooler weather. We lost our supplies along the way. It fit me so he let me have it, though it really isn't as necessary as it would have been had we all still be on foot or on ponies. The flying ship makes the trip not only much, much faster, but much warmer and more comfortable as well."

"Flying ship?"

"That I found in Mordor."

"Mordor? What was a hobbit doing in Mordor?"

"I was with the company, of course, before we went to Erebor."

"Mordor." she repeated, sounding aghast. "They're alive, and unharmed?" she demanded again.

"Quite fine, all of them."

"Come, Mr. Baggins. I think I need a good, stiff drink before you tell me about your adventures."
It didn't take long for all the dwarves in the area to gather; everyone wanted to know the fate of the company and the quest. Before long it was standing room only—hundreds of dwarves, males and females, young and old, were crammed together and waiting with baited breath to hear the story. Somehow, Bilbo ended up being the one to tell it.

He had a way with words, as Gloin and Bombur discovered. Why, they found themselves impressed by all the Company had gone through, and they had been there! Every encounter with danger was spun out into an epic in and of itself, and the crowd rewarded him by leaning forward, gasping, and cheering in all the right spots. He wove moments of levity in between, small anecdotes of life on the road made comical for the crowd, to lighten the mood before the next run in with monsters.

The whole of the colony was held spell bound till the end, when the Company at last set eyes on Erebor and successfully entered the mountain. Bilbo was quite hoarse by the time he finished, and the crowd was weeping and cheering. Dis brought him a mug of foamy ale and offered him her hospitality for the night. Bilbo was happy enough to accept. He had done all the heavy lifting thus far; Bombur and Gloin could handle the questions and curiosity of the masses.

A youngish dwarf delivered food to them both once they were back in her rooms in the mountain. It was a homely place—sturdy if worn wooden furniture, a battered loveseat, a worn armchair, a stand with a row of old pipes along the mantle, finely wrought and worn with age. A pair of boots lay discarded near the door, on a small table to the side of the room sat a half-finished game of chess. A pot of glue and some bits of feather were discarded on an end table in the corner—Kili fletching his arrows, no doubt. It didn't look like the abode of a displaced royal line, but it was cozy and warm and spoke of the family that lived there.

Dis turned her attention to the letters she'd been given earlier while Bilbo began eating. She finished Fili and Kili's letters rather quickly and snorted when she was done.

"Hello Amad. I'm fine, still alive, so don't worry. We finished the quest and are now in Erebor. It's really stinky in places, smells like dragon. There's lots of broken stonework. Please send some stonemasons and engineers back with everyone, and also some clothes and stuff. Love Fili." Bilbo sighed and shook his head.

"Hello Amad. I'm fine, still alive, so don't worry. I killed the dragon. It was awesome. No one can say archery is un-dwarven ever again, so there! Send stoneworkers and engineers, and some fresh clothes and stuff. Love, Kili." "Honestly! They've not seen you for months!" Bilbo grumbled. "I'm almost afraid to see what Thorin wrote. He's not much for words most of the time…except when he's making speeches. Then it's sometimes hard to shut him up."

Dis snorted and then laughed outright, before fixing him with a stern look, though it was softened by the twinkle in her eyes.

"For shame, Mr. Baggins. One should not speak so of the king. Surprisingly, his letter is much longer. I guess I'll see."

Bilbo helped himself to a bit more of the savory stew and fresh bread they'd been given while she read the next letter.
While Dis read her brother's missive, she studied her unusual guest. A hobbit had been brought along on her brother's quest, and from his letter, had managed to firmly cement himself in both the company, and if she wasn't mistaken, her brother's affections as well. He certainly seemed to think well of him; he had devoted an entire paragraph to asking her to welcome him and show him every courtesy while he visited.

More than that he had given him his old cloak, finely made and lined in silvery grey warg fur, with the emblem of Durin on the breast. The hobbit also sported dwarven beads in his hair-- though they had been given to all the Company, according to the hobbit, to commemorate the quest for Erebor and their trip to Mordor to destroy the ring. Most telling, he had a shirt of mithril ring mail hidden beneath his jacket; she had spotted a bit of it peeking out when he sat down.

Goodness. Any one of those things would have flummoxed her ordinarily. To have all of them at once, lavished on the same little hobbit was unusual to say the least. It bore investigating.

"Well, my brother at least managed a halfway decent letter. He said a bit more about the quest and the state of the company, though he says to ask you for details as it was rather a lot to commit to a single letter. He also mentions he sent funds to see the rest of us to Erebor?"

"Yes, it's a good sized chest. Gloin will have to fetch it later. I'm afraid I can barely lift the thing. He and Bombur brought the funds for their own families in, I believe, but the rest is still there."

"Five gold for every dwarf set to return, ten for pairs with an extra for each child, and the same again at journey's end to see them settled in the mountain. That's surprisingly generous, and thoughtful, for my brother."

"That was my idea, not the amounts, but the incentive. The amount was decided on after much arguing amongst the rest of the company. I simply reminded them that all the returnees would have to travel quite a long distance and would need funds both to see them on their journey and to supply themselves once back in Erebor. As it stands I'll likely be busy for the foreseeable future doing food runs in the ship, more often as more folks come to join us. Goodness."

Bilbo frowned worriedly then as he considered things.

"Something on your mind?"

"Well, I was just wondering how they're all getting by with the three of us gone. Bombur did most of the cooking on the road. I've been doing it since we arrived at the mountain. I had some of them help me clean up the rest of the guard barracks and the attached mess halls and kitchens, to house Dain and his people once they arrived. That's where we were all living thus far. With Bombur and I both gone, they're probably all smashing up the furniture for firewood and roasting sausages over it. I can hardly bear to think of the mess. From what I understand, Dain's people are going to all be soldiers and workmen, and of course Thorin and the boys asked for more of the same. I do hope Dain brought more cooks with him. I'm only one hobbit! I can't feed a multitude, or keep everyone in fresh sheets, towels and clothing by myself!"

Indeed, the poor hobbit looked rather distraught even imagining it.

"How long does the trip take from Erebor to here?"

"Well, it took several hours to get from there to the Shire, then a few more from the Shire to here. Considering how long it took us by pony and on foot, not long at all."

"You stopped in the Shire to resupply before coming here for more workmen?"
"Yes. We hit the markets of all four farthings and Bree so we wouldn't clear out any one market. We're rather loaded down. We've actually only room for a dozen workmen, and that only if they travel light and don't mind being squished together for most of the flight. Every spare inch of space is taken up with food supplies, and stuff I brought from home to take with me. I only had one set of extra clothing, none of what I had was at all warm, and it was threadbare to boot. Well…there is the upper deck, but I doubt anyone wants to be stuck up there for several hours. We could use it to pack the workmen's belongings, I suppose. That would free up a bit of room…"

"Well then, since you've just resupplied, I can send a handful of eager workmen back with you now. If you return in a day or two to pick up more, I'll try to send a mixed group of workmen and domestic staff to see to those other matters. In fact, I'll send out some people to hunt as well. We can send some meat back with you when you come back. I imagine you mostly focused on dry goods that would keep for a bit?"

"Yes, and cheese and some root vegetables, enough to supply each of the guardroom kitchens for a short while. Meat would be welcome. We did buy some jerky and smoked sausages that would keep for a bit, but fresh meat would be welcome, even by me. I can get by just fine on fruit and vegetables, but that's been all that was available often enough during our journey that I've found myself missing it as much as the rest of the company has."

"That's what we'll do then. We'll load you down a few times before you need to make your next food run. Once you have, let us say in a week or two, come back and we can send off another group of workers and domestic staff to keep things running smoothly."

"Thank you." Bilbo said with relief. "I'm glad you at least can think of practicalities beyond just loading down the mountain with workmen and expecting everything to be fine."

"Believe me, I've been looking after my sons and my brother for years now, and overseeing the day to day running of this mountain. They all like clean clothing, and hot meals and regular baths, but not a one of them every considers the very real work that goes into providing all of it."

"Oh, you don't have to tell me!"

The hobbit and dwarf princess found themselves becoming fast friends as they commiserated over the trials and tribulations of trying to keep a group of stubborn, boneheaded dwarves in line.

Bilbo woke slowly and stretched, smiling. He had been put into Thorin's room for the night, and it had resulted in a very good sleep, though he was rather embarrassed to admit to the reason. The pillow smelt like him. He may have pressed his face to it and inhaled when he realized. The bed was a bit lumpy, the room a bit cooler than he liked, but he'd fallen right to sleep and slept the whole night through. It was true what they said; there was no fool like an old fool.

Feeling a bit maudlin at the turn his thoughts had taken, he rose and dressed for the day. He found Dis in the kitchen, seated at the table and writing a letter. There were a few others beside her elbow, already sealed and ready for delivery.

"Good morning" she said with a smile when she saw him.

"There's breakfast there if you're hungry." she pointed towards the stove where several covered pans were waiting.

"I'm a hobbit. We're always hungry." Bilbo replied with great dignity.
He helped himself to a bit of everything and settled at the table to eat quietly while she finished her letters.

"I saw young Gimli this morning. He told me Gloin and Bombur got the ball rolling on gathering workmen last night after we left. Most everyone in the colony put their names down on one of the sign-up sheets, depending on their skill set. About a quarter of those here will be staying. They were born here, already have a life they enjoy. There's no big pile of gold here for any of them, but work opportunities will open up as the rest of the population leaves. I cannot really blame them. Though it wasn't what many of us were used to, these mountains were our home for a good many years now. Part of me will be sad to leave, though it would no longer be home if my family isn't here." She looked around at the homely surroundings and smiled nostalgically.

Bilbo just nodded sympathetically. He knew exactly what she meant. Bag End would always hold a large place in his heart, but it hadn't been quite the same since his parents died. Too big, too quiet for one little hobbit living all by himself. He imagined this place had been much the same since Thorin and the boys had left to go on the quest.

"I sent word to the other settlements-- the Broadbeams and Firebeards that let us settle here when Erebor was lost. There will be some at least from there that want to go as well, though not nearly as many. There are always at least a few youngsters that want to strike out on their own for a bit, find new opportunities. The guilds control who can do what work, and the choicest jobs always go to the most senior members. There will be plenty of eager young lads and lasses that hope to move up a bit in their respective trades by moving."

"That's what Erebor needs, lively folks eager to make their mark. That should bring the old mountain back to life."

"I do hope so. That said, we have the first group of workmen picked and ready to go. They're packing, putting their affairs in order and saying their goodbyes. Is tomorrow morning alright to leave?"

"Yes, that should be fine. We don't want to rush them."

"Good, good. When you return in a few days we'll have another group ready and waiting, and I should have my sons' and brother's things packed up for them by then. Given how laden down you already are, it didn't seem fair to leave the workmen with no space for their own things. The rest of the company should have the things they asked for ready and waiting as well."

"They'll be happy to hear that. We lost nearly everything we started out with along the way, but somehow things still worked out. We were very lucky."

"Lucky indeed. I still shudder to think of my boys facing off against so many monsters. When I see them again I'm not sure whether I'll throttle them for giving me new grey hairs or bundle them off to baby them for a month!"

"They get quite enough babying already. I keep finding myself making cookies for the little brats. I even bought a dozen pumpkins so I could make them pies after they fussed at me about it. Ori's no better. He doesn't fuss the way your boys do, he just stands there looking cute and mournful and agreeing that 'pumpkin pie does indeed sound very nice, but please don't trouble yourself on our account'. Wretched little beasts, the lot of them." his voice was fond in spite of his words.

"I see he brought the chest along as well." he gestured with his head to the banded chest that was shoved against the wall in the corner.
"Yes. So much gold!" "HA! There's an ocean's worth where that came from. They could have sent you ten times as much and no one would have noticed the loss of it."

"So much gold..." she grew pensive then and fixed Bilbo with a frank, worried stare.

"My brother...he has seemed well?"

"You're worried about gold sickness?"

"You know about that?"

"Yes, Thorin himself told me some of it, how he had to drag your grandfather from the mountain..."

He told her what Ori had learned of the dwarven rings, Thorin's own confession about the gold sickness that he'd felt on the way to Mordor and his fear of visiting the treasury.

"I think he beat it already, to be honest. By turning his back on it, possibly forever, to set himself against Sauron, I think the gold lost the hold it already had on him. Now that he and the dragon are both gone, I think whatever sickness lay on the treasury is gone, or is at least dissipating. Thorin himself has already moved past it and was no longer fearful after his visit to the treasury. In the few days between then and when we left, they all seemed fine. They went and poked around some, talked endlessly about some of what they found, but that was all. They went back to work in the morning, and as far as I know haven't been back since, except to gather funds for you."

"And a mithril shirt for you."

Bilbo touched his chest self-consciously. "I told him it was too much, but I think he felt badly that I didn't get any in Mordor like the rest of them did."

"Wait...they all have mithril armor?"

"There was a stockpile of it in Sauron's tower, mithril chainmail, plate mail, helmets, shields, weapons. There was enough shirts to cover the whole company, but it was all dwarf, man or elf sized. Even the smallest shirt they found was over my head when held up against me. The tallest members of the group took the man and elf-sized stuff so there'd be enough dwarf-sized for the rest. The shirts reach their ankles or mid-calf, but they're split at the bottom, so they could still maneuver in it just fine. The boys, Balin and Dori got the dwarf-sized stuff. The boys' shirts are a little big on them as they've not come into their full growth yet, but they'll fit them fine in time. They gave me a shield they found that's almost as big as I am. It was very light. I'm afraid I hit Thorin with it when he was trying to carry me away from the ring, but then I kicked the ring and it went flying and fell into the lava anyway, thank goodness. But yes, they all have mithril, and there was a few more besides that they took away with them from Sauron's tower. This one was made for an elven child, so it fits me about how the boys' dwarf-sized stuff fits them. Thorin was worried the ship would be attacked by people wanting to steal it, and insisted I wear armor since they couldn't send a squad of soldiers with us."

"Oh, I see."

That put things in slightly different perspective. But, no. There was something there, she was sure of it. Oh, the hobbit's explanation made perfect sense, but still... that shirt was probably the single most valuable thing in the whole of the treasury other than the Arkenstone itself. Her brother, practical explanations aside, wouldn't have given that away to just anyone.

Then there was all the heart-to-heart talks they seem to have had. Getting her brother to talk about his feelings was like battling orcs: dangerous and unpleasant. That he had done so on several occasions
to Mr. Baggins spoke volumes of his regard for and trust in him. Bilbo Baggins was important to him in some way that went far beyond being a stalwart member of his company. She was sure of it, and she would be watching.

The following morning, when Bilbo followed Dis outside, they found most of the colony gathered around the ship and watching in interest as Gloin, Bombur, Gimli who was going back with them, along with the first group of workmen, climbed all over the ship lashing down everyone's bundles of belongings that they were taking with them back to Erebor. The workmen seemed astounded at their sudden good fortune, though a bit wary of taking off in a flying elven contraption piloted by a hobbit. Bilbo watched the dwarves antics for a bit, but then got distracted by the feeling of eyes on him.

He turned his head slightly so he could listen...there! He'd heard a horse, he was sure of it. He turned his head a bit more, listening intently. Yes...right about...there! The man was well camouflaged enough he'd almost missed him, but hobbits had a knack for spotting intruders. He turned to Dis and nudged her elbow slightly to get her attention.

"Hmmm?" she asked distractedly as she turned to him, most of her attention still on the ship and the preparations underway.

"There's a man in the bushes watching us."

"What?"

He had her full attention now. He pointed in the direction the man was hidden in and she glared intently at it, though she could see no sign of a hidden watcher herself.

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. He crept up there a few minutes ago after leaving his horse further back in the tree line."

"That bush there?" she asked, already marching towards it.

Bilbo scrambled after her. A few of the guards in the area, seeing the Princess stalking off, obviously on the warpath, exchanged looks and scrambled after her as well. When they were about halfway there a man unfolded himself from where he'd been hidden. He looked both aggravated and somewhat sheepish. Resigned to being questioned now, he came out to meet them halfway.

Dis looked him up and down, while the guards arrayed themselves behind her and did their best to look fierce.

"A Ranger? What is a Ranger doing spying on us?"

"It was not my intention to spy on you, my lady"

"Princess." one of the guards barked.

"Princess" he corrected with a short bow in her direction. "We spotted something large flying in the air and I was sent out to try to discover what it was. It was large enough to be one of the giant eagles, but by the shape we knew it was not. There was some worry that it might be a dragon, but even then we were unsure, so I was sent to follow and learn the truth of things."

He looked past them to the ship and shook his head.
"Never in my wildest imaginings did I think to find this at the end of my journey. How came you by it?"

"I found it in Sauron's tower in Mordor."

"Mordor?! What was a hobbit doing in Mordor? Or here for that matter?"

A look of great distress crossed the man's face.

"Is...Is the Shire alright? We did not fail again, I pray!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Your people pledged yourselves to the Kingdom of Arnor long ago and were promised protection in return for upkeep on the roads and bridges. Though the kingdom fell long ago, your people have held true to your pledge all these years. The Dúnedain Rangers are all that remain of the people of Arnor in this current age. We have continued to protect the Shire to uphold the honor of Arnor all these years, even as your people have upheld their agreement."

"That...explains a lot, actually. What do you mean that you failed though?"

"The Fell Winter. We were busy battling orcs in the north. So many of your people died that year, under our watch. It is a failure that has shamed us greatly in all the years since."

"Well, goodness! While I will be the first to admit that particular winter was a hard one... I lost my father that year, you know. Sickness, not wolves or orcs, though when death is the result either way, perhaps it doesn't matter the manner of it. Yes, it was a dreadful time, and yes, many hobbits lost their lives, but really! You just said yourself you were busy battling orcs in the north. Had you not been there it could have been so much worse! The river has never frozen like that any other year. There was no reason any of you should have realized it would that year!"

"It is kind of you to say so, but we know it is our failure nonetheless."

"Well! That will never do! A person can only do so much! We have always been safe in the Shire, safe in a way that few others can ever claim, and all thanks to the efforts of your people all these years. Yes, tragedy struck us, but that is life. Please don't continue to trouble yourselves over it. Things happen sometimes."

"None of that really explains what one of your people was doing in Mordor."

Bilbo sighed and gave him a rundown of Gandalf's visit, the quest and his finding of the ring. When he was finished, the Ranger sunk down on a nearby boulder, quite overcome.

"And now our shame reaches new bounds! Not only did we fail you, but now you have undone our greatest shame and destroyed the Ring that corrupted our king!"

Bilbo huffed and put his hands on his hips. "Goodness! You men do like to wallow in your guilt, don't you? I have already told you the Fell Winter was unfortunate, but hardly your fault! Did you know we were in need? No. Were you busy elsewhere when it happened? Yes. Did you deliberately withhold aid in order to hurt us?"

"NO!"

"Exactly. Enough. It is done, let it go. As for Isildur, let that go as well. I think the poor man has been unfairly maligned for long enough."
"Maligned? He was…"

"Unable to throw it in. So was I. I had friends there to help, and as we had speculated on the possibility of foul arts that might stymie our wish to destroy the ring, we took some precautions… precautions which didn't work, I might add, but which allowed the ring to be separated from me without needing to lose a hand. As it is, it was an accident that it was destroyed, but frankly, I've come to believe that's the only way it could be done. Goodness knows the moment I learned what it was I had found I wanted nothing to do with it, nor did any of us, and all of us wished only to see it destroyed. Yet, even with that, when the moment came I was unable to let go. I could not throw it in. We know he kept it. I have never heard that he became evil, or that he became a monster like the Nazgûl did, only that he kept it. The hobbit who found it centuries ago was slain by his cousin for it…and I believe he may be the same creature I met in the roots of the goblin caves. He was twisted, wretched and completely mad. He murdered his cousin in cold blood, and attacked others invisibly while wearing it, until my people fled our original homeland and came west to the Shire. I have never heard that Isildur did anything of the sort. It had a strange magic to it, that ring, that made you covet it, made you secretive and wary of anyone touching it…which made it impossible to destroy. Let Isildur's memory rest already. I think he was not half the wretched creature history would paint him as."

"You have given me much to think on and report, friend hobbit"

"Bilbo. Bilbo Baggins at your service, and may I present Princess Dis. Her brother, Thorin is the leader of the company I traveled with and is once more King Under the Mountain. Her son, Prince Fili, helped in the destruction of the ring, as did King Thorin. Her younger son, prince Kili, slew the dragon Smaug."

"I am Halbarad. Princess, Mr. Baggins, it has been my honor. Might I ask what goes on here today before I leave?"

"Some members of the company, Mr. Baggins included, were gathering provisions to take to Erebor and a few workmen to help with the rebuilding."

"It is likely when I relay the tale you've told me that my people will wish to send representatives to Erebor."

"Wait until spring. My brother's coronation will not be held until then. Smaug left behind great devastation when he stole Erebor. We have lost citizens to lay to rest and a lot of damage to repair before we'll be ready for visitors."

"It shall be as you say, Princess. Please convey my congratulations to your brother, and you Mr. Baggins, to the rest of your remarkable company, on the many astounding feats you've accomplished. May Erebor rise strong and proud once more!"

"Thank you, Halbarad, we shall certainly do so."

"Open the gate! Clear the way! Ship incoming!"

There was a moment of confusion amongst the dwarves as the order came down. The company members that were nearby hurried towards the gate and got everyone moving, clearing the entryway and getting the gates open. Those further away, hearing the call, peered towards the gate from
wherever they were, wondering what was going on. The sight of the silvery elven airship, wings unfurled like a great metal bird, sailing in through the gates of Erebor left them speechless.

The Company had decided not to elaborate on just how the remaining members of their party had traveled westward, wanting to see the looks on all their faces when they returned. Dain Ironfoot, Lord of the Iron Hills, gaped quite unashamedly at the ship as it landed gently just past the gates, the wings retracted, then a gangplank unfurled as the side opened up. Dwarves began to spill out from the side, most toting barrels, sacks and crates, which they left in a pile just outside the ship, before going back in for more. He turned to his cousin, Thorin, mouth still hanging open, only to find the king, as well as Balin and Dwalin, each sporting a small, smug grin at his expense.

"Where…? What…? How?"

Thorin laughed quietly, well pleased with how discombobulated his cousin was.

"Mordor. That's how we were able to travel back north so quickly."

"You seem to have left quite a bit out of your tale!"

"Just this. You should have seen your face!"

"Ha, ha." Dain retorted, voice dry. "But truly, this was a marvelous find!"

"Aye, and well we know it. As you can see, when I said I did not fear us starving until the men of the lake returned, I was not being stubborn, or foolhardy, or any of the other things you claimed. We have the means to feed ourselves until Dale is reestablished."

"So I see." Dain's gaze still had not left the ship.

"Would you like to see it?"

Dain didn't bother answering, he just nodded and started towards it, fingers twitching as though he was already imagining running his hands all over it.

The dwarves from the ship were unloading the last of the goods held therein, while two more were tossing down bundles from the upper deck. Bombur had taken control of the gawkers and was sending them off in different directions with a portion of the food they'd brought back to stock the various pantries.

"Yer majesty, lord Dain. We've returned."

"Your trip was successful then?"

"Oh, aye. We stocked up in the hobbit markets and then headed onward to Ered Luin. I've brought back letters for everyone. We didn't bring anyone's things back this trip. Bilbo's supposed to be heading back day after tomorrow. He's going to pick up some more workers, and everyone's family should have our things packed up by then. We dinna have room with all the food aboard." Gloin replied.

"Ah. Disappointing, but we can do without for a bit longer."

"This is some workmanship. The Unexpected Journey?"

"Well, every ship needs a name. It seemed fitting, as that's what we were on when we found her. Bilbo came up with the name. It was only fair, he found it after all."
"Who or what is a Bilbo?"

"Someone call?"

Dain's eyebrows rose in surprise. "A halfling?"

Bilbo's eyes narrowed and he put his hands on his hips before answering. "Hobbit. Hob-bit. We're not half of anything, thank you."

Balin winced and hung his head. Dwalin turned his face away and bit his lip so he wouldn't laugh at the affronted look on Dain's face. Thorin grinned and clapped Dain on the shoulder.


Bilbo glanced down at Dain's feet and saw that, indeed, one of them was made of iron, or at least metal. One would think an actual iron foot would be terribly impractical, what with rust and all…

"Goodness! That really is quite ingenious. I would imagine it's rather heavy though…but then you dwarves are all rather strong, aren't you? Oh, my, do forgive my manners! Listen to me, nattering on and on! It's very nice to meet you." Bilbo said cheerfully, before turning back to Thorin. "What's this I hear we've moved lodgings? Where are we now? It's just…I brought some of my things back with me, and I'd like a chance to unpack before I have to head out again."

"You brought your things but not mine?"

"That was your sister's decision after she saw how laden down we were! Besides, there's plenty of stuff around here to fit all of you! It's all far too big for me, I needed my own clothing. Anyway, it's not like I did it on purpose! We went to the Shire first. I cleaned my house and sorted through my things and loaded them while waiting for the tweens I hired to get back from the various markets and for Gloin and Bombur to get back from Bree. My stuff was already on the ship before the food arrived and that filled up pretty much all the remaining space. As it was the poor fellows we brought with us practically had to sit in each other's laps, and that's even with using the upper deck for more storage! There just wasn't any more room!"

"You could have found room if you tried…don't walk away from me!" Thorin growled as Bilbo threw up his hands and stomped back towards the ship.

"You're not the boss of me."

"You're under contract!"

"I found your stupid glowy rock, so technically…"

The rest their conversation was muffled by the ship, since Thorin had stomped after the hobbit when he left. Balin hid his face in his hands and groaned. Dain just stared after the two of them bemusedly.

"Well…quite the interesting fellow you found. Why a half… a hobbit?"

"Tharkûn chose him. We numbered but thirteen without him." Balin sighed. "He proved to be a lucky addition, though none of us ever would have guessed it at the start of the journey."

"Aye, the lad was soft and a bit out of his depth at first. He sharpened up pretty quickly though, all
"things considered." Dwalin agreed.

"Is there…"

"A betting pool? Aye. Long odds. Oin said the portents weren't right, so a lot of folks bet against instead of using their damn eyes."

"I'm as fond of Bilbo as anyone, but the dwarf lords will never stand for it. Not to mention the princess. It just isn't done."

"He seems to have fared well enough in her care." Dain pointed out.

"Oi! Gloin, Bombur, c'mere a second would you?"

Gloin and Bombur and the few members of the company that had arrived while they were talking, ambled over after seeing the last of the goods but one batch distributed to the guard stations.

"What's that for?" Balin asked, indicating the remaining food. "Why didn't you send that off with the rest?"

"We asked them to." Nori explained. "We're taking that lot to the palace. Dori cleaned out the kitchen. No offense to the fellows that've been doing the cooking, but we'd prefer to have Bilbo feed us, now he's back."

"He's going to make us pies! Did you see all the pumpkins?" Kili said cheerfully.

"He might make pumpkin bread and cookies too, and he said you can stuff 'em with stuff and bake them like that and eat it. He might do that too." Ori explained. "I'm not sure I want to eat any. They're kind of a weird looking fruit, aren't they?"

"I think they're actually a vegetable."

"You don't make pies with vegetables! Well…elves might, but that's hardly a recommendation." Dwalin grumbled.

"We've all liked everything he's made for us so far, even when we were sure we wouldn't. I'm willing to trust him about the pies." Fili objected.

"It's delicious! His auntie gave us some when she came by to visit." Bombur said.

"Aye. I had three helpings. I know Gimli's looking forward to it!"

"He kept talking about it." Gimli explained. "The whole ride, near enough."

"How did the princess take Mr. Baggins' presence?"

"They seem to be great friends. She put him up for the nights we was there. In the king's room, no less!"

"Thorin's room? But…she has a guest room."

"Aye. Suppose she must've been using it for something already. I didn't ask."

"Incoming." Dwalin whispered in warning as a laden-down Thorin and Bilbo exited the ship.

"Mahal's beard! What do you have in this thing?"
"Books."

"Books? We've a whole library of books here already!"

"They're mostly translations I did of various Elvish texts I came across, and books written by myself and several of my family members. You may not have all or most of the Elvish texts, I shall have to look, but I know for certain you don't have any of the hobbit ones. The copies in there are the only ones outside the Shire. Ori wanted to make copies to add to the library here."

Thorin spotted Fili and Kili and gestured them towards the ship.

"Grab the rest of that, would you?" Bilbo himself was already weighed down with a satchel in each hand.

"There's more?"

"Well, yes. I brought along everything I wanted near to hand for the foreseeable future--books, clothes, both to work in and otherwise, odds and ends to decorate my room, my mother's recipe book, which is written in Hobbitish, so don't bother trying to steal it."

"Why would we steal it when we can just have you make stuff for us?"

"You have your own language?"

"Well, yes, of course we do. We mostly speak Westron, but everyone still learns it."

"Why do you speak in the language of men if you have your own?"

"So that we can keep in touch with the Bree folk mostly, and for trade and the like. It's just easier."

"But why do you not speak it amongst your people?"

"Well, we apparently fell out of the habit during our wandering years. We needed to speak common in order to travel through the lands of men, and we wandered long enough we spoke it more than our own. It was never forgotten, it just became a special occasion sort of thing, I suppose."

They ended up forming a strange parade--Bilbo, Thorin, Fili and Kili carrying Bilbo's luggage, the rest grabbing food to take down to the palace pantry. Dain and Balin, who abstained from carrying anything, followed after. They could hear Bilbo complaining as they entered after the rest of the group.

"You just threw down your blankets in this awful, dusty room? You couldn't even sweep first? Honestly!"

They were treated to the sight of the princes squirming sheepishly beneath Bilbo's disapproving glare. Thorin wasn't squirming, but he looked no less sheepish than his nephews, though he was doing his best to disguise it with a majestic glare. Bilbo threw up his hands in despair and marched off towards the kitchen, muttering under his breath all the way.

"Oh, the kitchen at least looks lovely."

"That was Dori's doing. We know how much store you put by a clean kitchen. Ori offered.

"Marvelous. That means I can actually start on a few pies without having to scrub everything down
first."

"Do you need any help? I'll admit, I'd like to learn how to make them myself."

"Help would be welcome. I'll warn you though, it's a bit of a messy process right at first."

Dain stood back and observed, a few of the company followed Bilbo and Bombur into the kitchen--Thorin, Fili and Kili to be exact, the rest headed off to the room they'd commandeered to sleep in, which was just down the hall. He split his attention between both. Those in the kitchen were groaning and carrying on about how 'disgusting' pumpkins were, though Bilbo just laughed at them, assured them it was just pulp and seeds and not the part that got eaten, and put them to work separating out the seeds while the rest was put in the oven to soften up the flesh. He and Bombur then got started making pie crusts and preparing the baking pans to receive the pumpkin filling later when it was ready.

Down the hall the rest had gone to work on their room, shaking out the furs and blankets which had gotten rather dusty, sweeping the floor, wiping down the surfaces. The ones not busy doing that had a brief conference and another group went off to clean the nearest bathroom. The hobbit himself was cheerfully bustling around the kitchen, putting all those who followed to work helping prepare that night's dinner, digging through the nauseating gunk he'd pulled from his pumpkins, while he and Bombur regaled them with tales of their trip to the Shire and the Blue Mountains and back.

The cleaning crews finished the rooms they'd been doing, and by common consent headed off towards the dining room to continue their efforts. By that point there were a dozen or so pies being assembled, dinner was well on its way and the whole area was filling with delicious scents from their efforts.

Dain eyed his cousin with some amusement. Thorin had perched himself in the corner--near enough to be part of the group without being too directly involved. To the casual glance, he seemed to be reading the letter sent back by his sister, but if you watched him, he was actually watching the hobbit as he moved about the kitchen and joked and sang with the others. He hadn't actually finished even the first page of Dis' missive.

He'd never seen his gruff, stoic cousin like this before. It was very amusing. Also bizarre--a tiny, chubby, hairy footed little fellow with enough sass for three dwarves, who had pointed ears like an elf is what finally turned Thorin's head? It was all very strange… but mostly, it was amusing.

"Where have the new arrivals been placed?" Bilbo asked after the last of the pies was removed from the oven and set aside to cool. "It's just, I promised them some of the pies when they were done."

"But those are our pies!" Kili spluttered.

"There are ten more." Bilbo huffed in return. "Which means everyone here could get as many as five slices apiece should they want them. Don't be ridiculous!"

"There's a room near the latest area we've been working in that was dusted out for them."

"Is there a bathroom nearby? Washing facilities? A kitchen? Beds?"

"Well…not as such." Bilbo sighed.

"You said there was servants quarters and a guard barracks here, didn't you?"
"Yes?"

"I'll get the guard barracks cleaned up to house them till we find permanent housing for everyone. The next group I'm to pick up is all domestic staff. Once they're here I'll help them get the servants quarters gussied up for them to stay in...perhaps station one of them at each of the guard stations to cook and do laundry? I'll discuss it with Dis when I get back there. Is there any sort of register detailing who lived where? Before the dragon, I mean."

"I'm sure there is. Balin will likely know where to find it. Why?"

"So we can start making a survey of what quarters are available. We can match the lists against the list of those who are returning. Any left over will likely be those whose occupants perished during the dragon's attack, or those who will not be returning. Once we know we can mark those off and clear them out. Those who are simply not returning, we can see about having anything in those rooms returned to them. If the occupants perished, we can try to track down relatives to give the items within to. Barring any survivors, we could gather up what's in each of them and make a storehouse with like items grouped together. I'm sure a lot of those who will be returning will find themselves needing different things as they settle in. Having dishes, extra clothing and furnishings available will help the transition immensely, I shouldn't wonder. Either way, quarters expected to remain empty can be marked off and we can start moving people into permanent housing rather than trying to find odd corners to keep stuffing everyone in to."

"I'll have Balin track down the census records tomorrow. You and my sister seem to have things well in hand, so I will leave it with you. Kili can help you."

"Huh? Oh, uh, sure. I can do that." Kili said, while trying to look responsible and trustworthy.

"Oh good, you can come with me on my next trip. I know your mother will be happy to see you... and it will give her a chance to scold you about your letter-writing skills."

"I added stuff!" "A whole extra sentence. It must have been exhausting." He turned to Fili "If you want to send any more letters have them ready and we'll take them back with us."

He paused behind Kili's chair and began idly fussing with his hair, finger-combing some of the knots he could see.

"This reminds me. I brought along a concoction my aunt Donnamira makes for hair. It should help keep down the tangles. You put it in and let it set for a bit and then wash it out. Next time you're going to bathe, let me know and I'll put it in for you."

"Don't get your hopes up. Nothing works on my hair. It does what it wants."

"You've never encountered aunt Donnamira's miracle hair goop."

"This looks like it's just about done." Bombur called from the stove.

"Good. I'm hungry."

"Hi hungry, I'm Kili!" Kili chirped before shortling madly.

Fili snorted, Thorin sighed and rolled his eyes. Bilbo patted him gently on the head and went to help Bombur dish everything up.
The rest of the company showed up, most of them newly bathed and in fresh clothing.

"Dinner almost done? Smells good."

"Yes, you're just in time."

"Dining room's all cleaned. We set the table too. We can eat in there."

"Oh, excellent. Does everyone want to help carry everything?"

"Hang on a moment. There's a cart just back here that was meant for that, I believe." Dori interjected, bustling off into the back of the kitchen and returning pushing a multi-tiered cart with a lid on each section to keep the heat in.

"Oh. That's very handy, isn't it? In that case, the rest of you run along and we'll load this up and be right behind you."

"Ah, nice job you boys did in here…though, my, the chandelier really needs a good scrubbing, doesn't it?" He stared at it a moment longer. "Are those…diamonds?"

"Yes. Of course they are." Thorin replied, quite matter of fact. "What else would they be?"

"Bits of glass. Polished metal."

"Pfah."

He got his first good look at the dining table, now revealed in all its glory from beneath the century of dust that had coated it. It was a long table, made of the same green stone that was in evidence all over Erebor. The sides of the piece had been carved with geometric shapes and animals, and the legs were each carved to resemble a fierce dwarven warrior, so that it looked like the four of them were grimly holding the table aloft. The top was polished to a high gloss, and seams of gold could be seen running through it.

The chairs, he now realized, were made of the same material, and also had gold running through them. The high backs of the chair rose up above everyone's heads, and each featured a design spotted with precious gems, which caught the light and made each of them look like they had a fiery, jeweled halo. Thorin's chair was the largest and most elaborately carved.

Now that the room was clean, more details than just the table and chairs stood out. The walls were carved as well, with elaborate bas-reliefs depicting dwarves, elves and men—though the elves and men were both shorter than they should have been, and the poor elves ears were far too big. A border of intricate knot work ran along the top of the wall, inlaid with different colored gemstones, and with the edges limned in silver.

The floor underfoot was highly polished and showed flecks of gold running through it as well…in fact, now that he looked, the table was actually growing out of the floor… as was the sideboard and the beautiful china cabinet that stood at one end of the room! Some of what he was thinking must have shown on his face, because Thorin looked terribly smug, as did Balin, when he turned back to the table.

"Your people actually made furniture as they were carving out the room! Goodness! Erebor, well really just dwarven stonework and engineering in general, are truly a marvel!"
"Better than Rivendell?"

Bilbo sighed, and Fili snorted, though he tried to cover this fact. When he looked around at the rest of the table, he realized all of the dwarves were waiting for his verdict. Bilbo sighed again, though he smiled with exasperated fondness at his dwarves as he did so.

"There's no comparison, really."

"Because Erebor and all things dwarvish are so much better, right?" Gloin demanded.

"Erebor is a beauty and a marvel and without compare"

The dwarves cheered—except Thorin who eyed Bilbo suspiciously, and continued to do so as he and Bombur filled the table. He didn't say anything until Bilbo had taken one of the two empty seats that were left, which was coincidentally right next to Thorin, between he and Fili.

"I sensed a 'but' in your praise." he muttered quietly.

"Honestly, Thorin! It's not a competition! I can think two places—or more!—are beautiful, without it taking away anything from any of them. I thought Rivendell was lovely. I also think the Shire is lovely, and Minas Tirith was quite impressive as well, the little I saw of it. They each have their own beauty, and are different enough from one another that they cannot really be compared to each other. That said, if it makes you feel any better, I do believe Erebor is the most impressive from a purely engineering standpoint. Honestly, just imagining the sheer amount of work that must have gone in to hollowing out this place, let alone doing so while building furniture and bridges and staircases as you went! It's quite astonishing. That you all not only did that, but managed to make it beautiful as well…! That was an accomplishment indeed."

After dinner was eaten, and many pies devoured, Thorin and Dain excused themselves to go check on the workmen and see how the day's repairs had fared. "They won't be back for hours. It's a big mountain, and the work crews are scattered all over." Kili explained.

"The rest of us might as well head for bed, really."

"You can if you want to. For myself, I'm going to go gather sheets to wash. The rest of you can continue sleeping on the floor if you like. I prefer beds. Goodness…that's going to be a lot of sheets."

"There's a laundry facility here, beneath the servants' quarters and guard barracks." Dori assured him.

"Excellent. That should make things much simpler."

Dori kicked Nori and Ori until they climbed to their feet, grumbling.

"We'll help you. I would much prefer to sleep in a bed as well, so the sooner all those sheets are washed and ready the better, to my mind."

Bifur, Bofur and Bombur traded a look and climbed to their feet as well.

"Oh, marvelous! It shouldn't take any time at all with so many hands to help! Come along then!"

Dori found a laundry cart to help and everyone went off to start stripping all the beds in the palace proper, the servants quarters and the guard barracks, while Bilbo found and emptied out the linen closets.
Dori and Bombur's explanation of the ingenious drying machine from the last time they'd done laundry had given him an idea. He went and dug out a few of the lavender sachets he'd brought with him and brought them along. If he threw a few in with the sheets the heat should help release the scents into everything, which would go a long way towards making living in the palace more pleasant. It was right near where the dragon had spent most of its time, and so the reptilian smell was especially strong in the area.

"Hmm…that actually give me another idea… It will mean another trip to the Shire to replace everything, but it would be money well spent if it works…"

He explained his ideas. Dori took the sachets and offered for the rest of them to get started with the laundry while he got the rest of them in gear to air out the rooms. After explaining to Balin, he got the rest of them organized. Balin chose rooms for everyone--double and tripled up for the moment (all but Dain and Thorin who merited their own room, and Bilbo who had no kin amongst them) so they had less cleaning to do immediately. The beds in the palace were large enough it wouldn't be a hardship to share until quarters for everyone were found.

The chosen rooms were each swept free of dust and cobwebs. Bilbo showed up just as they finished up with buckets of good-smelling water for them to wipe down the surfaces with.

"Lemon. It's not only good for lemonade, pies, cupcakes and cakes, it also makes a good cleaning agent and leaves the room smelling fresh and clean afterwards."

While the dwarves got to work with the lemon water, he started a small fire in the fireplaces in each room and threw on a bundle of aromatic herbs. In the kitchen he put on a large pot of water filled with more and left it to boil. Once satisfied, he started for the laundry, which Dori had told him how to find.

The laundry crew was already hard at work. Nori and Dori were tending the large wash tub, while Ori, Bofur, and Bombur tended the scrub boards. Bifur split his time between taking things from the scrub boards to the large tub, and keeping an eye on the drying machine so none of the clothing got burnt from being on the heat too long. His idea with the sachets seemed to be working, as the whole area smelt like lavender.

The only thing left was to fold and sort the dried things, which were all piling up on the long tables to one side of the room. Bilbo pushed up his shirtsleeves and went to do just that. He was sleeping in a bed tonight, come hell or high water.

Dain and Thorin didn't return for hours; Erebor was a big mountain, and the workmen and their projects were scattered quite a distance from the palace. They could hear the rough accents and laughter of workmen when they entered the palace grounds and followed the sound to its origin. The workmen that had just arrived that day were ensconced in the entrance level guard barracks, which was miraculously clean. Many of them had wet hair, as though they had just returned from bathing, and they seemed to be in high spirits, though that might have had something to do with the empty pumpkin pie plates scattered about, or the now-empty mugs of hot chocolate that seemed to be near at hand to each of them. They didn't alert them to their presence, just continued on.

The main hallway was missing the (filthy) rug that had run the length of the hall, as well as the wall hangings and statuary that had decorated it. It was swept clean, and the sconces and chandeliers that lit the length of it had been scrubbed, polished and new oil and candles had been installed. Dain took a deep breath, inhaling the delicious scents that seemed to permeate the air.
"Is your hobbit cooking again?"

"I don't know."

The family sitting room was just ahead, and they could see warm firelight spilling out of the doorway. Dain stayed back a bit so he could watch Thorin unobserved, but then felt guilty but a moment later. The raw emotion on his face when he glanced in, like he'd been gutted--or had a rancid wound torn open and drained of poison--it seemed a terribly personal thing to witness.

He averted his eyes to look idly around the hallway they were in--this one had been stripped bare and given a quick cleaning as well-- to give his cousin a chance to put his stoic mask back on. Thorin did so and entered the room, Dain right behind, and very curious to see what had caused such a reaction.

The first thing one saw when looking inside was the fireplace, with a newly cleaned portrait of Erebor's royal family from long ago just above it. The hobbit was seated before the fire with Kili at his feet. He was combing his hair with some sort of greasy, herb-smelling substance from a jar. Fili, Ori and Gimli were seated on the floor nearby, teasing Kili good-naturedly about his ordeal, while snacking on scones. The rest of the company was on the other side of the room, gathered around a table, drinking mulled wine and playing cards. They were all freshly bathed and dressed for bed.

"Ah, Thorin, Dain, you're back! There's wine and scones if you're at all hungry." Balin greeted them.

Dori busied himself serving them both up some while they took seats near the fire.

"What are you doing to my nephew?" Thorin finally asked.

"This is aunt Donnamira's miracle hair goop. It should make his hair more manageable. She brought some for me after hearing about my difficulties" he grimaced in irritation for a moment.

"Difficulties?"

"I was going to get my hair cut while we were all in the Shire…"

He was forced to stop there as the gathered dwarves all erupted in horrified dismay. Bilbo sighed.

"Yes, that's just how Gloin and Bombur acted! I tried to tell them, and I'll tell the rest of you now, whatever it means in dwarf culture, it doesn't mean the same among hobbits! Only the women wear their hair long, and most of them have some goop recipe of their own so they can do so without too much trouble! It's all ridiculous! I can't even get a brush all the way through my hair without hurting myself! I actually got as far as the barber shop once. I was in the chair, and he'd just covered me with a cloth to keep hair off of me, and Gloin exploded into the room and burst into tears! He gave poor Jubbo…that's the barber--a terrible fright! Aunt Donnamira heard all about it and took pity on me. She said, "well, it looks like you're not getting a haircut any time soon. At least with this you'll be able to actually brush your hair!"

"It smells like something ta eat, not put in yer hair." Dain commented.

"Well, there are herbs and, I believe some fruity bits as well. I think everything in the mixture is in fact edible, though I doubt it would taste good mixed together as it is."

"Hear that, Kee? You've a fruity salad on your head!"

Kili pouted while the rest laughed.
"Don't listen to them, my boy. Your hair will be smooth and silky once I'm done. You'll be the envy of dwarves everywhere."

He combed the mixture through one last time and patted Kili on the shoulder.

"Just sit for a few more minutes and let it soak in and then you can go wash it out."

"Good. It's cold. And also kinda slimy." Kili said with some relief. "There's still scones left right? You didn't eat them all?"

"Sorry. Dain and uncle got the last of them."

"Honestly!" Bilbo grumbled, giving all the dwarves a dirty look. "Don't worry, my boy. Go ahead and wash up. I can whip up another batch easy enough. They should be hot out of the oven by the time you're done."

Kili grinned happily, then stuck his tongue out at the other boys before hurrying off to do just that.

"You're making more?" Thorin spoke up hopefully as he brushed the last crumbs from his lap.

Bilbo looked around and realized they were all looking hopeful.

"Goodness! At this rate I'll not have any cranberries left. I shall have to get more on my next trip though the Shire."

"Are cranberries those red things that were in them?"

"Yes. Several families that live in and around the Marish in the Shire tend the bog where they grow. They'd just been harvested when we went through. I do hope some are left when I go back. They sell quickly each year. Everyone keeps some fresh on hand while they last to add to scones and such, and usually cans the rest to last the winter--saucers, jellies, compotes, and some make teas and such with them. Well, I guess I'll see. I should probably pick up a few more pumpkins while I'm there as well…goodness…"

Bilbo wandered off, fretting over food supplies, and Thorin's eyes followed him till he was out of sight. When he turned back to the fire, he found Dwalin, who had taken over Bilbo's seat when he left, smirking at him in amusement. He flipped him off, which just made Dwalin laugh softly to himself as he lit up his pipe.

Thorin settled in for a good brood. While Bilbo and the others had brought back quite a lot of food, all things considered, there were enough of them now in the mountain that it wouldn't last for long. They couldn't even really hunt to stretch their supplies. There was nothing growing anywhere in the near vicinity of Erebor and hadn't been since Smaug had arrived decades ago. Their numbers would only increase from here on out.

"Has there been any sign of the lake men yet?"

"Not that anyone has seen. I asked them to keep an eye out. Why?"

"The ship will have to make constant trips to keep us fed. It would be helpful if we could get supplements from closer to home." Thorin sighed then, looking bitter indeed. "They likely fled to the elves for shelter when Smaug went on his rampage. They don't seem to realize he never came back. We might have to send word to them if we want them to return."
A low mutter of 'elves' and 'Thranduil' traveled around the room. Those who remembered Smaug's arrival had never forgiven Thranduil's betrayal, and all those younger had been raised on stories of his treachery. A terrible, frustrated ache formed in Thorin's chest. He was king, which meant he was ultimately responsible for the wellbeing of all within the mountain. The ship would allow them to gather food from far and wide, but it could still only hold so much at any one time, and it would be made more difficult as the population increased. Little as he liked it, they would need the help of the men and elves to make it long-term. That meant, however little he liked it, he was going to have to deal with Thranduil sooner or later, and that was no real solution. He had already betrayed them once. There was nothing to stop him from doing so a second time.

"Goodness! What did that wall do to offend you so mightily, o king?"

Thorin blinked, jarred from his dark thoughts by a fragrant scone thrust beneath his nose, and the cheeky hobbit that was holding it.

"It is nothing. Do not trouble yourself."

For a moment it looked like the hobbit would berate him, but the presence of the company, not to mention Dain, seemed to still his tongue. It was just as well really; the hobbit had a bizarre fondness for elves, and likely would have demanded he make nice with Thranduil. It would have led to an argument, he was certain. He was mellow and relaxed at the moment, and didn't wish to ruin it with a demand to make nice with his hated enemy. It really was a good thing the wizard wasn't still with them; he would have castigated him at length on how wonderful elves were, regardless of who was in earshot. He found himself wondering, and not for the first time, whether the wizard treated all kings thusly, or was that particular behavior reserved for dwarves alone. Given how he'd sucked up to the lord of Rivendell, he thought it might be the case.

"Hmm, not just the wall, but the floor as well!" Bilbo joked lightly, brandishing the scone like a charm to ward off unpleasantness "whatever they have done to offend you so, can you not set it aside for the evening at least? They will still be here, unchanged, come morning. You can glare at them to your heart's content then."

He took the scone and nodded his thanks when his cup was refilled with more hot, spiced wine. Dain had joined those at the table, so his seat was empty. Dwalin was still in the chair Bilbo had been in earlier. Once he'd made sure everyone had food and their wine was topped off, he took Dain's seat next to Thorin, with a bundle of wool in his arms which he had retrieved from somewhere. Upon seeing Thorin's questioning look, he explained.

"I had been making a blanket. I had only just begun it when I ran off with all of you. I brought it with me so I can finally finish it."

Thorin watched for a bit as he got started.

"That's not what Ori does."

"Well, no, it's not. Ori knits. I'm crocheting."

"Some sort of hobbit technique?"

"Men do it too, at least they do in Bree…"

As he explained the technique and how it differed from knitting, the two of them moved closer together so Thorin could see what he was doing. They were so involved in their own conversation, neither of them noticed Dwalin shooing the boys to go join the card game in progress so they'd be
left alone.

"You seem deep in thought, Mr. Baggins."

"My name is Bilbo."

"Bilbo. What is on your mind?"

Bilbo frowned and focused on his crocheting for a bit before answering.

"I just can't help but feeling like I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"What do you mean?"

"Well…the whole quest we went from calamity to calamity with barely a breath in between. The end of the quest seemed strangely anticlimactic…not at the time, of course. At the time I was terrified out of my wits. I don't know if I'm just being a grumpy middle-aged pessimist or…"

Thorin sighed and stared into the fire with a frown on his face. "No, I know what you mean. The dragon dead practically without effort, the orc army decimated long before we were even in the area and the fearsome dark lord of old wiped out with just a bit of effort. We have our mountain back, the company is hale and whole, and there's not been a lick of gold sickness to be seen. It does seem entirely too easily managed, for all the troubles we've seen. Like yourself, I feel I've been waiting for another calamity to fall on our heads."

"You don't think we're just being grumpy pessimists?"

"I wish we were, but if life has taught me anything it's that things will always get worse."

"I was afraid of that."

"For the moment at least, all is well. We should enjoy it while it lasts."

Bilbo sniffed. "That will be considerably easier to do now that everyone won't be sleeping in filth on the hard floor."

"It was a bit of dust. You must admit we've slept in worse…"

"Out on the road, in that horrid bog, because we had no choice!"

"Ah, well, I guess it's good we have you here to take care of us all then."

Bilbo could feel himself flushing—in pleasure or embarrassment, even he couldn't tell you—and bent over his crocheting to give himself some space. If this was being in love he wasn't sure he cared for it. Thorin stretched and sighed, settling deeper into the couch.

"Alright there?"

"Just tired. We've been hauling bodies and hauling broken stone for weeks now and we've barely made a dent in things."

"Your cousin and his people have only been here a few days. It will take time, but it should start going much quicker. I'll be bringing domestic staff as well as engineers and stoneworkers next time I go to the Blue Mountains which should also help. Just look around here. A few hours, some willing hands and some elbow grease, and look at the difference it made. We're not finished, of course, but now that we've got so many hands to help it will start going faster."
"I suppose I'm just impatient."

"Have you been sleeping well?"

"As well as I ever do."

"So barely. Let me get you some more wine. You'll be sleeping well tonight no matter what I have to do."

"Even pull my beard?"

Bilbo's ears and cheeks went pink and made a noise halfway between a splutter and a squeak. He elbowed Thorin hard in the side when he started laughing.

"You know very well, I didn't know it meant anything in particular to dwarves, though I suppose I should have guessed. Honestly!"

"It's just not something I ever expected someone to shout at me…especially with my sister-sons standing right there."

"You make it sound like you never expected to be propositioned by anyone. I doubt that's the case!"

"Erebor fell when I was but a child. People don't exactly line up for a simple blacksmith, even if he's technically a king."

"I find that hard to believe. I'm sure there were plenty. You were probably too busy brooding to notice."

"Oh? Is that so?" Thorin purred.

Over at the table, the game halted for a moment when they heard Thorin's laughter, quiet as it was, roll over the gathering. They all turned to look at their king and their burglar. Thorin was grinning, as was Bilbo, though he seemed fondly exasperated, and was gently nudging Thorin in the ribs to scold him. They all turned to look at Oin, who glared at them all stubbornly.

"The portents don't lie. Tragedy and love unrequited."

"That doesn't look unrequited to me. They're practically in each other's laps." Nori snickered, ducking out of the way of Dori's expected swat to his head.

Bifur spoke quietly and they all turned to Bofur, who looked surprised and thoughtful at what his cousin had to say.

"He makes a good point. Did you check the portents before or after we decided to head to Mordor?"

Oin opened his mouth to defend his portents again, then closed it without speaking.

"It was before." Gloin replied after some thought. "The first day we were at the skinchanger's home, when we made our bets."

They all exchanged a look of dawning realization.

"Are you saying…if we had come straight to Erebor…one of them…?"
"Or both…"

"Is that so hard to believe? You all saw what it looked like out there when we arrived."

"He really did save us all didn't he?"

"They both did. Azog had an army and we saw how much good that did him. What could we fourteen have done better?"

The mood around the table was somber indeed as it really hit them how very, very lucky they all had been.

"Enough brooding. It didn't happen. We're alive and here and doing fine." Fili spoke up firmly.

Even knowing that, none of them could help glancing over every so often and taking in the sight of their king and their burglar, alive, well and happy.

"Something smells good." Bofur said with a smile after inhaling deeply.

"It should be ready soon. You'll have time to clean up first." Bilbo replied with a pointed look at everyone. Their hands were dirty, as were most of their faces and they were covered in dust and flakes of stone.

"What are you two up to?" Fili wondered, coming up to peer over Balin's shoulder.

The two of them had been ensconced at the long table in the kitchen since just after breakfast, peering at piles of papers with what looked to be plans for different levels of the kingdom spread out between them.

"We're matching residences with the people set to return to Erebor. About two hundred of the folks here with Dain were originally from Erebor, and most of them plan to return. A few married or had children, or simply established a new life in the Iron Hills and aren't looking to uproot themselves again, so not all of them will-- we've spent most of the day matching those folks to residences in the mountain so they can be cleared out for someone else."

"This is going to be a long, painful process matching everyone. Just this has taken us a good portion of the morning, and it was the shortest list."

"The rest should go more quickly." Bilbo replied absently, making a small notation on the map he and Balin were working on.

"Ah, Mister Baggins, there you are. Here's the list you asked for, well, part of it anyway. I'm afraid only the folks at the gate station actually completed it. I'm sure the rest will be along in time."

"Ah, thank you Lord Dain, this should be a great help." Bilbo replied, taking the list with a smile. His smile dimmed when he saw the list; it was composed of long lines of neat runes. He couldn't read a word of it. He handed it to Balin with a sigh and headed towards the stove to check on dinner.

"Er...'scuse us, but...eh, no one said if we was supposed to join th' others fer meals or..." Bilbo smiled kindly at the dwarves that had accompanied he, Gloin and Bombur back from the Blue Mountains.
"Ah, Baldr. Are the rest with you?"

"Yeah, they're just in th' hall 'ere."

"Ah, good. You were right to come here. Let me just load up the cart for all of you. There's a mess hall attached to the barracks we have you in, correct?"

"Aye."

"Perfect. It's just fish stew and bread, I'm afraid."

"Smells divine, m'lord, please don't apologize."

"I'm no lord, just plain old Bilbo Baggins, gentlehobbit of the Shire! Ah, there you are. There's a small cask of ale on the bottom there. Try to make it last; we haven't much of it."

Baldr bustled in and took the cart from Bilbo with a grin and a nod and he and the other Blue Mountain workmen hurried off to eat. Bilbo waved them off with a smile and busied himself filling the second cart for the Company's dinner. Balin carefully gathered up the papers they'd been working with and hurried after him. The rest of the company was already gathering, rubbing their hands together in eagerness for another of the hobbit's meals.

"Smells good, whatever it is."

"Fish stew and fresh bread. Nothing very fancy, I'm afraid." Bilbo apologized.

"I'm sure it will be wonderful." Kili objected, already holding out his bowl for Bombur to fill.

The king's seat was conspicuously empty. Bilbo's sharp ears caught the faint ringing of metal in the distance. Curious he followed the sound out of the dining room and down the hall then down a staircase and down another hall. It was warmer down here than above, and the doorway ahead was lit from within by a large, flickering fire. The sound of ringing metal led him forward. Once in the doorway he froze in place.

It was Thorin. The place he'd found was obviously a workroom of some sort. There was a blazing fire lit in the forge. Thorin was stripped to the waist, his long hair bound into a messy bun at the back of his head. A light sheen of sweat coated his upper body, outlining and highlighting the expanse of rippling muscles in his back and shoulders. As he stared a droplet of sweat rolled down his back. Bilbo's gaze followed it with rapt attention, even as he quietly scolded himself for ogling the dwarf king like he was.

A sudden hiss and a cloud of steam allowed him to tear his gaze away at last, though the new view was no better. The steam billowed and curled around the king's glistening form and refracted the glow of the forge, making him appear otherworldly and unapproachable. Thorin pulled the now-cooled metal from the tub he'd quenched it in and turned to lay it with the other finished work, only to freeze for a moment when he caught sight of Bilbo hovering in the doorway.

"Master Baggins?"

Pull yourself together, Bilbo Baggins!

"Sorry to interrupt. I just wanted to remind you dinner is ready."
"I'll be along when I am finished."

"You'll be along now. Whatever it is you're making can wait till you've eaten!"

Thorin opened his mouth to argue, but Bilbo bristled and gave him his most ferocious glare, which made the hobbit look rather like a disgruntled, fluffy kitten than anything—not that he'd ever tell him that. His hands went to his hips and one of his furry feet began tapping impatiently. It was body language he knew well, though he'd only ever gotten it from his mother and his sister, now that he thought on it.

"I only have two more to make."

"Fine, then I'll wait until you're finished. I have a feeling if I leave you here you're going to forget to eat altogether."

Bilbo's stomach chose that moment to gurgle unhappily. Thorin sighed, though a small smile touched his lips as he did so.

"I will not be responsible for keeping a hobbit from his food…especially as your stomach seems moments away from devouring all in sight. 'twould be a sad epigraph for my tombstone. Survived the fall of Erebor, the battle of Azanulzibar, the destruction of Sauron…only to be laid low by a hungry hobbit in his twilight years."

Bilbo began to bristle, but his stomach let out another unhappy gurgle. Thorin bit his lip to keep himself from laughing, but his eyes danced with mirth nonetheless. Bilbo flushed in embarrassment, but did his best to carry on as though he hadn't heard his stomach's loud complaints.

"What are you making, anyway?" Thorin held up the thing in his hand that he'd been working on earlier.

"Black arrow?"

"For the ship. I've already finished the ballista." he gestured vaguely towards the corner, where Bilbo could see the item in question resting.

"The ship already has a ballista."

"I dismantled it and added some improvements. Kili mentioned he couldn't arm it by himself. That will never do. It would be far too dangerous with only the two of you travelling westward tomorrow. You need to steer the ship and cannot be spared to help him arm the ballista should it be necessary. Smaug was quite dangerous, and obviously decimated the orc army that came here, but that doesn't mean none of the beasts escaped. There may well be scattered orc bands roaming all across the countryside. I'll not have you unprotected when you venture forth once more."

"We're going to be up in the air. Even if there are orc bands around it isn't like they could get to us."

"Nevertheless you will have a full complement of arrows and a better ballista before you venture forth once more. Kili has also been instructed to stock up on regular arrows so these can be saved for larger threats, like trolls."

"We'll be in the ship. We'll likely be the safest travelers in all the world, when it comes right down to it. I realize Kili is your nephew, and the baby of the family, but you really need to stop worrying so much." Bilbo said kindly, reaching out to pat Thorin on the arm. He froze for a moment when his hand met bare skin. He pulled his hand back as though scalded and his face flushed pink, as did his ears. The heated air seemed to thicken and grow heavy around them.
"UNCLE! MR. Boggins! What's taking so long? We're hungry!"

Just like that the heady atmosphere shattered. Bilbo stepped back, feeling strangely bereft as Thorin dropped his hand and turned away to grab his shirt and put it on. Bilbo turned and headed for the door, to give himself some distance and some space to reel in his self-control, wondering all the while if he'd been imagining things or jumping to conclusions. He could feel Thorin like a tingle down his spine as he loomed up behind him.

"Shall we, Mr. Baggins? We don't want to keep everyone waiting."

Bilbo nodded, trying to work moisture back into his mouth so he could answer without squeaking or croaking.

"Yes. Don't want everything to get cold." he managed to answer with a reasonable facsimile of calm.
Interlude - The White Council, Rohan and Gondor

Chapter Summary

A quick peek on what was going on elsewhere while our heroes were trapped in Mordor.

The rest of the white council waited patiently as Lady Galadriel of Lothlorien cast her mind out into the world.

Events at Dol Guldur had caught all of them by surprise. Now that they were rested and healed, they all were curious to see the state of the world, and find out what had become of the forces they had sent northward to the Woodland Realm. The wizards and elf lords all listened attentively when she finally stirred.

"King Thranduil of the Woodland Realm is dead."

Celeborn gasped, Elrond lowered his head in sorrow, as did the wizards. After a long moment of silence in respect for his passing, Elrond glanced at his mother in law with a question on his face.

"The boys are fine, as is King Legolas."

"What happened?"

"I would think it was obvious. Your dwarves happened. Did I not say waking the dragon was folly?"

"It cannot have been them. They needed the light of Durin's Day, which has yet to pass, to reveal the secret door that would allow them entrance to the mountain. Given the short amount of time that has passed since I left them, they would have been at best only part of the way through the forest when Smaug destroyed Dol Guldur."

"It was not they who stirred the dragon's wrath. It was an army sent against Erebor that awoke him."

"Who's army?"

"It was the forces of Azog the Defiler, at the behest of Sauron. Elladan and Elrohir say that there were Gundabad war-bats in the thousands providing cover from the sun, and that the forces of orcs, goblins, wargs, trolls and other fell beasts covered the desolation like a surging ocean that broke upon Erebor and woke the beast within."

"So… Smaug did not come to rescue Sauron…"

"He came to punish him for trying to take his mountain from him."

"The ring is in Erebor?" Saruman mused. "It must be. What other reason would the enemy have to stir the beast in its lair?"

"It would certainly explain Azog's single-minded obsession with the line of Durin."
"It would make sense. We know Isildur was last seen fleeing the Gladden Fields. Moria lies not too far distant from the site of the battlefield. Perhaps he attempted to get help from the dwarves? He perishes there and then Durin's Bane awakes in its depths and drives the dwarves from the mountains…"

"And the ring is carried to Erebor where it slowly begins to work its evil…"

"Until eventually King Thror is so greedy and gold-mad he calls a wyrm from the wastes to wreak havoc on the people of Erebor, Dale and the Greenwood."

"As I recall, the folk of the Greenwood suffered no harm that day. 'Twas only the men and dwarves that did so." Celeborn corrected.

"A fact which Thorin Oakenshield refuses to forget." Gandalf muttered irritably. "Speaking of which, did the woodland elves see any sign of the Company or the skinchanger that travels with them?"

"They have not, for I did think to ask after their fate. There has been much in the way of tragedy and confusion in the realm of late. Elladan reports that the Woodland elves had all retreated northward to escape the taint which has lain heavily on the forest for many centuries and slowly spread throughout. Though Smaug laid waste to most of the army that approached Erebor, there were those who escaped. The men of Esgaroth fled to Thranduil's realm to help fight the fires before they could engulf the whole of the forest in exchange for protection from the many fell beasts that have spread over the whole of the area. Orcs and spiders fleeing the dragon's wrath surrounded them and they fled in fear of their lives. I have told them of the destruction we faced in the southern reaches of the forest, and that Aiwendil has gone to rouse the Ents to help clear the forest of the remaining taint. Elrohir reports that King Thranduil had pulled most of his forces back to his fortress and had been sending out scouts enough to keep their immediate area clear of beasts. King Legolas, at the urging of his guard captain, has been sending patrols further afield in the forest and the surrounding areas in hopes of reclaiming the kingdom from the Shadow."

"Troubling news indeed, but hopeful." Celeborn sighed.

"What goes on elsewhere?" Saruman asked curiously.

"Well…"

"DRAGON!"

"Have the gods abandoned us?"

"DRAGON!"

"First that dark shadow that froze the marrow in our bones and now this?"

"FLEE FOR YOUR LIVES, PEOPLE OF ROHAN!"

Most of the warriors were directed to flee with the common people and guard them, their goods, and the horses. The King's Guards went to join their liege lord as the people fled Edoras and did their best to disappear into the surrounding grasslands.
There would be no such easy escape for them. Their king would not flee, and as his sworn men their duty was clear. They would guard the King of Rohan with their sword and body, even should it take their lives, down to the last man.

The prince, the King's son, was safe in Gondor. The royal line of Rohan would not be broken this day, even should they perish.

"To the treasury! Stand fast, warriors! We shall see to the wyrm's end this day. This gold is mine! He shall not have it! Not even so much as a single coin!"

The warriors' jaws clenched, but they made no protest, and did not move from their post. It had been hard these last years, watching their once-great king descend until he was a parody of himself. He was enormously fat, thrice the size of most of the warriors of Rohan at least. His greed for food and for gold was spoken of in whispers all across the land.

They knew not if it was some fell magic or what it might be, they knew only that there was little left of their king, the once-mighty warrior and honorable lord they had known. It mattered not. He was their king, and they would guard him. Death before dishonor.

The warriors tensed, and drew their weapons as the thunder of the dragon's wings sounded overhead.

"IT IS MINE! IT IS MINE, DO YOU HEAR ME, WYRM! YOU SHALL NOT HAVE IT! MY MEN WILL DIE TO THE LAST MAN TO SEE IT SO!"

The warriors gave a fearful shout and brandished their weapons as the roof was simply torn off and tossed aside. Three of the guardsmen screamed in agony as the roof, and the wall it crumbled as it was tossed, landed on them and crushed them beneath.

The remaining guards firmed up their courage and gave a mighty shout, brandishing their swords. More of the wall crumbled as the dragon slinked inside, tearing away more of the roof.

The warriors charged, but were knocked aside like toys, and even those that managed to hit the beast felt despair begin to well in their hearts. Their swords were dull as tree branches and made as little impact on the beast.

Two of the guards tried to urge the king to flee, but he was deaf to their cries and maddened by the sight of the beast gazing covetously at his gold.

"Sire! You must flee!"

"IT IS MINE! YOU SHALL NOT HAVE IT! YOU SHALL..."

The remaining guards and Fengel, king of Rohan were swept aside by the beast's mighty tail, smashed into the remaining crumbles of the wall and sent careening down the mountain on which the fortress rested. They were dead before they hit the ground.

Smaug paid no mind to the groans of the dying men, to the stones crumbling, or to the last guard, who was crawling on his belly, his legs shattered, but still trying to cut the beast down... beyond grimacing slightly went he stepped on the ill-fated warrior and squashed him.

"Ewww." the dragon grumbled, shaking off the blood and bits of man stuck to his paw.

He put the warriors out of his mind a moment later and focused back on the gold. It was a nice little
collection—nothing compared to his hoard, of course, but it would make a nice addition nonetheless.

He began swallowing it down in great gulps. It would mean he'd fly a bit slower, but no matter. It could collect some of his power while he finished the uppity dark lord that thought he could steal his kingdom from him, and would be ready to add to the hoard when he returned.

When the last scrap of gold was swallowed down, he leapt ponderously into the air and continued towards Mordor. Behind him, Edoras was naught but a crumbled ruin.

"Stinking orcs. Is there no end to them?" Ecthelion, son of the Lord Steward of Gondor, snarled.

He gave his sword a shake to dislodge some of the blood that coated it and pulled his horse around, only to find his friend Thengel sitting still upon his own horse and staring towards Rohan with a pensive frown upon his face.

"Thengel, my friend, this is not the time for daydreaming! There are still orcs aplenty to be dealt with!"

"My apologies, friend. I was seized with a sudden, strange foreboding…"

"Hardly a surprise, when the very bowels of dread Mordor are spilling their contents into our streets! Whatever fancies have overtaken you, set them aside. To battle!"

"To battle!" the rest of the men in their squad echoed.

Thengel spared one last glance to the northwest, where the home of his birth if not of his heart lay. It was a strange thing, to be thinking of Rohan now. He had lived more of his life in Gondor than in the rolling plains of his youth. He had been a citizen of Gondor since his father had begun falling into greed and madness. Their estrangement had been a bitter one, and it had remained unresolved all the years since.

As he had done all the years since leaving, he put the land of his birth aside once more to focus on defending his adopted country from the forces of the Shadow. He, Ecthelion and their squadron were patrolling the edges of Osgiliath. It had fallen to enemy forces years prior and now was a perfect hiding place for orcs when they crept out of Mordor to do their mischief. It was their job to pick off the stragglers that got through the front lines.

"The beasts have gotten bold of late. Their raids seem too frequent for my piece of mind."

"Aye. Every time we turn around lately there seem to be more of them."

"And in greater numbers each time. Cair Andros has had to have reinforcements sent, the raids were so fierce."

"I had heard that. I'd also heard the beasts are kidnapping dwarves."

"So I too have heard. A dozen of the buggers just a few weeks ago. The garrison commander thinks they'd been grabbed and managed to win free. They were hiding in the foothills. They came to help when his patrol was nearly overrun, and got recaptured for their trouble."

"A few less dwarves in the world is no great loss… though they are clever things when it comes to
"That was his thought as well. He worries what it means that they may be stocking their prisons with dwarves to make weapons for them. It speaks of larger plans."

A horn sounding in the distance, which was soon picked up by those closer by drew the squad’s attention.

"They're sounding a retreat? Why? We have them on the run! We should be pressing our advantage!"

"Hush. They're shouting something…"

"Dragon!"

"Did they say…!"

"Surely not!"

"None of the great wyrms has been seen in decades at least!"

The cry was repeated again as word spread through Gondor's forces.

"DRAGON!"

The squad exchanged a grim look and wheeled their horses around to get clear of the city so they could see if the reports were true. They had just cleared the city limits when a great gout of flame shot down from the sky and the screams of men and orcs alike filled the air.

"By Eru!"

"RETREAT! DRAGON!"

The men’s blood ran cold as the dragon laughed and shot down another gout of flame, taking out another squadron and the orcs they'd been battling.

"It's leaving!"

"It's headed towards Mordor!"

"We need a windlance! It's the only chance we stand against the beast!"

"RETREAT! RETREAT!"

The horns sounded and what was left of the fighting forces turned their horses to hurry back to the dubious safety of Minas Tirith. They crossed but half the distance when the earth shook and a loud explosion sounded behind them. The horses whinnied in fright and it was all they could do to stay seated.

"Mount Doom has erupted!"

"LOOK!"

They could just see in the distance Sauron's fortress, Barad Dûr collapsing in on itself. Mount Doom
had indeed erupted as well. They could see lava spewing out of it, along with great gouts of smoke and lightning.

"Did the dragon do that?"

"I don't know."

"What's going on?"

"LOOK! There's something up there with the dragon!"

"TWO dragons?! This is a catastrophe!"

The dragon suddenly seized up and then began to fall in a graceful spiral down towards the ground.

"What is going on in there?"

"I don't know…but I think you might want to call for reinforcements…"

"Why…" Ecthelion trailed off in horror.

There were orcs pouring out of the mountains, all of them trying to escape the destruction within.

"SOUND THE HORNS! WE NEED REINFORCEMENTS! FORM UP MEN! NOW IS THE HOUR OF OUR FATE!"

"FOR GONDOR!"

"TO BATTLE, MEN!"

"FOR GONDOR AND ROHAN!"

"FOR THE FREE PEOPLES OF THIS WORLD!"

"TO BATTLE!"

Back in Lothlorien, the White Council, minus Galadriel, stood abruptly as the whole world shook.

"My Lady, what know you of this?"

Galadriel sat silent for many long moments, staring at the ring on her hand.

"It has been destroyed." she said, her voice shaking as though some great doom had laid its shadow upon her. "The One Ring has been destroyed. Sauron, the enemy, is no more."

She cast her mind outwards again, and shuddered deep within when she did not have to cross the bubble of her own power which had kept Lothlorien separate from the world all these many centuries. Change would come now to Lothlorien and she had no way to stop it. The ring had not come to her as she had envisioned.

She had no way to lift her exile. Valinor, and her daughter, were lost to her forever. With a tremendous act of will, she set aside her horror and her sorrow to look outwards once more.
"Orcs pour out of ruined Mordor like blood from a gushing wound. The beacons have been lit to call for aid. Rohan is in disarray, their king lies dead at the foot of the mountain. The first marshal rallies the men. They will answer, and fetch their new king forth from Gondor."

She cast her net wider and shuddered.

"Orcs, spiders and goblins flee southward and westward. The folk of the Greenwood are out in force, but some have eluded their search."

"We will send troops to patrol the area, and southward to bolster the men of Rohan. If they head southward to aid Gondor, they will have few men left to patrol their northern borders and their land may become overrun while their gaze lies elsewhere."

"I will send messengers to the Dunedain and double the patrols around Rivendell to let them know of the dangers heading their way."

As the rest of the White Council split up to rally troops, send messages or give aid, Galadriel stayed where she was, staring into the middle distance.

She looked down at her ring of power, Nenya-- forged by Celebrimbor with Sauron's arts, if not his power. For centuries it had aided her to keep Lothlorien safe and apart from the world, a haven for the unchanging elves in a changing world.

It had been both burden and boon--it had expanded her power beyond what she could muster alone, but it had also left her open to Sauron's mind, which she had resisted for all these years. She felt strangely light without the burden of the enemy's thoughts pressing against her. Nenya lay quiescent on her hand, silent and dead now that the enemy had been vanquished.

As she stared at the ring on her hand it occurred to her that, with her great power, she could forge new rings, made with her own power alone and reign anew as the queen she was meant to be. The idea took root and began to spread, filling her with new purpose.

A new ring of power, for herself alone.

She could expand Lothlorien's borders further.

The world would twist itself to obey her commands. The peoples of this world would love her and despair.

She could see it so clearly now: armies at her command, gathered at the foot of her high throne to worship her and sing her praises...

The vision of power was banished with a thought and she sat once more quietly to consider it.

She had changed, though slowly, in her time there. She had come to Arda centuries ago, against the will of the Valar, because she wanted to be a queen, conquer a kingdom, and be worshipped and loved above all others.

"The foolish thoughts of a foolish child. I have changed indeed if the follies of my youth no longer hold the same lure for me they once did. Alas, that I learned my lesson too late." she mused to herself quietly.
"I have seen too much of war, too much of loss, to wish to be the cause of such any longer. I did not truly understand what it was I wished for in those days. Even the mindless adoration of those too terrified of me to do otherwise has lost its shine."

She had once mistaken that for love, but she had learned better in the days since.

True love bore you up through hardship, recognized your faults as well as your finer qualities, and warmed you through long years of exile.

Galadriel's breath caught in wonder as she felt a gentle touch upon her soul, a blessing and forgiveness in one.

She trembled in relief and thankfulness. Her doom had been lifted. She could return once more to Valinor.

So overcome was she, she covered her face and wept.

"MY LADY!" Celeborn said in alarm. He hurried to her side and knelt beside her, gathering her close.

"What new calamity has fallen that has moved you to tears?"

"No calamity at all, my love. I have been forgiven and my doom lifted. I had not been forsaken at all."

"I am glad for you, beloved."

"You are not surprised." she realized.

"We are all of us the children of he our maker. He would not forsake us. If we lose our way, it is only because we have turned away and refuse to see what was there all along. We are loved."

"It is really just that simple for you."

"If you recall, beloved, it was you who said I was wise. Perhaps you should have listened to me long ago."

Galadriel's laughter was like the chime of silver bells, and brightened the hearts of all who heard it.

"Indeed, my love, perhaps I should have done just that."

As her mirth subsided, she studied the face, long beloved though not always appreciated as perhaps he should have been.

"Thank you."

"For what, my lady?"

"For loving me."

Celeborn pressed a gentle kiss to her palm.

"My lady. It was never a hardship."
We are the champions!... No, WE are.

Chapter Summary

The White Council travels south. Bilbo flies west, then east again. He also has interfering relatives.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, folks. Also, thank you so much, everyone who left comments! Each and every one made my day.

"Ugh, is there no end to the wretched beasts? It has been weeks, and yet our patrols are still finding groups of them lurking around our outposts, digging themselves in to Osgiliath, trying to get into Minas Tirith…” Ecthelion said with feeling.

"Hopefully the clean-up will begin to go faster now that the men of Rohan have finally arrived." Thengel tried to comfort him.

"Just in time too. We've been hard pressed these many days. If I didn't know better, I'd say stinking Mordor was just creating more of the filth on command, just to trouble us."

"It would not surprise me to learn it was so. It is a fell place, full of darkness. Who knows what strange magic lies upon it still."

"Come, my friend. It has been a long patrol. There should be a few flagons of wine with our names on it."

As the two friends made their way to the upper reaches of the White City, they saw the weary faces of the citizens all around them, most moving aside and nodding respectfully as they passed. A messenger intercepted them as they reached the palace.

"My Lord Ecthelion, your Lord father bids you join him in the audience chamber."

"Ah, I guess our wine will have to wait." Thengel sighed.

"Nay, my Lord, the Lord Steward has respectfully requested your presence as well."

"I hope whatever it is, it is not more bad news. We've quite enough going on already, I think." Ecthelion huffed as they headed inside.

They found Turgon, Lord Steward of Gondor in the audience chamber, seated in his chair of office below the dais upon which sat the throne of the king, empty now for many generations. There were several notable personages gathered there with him, which they noted as they crossed the room to join them. There were a trio of elves, two wizards and, unless he had long forgotten the insignias of Rohan, the First March Warden of Rohan and his two lieutenants. Thengel froze in foreboding as the men of Rohan went to one knee at his approach.
"I regret to inform you, Sire, Fengel-King perished at the hands of the dragon Smaug some weeks ago. The king is dead. Long live the king."

"Long live the king."

Thengel lowered his head in sorrow. His feud with his father had never been resolved, and now it never would be. For all that they had parted in enmity, he was his father still and he would mourn him—the man he once had been and never had a chance to become again. He also took a moment to mourn the loss of his adopted country. He had been gone from the rolling plains of Rohan for long enough that the country no longer spoke to him of home. He did not even speak their barbarian tongue—he and his family spoke the more civilized tongue of Sindarin, and Westron to communicate with their neighbors. He pulled himself together and gestured to the March Warden and his men.

"Rise men of Rohan. How fares the kingdom?"

"Not well, Sire. I brought the bulk of the men south to answer Gondor's call for aid, but I left a fifth behind to patrol the grasslands and the borders to catch anything that might slip through. Our security should be fine, but I'm afraid Edoras was destroyed in the dragon's attack, and the beast made off with the country's treasury."

It took an act of will for Thengel not to slump in despair. Bad enough to get dragged back to his homeland against his own desire, but now he finds he was king of a bankrupt kingdom, and there wouldn't even be a residence waiting for him when he arrived.

"In that matter at least, we can be of some help." the white wizard Saruman spoke up. "The dragon Smaug swallowed the treasury before heading to Mordor to face Sauron. The beast lies slain on the plains of Mordor. The treasury at least can be recovered. I'm afraid you'll have to rebuild your fortress on your own."

"As well have it lie on the moon!" Thengel laughed bitterly. "It has been weeks, and still the flow of orcs from out of Mordor remains unchecked."

"It will take some doing, I'll admit, but the pestilence of the dark kingdom needs to be cleansed regardless."

"The wizard speaks truly. If we would end this threat we must cleanse the filth from the source if at all possible." Turgon said with a sigh. "But such are concerns for the morning, when we are not wearied from a day of battle. And you, our guests have traveled long and far, I should not wonder."

"If it be not impertinent, my lords and lady, what brings you to the kingdom of Gondor in this hour? Have you come to bring aid to our beleaguered forces?" Echthelion asked curiously.

"Indeed, we have come to offer what aid we may, but mostly we came to bring glad tidings."

"Good news would be well appreciated indeed."

"Verily it would, my lady. What news is this that will lift our hearts in these troubled times?"

"Glad tidings indeed. Though I doubt not your forces that even now battle the forces of the shadow at your gates realize it, the reach of the shadow has been greatly curtailed these many weeks, for Sauron, the enemy has been vanquished."

"Can it be true?"

"Indeed, it is." Gandalf sighed, as a wry smile touched his lips. "For the One Ring, the cursed band
of gold that corrupted Isildur and tied the enemy to this world was found some weeks ago in a goblin cave of all places. In a truly astonishing turn of events, those that found it abandoned the quest they were on to venture forth and see it destroyed."

"Who were these mighty heroes who enacted such a miraculous feat?"

"The Company of Thorin Oakenshield."

"Who is this man? One would think the name of such a warrior would have resounded across all the known world and be known to all of us here."

"Thorin Oakenshield, son of Thrain, son of Thror. King under the mountain. He and his company had set out several months prior to reclaim Erebor from the dragon Smaug, the greatest calamity of the age. Thirteen doughty dwarves of the line of Durin, and a hobbit of the Shire."

"Are you telling me dwarves accomplished a feat that both men and elves failed at?"

"What on Arda is a hobbit?"

"I believe, March Warden, that your people would know them as holbytla. Long since, by the reckoning of men, they left their homes in the Anduin Valley and traveled west, where they became subjects of the Kingdom of Arnor."

"Holbytla? I had thought it but a story. Tiny people who lived in Burrows, smaller than dwarves, and with pointed ears like the elves. No such creature has been seen by any of our people in living memory. It was widely believed to be a fanciful tale for small children."

"They are quite real. They are a gentle folk, and do not in the normal course of things leave their homeland. I found the one exception. Bilbo Baggins of the Shire, contracted to be the burglar of the company. Rather than rob a dragon in his lair, as was the duty he was hired for, he instead found the One Ring and carried it forth."

"A tiny creature of folklore and a band of stunted half-men with an insatiable greed and hunger for gold were the architects of the enemy's destruction? Could it be?"

"I cannot help but remember a conversation held some weeks ago about a band of dwarves discovered during what should have been a routine patrol. Could this have been the company of which you speak?"

"Oh? Part of why were are here is to try to discover the fate of the company and some knowledge of their movements after they and I parted ways some time ago."

Turgon related all he'd been told of the night the patrol had encountered the dwarves.

"The leader had a blue glowing sword, and another, a child too young to have a beard was wielding a similarly glowing dagger like a sword, you say? That was indeed the Company I seek. Thorin Oakenshield wields the sword Orcrist, gifted to him by Lord Elrond when he found it in a troll hoard. The other your men saw was not a child dwarf, but the hobbit of which I spoke. He found an ancient dagger in the same hoard. But captured, you say? And yet they managed to both win free and make it to Mount Doom even so. Remarkable."

"I see the shape of it now. The great deeds they accomplished were only due to the intervention of the men of Gondor. When we feared the orc scum were kidnapping dwarves to make armaments for them we stepped up our patrols and reinforced the outposts. The orcs took exception to this and came upon us in great numbers. We were in the midst of battle when the volcano exploded."
"Ah, a relief. I half feared the world had gone topsy-turvy and out of its natural order and alignment!"

"They only succeeded because of us."

"I would say rather that it is due to the elves that they succeeded. The Company of Thorin Oakenshield guested at Imladris for several days. While there they were educated on the doings of the enemy and the nature of the ring. It is due to our stewardship as keepers of history that they knew what they found and thus decided to venture forth and destroy it. It is also due to the forces of Imladris, Lothlorien and the Greenwood that the men of Rohan and Gondor were not overrun long since, when the remnants of the armies that escaped the wrath and ruin of Smaug began fleeing southward."

"Or perhaps it would better be said that each race did its own part in its way and contributed overall to the victory we now all celebrate." Celeborn interjected, his voice mild.

"Yes, indeed. A day of victory for all free peoples of Arda, all of whom were necessary and heroic in their turn… which of course includes the dwarves and hobbit, whom, I might remind you, chose to destroy the ring over regaining their lost homeland, with no guarantee of victory and no way of knowing if the kingdom of Erebor would be lost to them forever because of their choice. The love of gold and gems was woven into the very fabric of their beings at their making. As well scorn a bird for flying as a dwarf for their love of all things that gleam and shine! And yet…when given a choice to do so, they chose the fate of the world over their gold. The hobbit as well! They're a gentle people, far too small for the big wide world, and yet he too bravely set off into the very heart of Mordor. I would not see their contributions lost in everyone's hurry to claim some portion of the glory for themselves." Gandalf chided irritably. "But let us continue. Know you what became of the Company afterwards?"

"We have had no word of any dwarves since then."

"There was something strange though. There was something else in the air when the dragon arrived to Mount Doom. It sparkled in the sun much as the dragon did, and at first we were afeared it was a second dragon, come to lay waste to Gondor. They met briefly in the air and then Smaug was vanquished. We know not what became of the second thing."

"Could the enemy have had a flying ship all this time?"

"There were a few that disappeared that none could find again. If it was, it certainly explains how they were able to cross the plains of Mordor unmolested and see to the dragon's end with such ease, though I find myself astonished any of them spoke enough of the ancient tongue to operate it."

"Indeed. A mystery I look forward to discovering answers to myself. For now, let us plan for our assault on Mordor. Let us cleanse it of fell beasts that dwell in the shadow once and for all, and see what we can learn from the ruins of Sauron's ambitions."

"Is it safe? It is just that…well, the volcano is still erupting, and the orcs continue to flee because, it seems evident, conditions beyond the mountains are too perilous even for the likes of them. I would not waste the lives of good men and horses on a folly."

"Well, it cannot continue indefinitely…and of course, winter fast approaches. Let us make plans so we will be ready to move once Mount Doom ceases its tantrum."

"A flying ship you say? An elven flying ship from the old stories? Well, damn those dwarves for making off with such a prize, when we of Gondor have stood sentinel against the enemy for
generations! If such a prize should be in any hands but yours, my lords and lady, it should be with us!"

"They vanquished the dark lord and a dragon before it had a chance to wreak havoc upon Gondor as it did Rohan, my lord. I would say they've earned it." Galadriel said quietly.

"There is also the fact that it may be a reward of sorts for choosing the safety of the world over their own concerns. They needed to reach the mountain by Durin's Day, a feat that would have been impossible for them without the aid of such a ship as that." Gandalf huffed.

"There is also the small matter of the dragon devastating the area around the Lonely Mountain a second time, and laying waste to large swaths of the Greenwood. I daresay they will need the aid of the ship to bring in enough food to last not only themselves but the men of Esgaroth as well. It would be a poor thanks indeed were they to starve after committing such valorous deeds for the good of us all." Celeborn added.

"I do not mean to sound churlish, nor to deny them a boon, but I have dozens of good men dead from all this business, and a lengthy campaign into Mordor will stretch the city's resources thin. We battle for honor, of course, and to rid the world of evil, but such heroic notions aside, the fact is that battles cost money. A flying ship would have been a nice recompense."

"If you are so hungry for gold, my lord, I will remind you that the dragon still lies within the bounds of Mordor. For as long as Smaug occupied Erebor, I've no doubt a fair portion of its treasury lies embedded in the beast's scales. You shall have to content yourself with that."

"Alright, the ballista is fully stocked, Kili has plenty of arrows…"

"I really think an entire barrel full is going overboard…"

"You have a helmet to protect your head"

"Which I'm not going to wear as I can barely see out of it! I need to steer the ship! Plus it's heavy!"

"We've found a bunch of stones for you to throw should he run out of arrows…"

"For goodness sake, Thorin, are you even listening to me! We'll be perfectly safe as we're going to be up in the air where no one can reach us!"

"Not when you stop to pick up the road crews, you won't be! Where is your shield? You should take that as well…"

Bilbo bristled when he realized he wasn't being listened to, and then turned his glare on the boys who were doubled over and laughing silently to themselves so their uncle wouldn't catch them. It just made them laugh harder.

Gloin stepped in, patting Thorin on the arm to get him to stop fretting.

"You were gonna swing by and see Beorn, correct? That chest o' gold from the troll hoard is in there for him, to thank him for his hospitality and the use of his boat. Saved us a good bit o' time, that. We'd not have made it in time, else."

"Will he even want gold? He said he couldn't be bothered to trade with men these days."
"He might change his mind. If he does, he'll have a chest o' gold to do it with."

"I was just going to bake him a pie."

"There's also a pile of elvish stuff from the treasury--armor that doesn't fit any of us, mostly, to give to Elrond."

"Finally decided to listen to me, did you?" Bilbo said archly.

"Your points were well taken." Thorin grunted.

He'd been stubborn about sending any thank yous to them until he'd pointed out that holding Thranduil's action against him would be much as if he'd been cheated by a Blue Mountains dwarf and then marched off to the Iron Hills to kick in someone's door and ruin their house as payback. He had finally conceded that perhaps he had a point... A very small one, but a point.

"We dinna want the ship getting stolen, so just swing overhead and dump it in the courtyard or something."

Bilbo peeked inside and saw a loose pile of armor and assorted other elvish stuff stacked within.

"You do realize if we just shove that pile out the door, it will likely spread out as it falls to the ground, and will probably end up walloping a few elves in the head? That's hardly going to make up for being bad guests before. If anything, it might end up setting off a war between your people."

Bilbo huffed at all of them. "Find something to bundle it up! Put a bow on it and a note, so they'll at least know why we're attacking their settlement with armor!"

"Do they understand..."

"Lord Elrond read your map, I'm sure he can manage. If you like I can write a separate greeting in Sindarin."

"There's some gold so you can purchase more food."

"Lord grumpypants..."

"His name is Goric Firebrand" Thorin sighed, already knowing it was a lost cause.

"Like I said, Lord Grumpypants agreed to have more fresh meat ready to go when we swing by there. He's likely going to be expecting all of them to be picked up as well, but I'm afraid we just won't have room with all the road crews. He'll have to wait for another time."

"That will indeed be welcome... Though I don't know why you insist on feuding with him." Balin said with some asperity.

"He's rude." Bilbo sniffed. "And as they're all dwarf lords, one would think it was rather their job to go with the caravan to help keep order, instead they dumped the whole responsibility on Dis while demanding special treatment! They can wait till I'm good and ready to transport them... say in a few more weeks when the caravan gets here."

"You do yourself no favors, Mr. Baggins in making enemies of them, they're powerful dwarves and..."

"Perhaps we should stock more arrows..."

"Thorin, honestly! We'll be fine." Bilbo huffed, tuning out Balin's lecture.
"There ya go. Elvish stuff's all wrapped up with a pretty ribbon."

"I wrote up a short letter explaining what it is and what it's for." Ori added.

"That should be everything then. We'd best get going. I want to reach the Blue Mountains before the sun travels that far. It's dreadful trying to see with it shining in your eyes the whole way."

Thorin paled as he began imagining the ship crashing into a mountain they couldn't see because they were blinded by the sun. Balin and Dwalin looked at him, looked at each other and nodded, each grabbing one of his arms to drag him away.

"Have a good trip! See you later!"

"Try not to crash!"

"Try to avoid any thunder battles!"

"Bye now!"

"Aren't we going to Beorn's?"

"I thought we'd stop by to see him on the way back. I need more pumpkins before I can bake his pie. I hope the Blue Mountains settlement has a large pie tin. I'd do it at Bag End, but I fear any pie I make there would barely be a bite for such a large person."

"If we don't have one, I'm sure someone could make one easy enough."

"That's true, isn't it? Dwarves certainly are handy to have around… even if you're all occasionally insane. Honestly! Your uncle is a bigger mother hen than Dori, though I never would have thought so before."

"He's like that with people he cares about."

"I suppose it's what will make him a good king, but really! Well, we're past the mountains. Help me look for Rivendell."

"Just up there is the pass we used… so it should be just a bit further in."

"Oh, wait! I think that's it there… Do try not to hit any elves when you drop that bundle off."

"I'll do my best." Kili laughed.

"Alright get ready…I'll try to swoop in low so it doesn't have as far to go. Meldo!"

The singing that seemed to go on in Rivendell day or night came to an abrupt halt as a silvery flying ship swooped down low overhead and a large clanking bundle was dropped down into their midst by a grinning dwarf, who waved to them before ducking back inside. The bundle made a godawful racket as it landed and split open, sending first age armor and helmets skittering all across the courtyard. Lindir, steward of Rivendell, whose nerves had never quite recovered from the dwarves' last visit, had to be carried off for a nice lie-down. Estel, who had spotted the nice little man who had visited before piloting the ship, sighed in disappointment when he didn't stop to come visit and play with him. He scurried down out of the tree he'd been in and went to inspect the armor, and found a note. Glorfindel, renowned Balrog-slayer, joined him.
Estel held the note up to him, frowning.
"I can't read it. The writing is all funny."
"Let me take a look. I might be able to."
He scanned the note briefly and snorted.
"What does it say?"
"It says Sorry for breaking your furniture before. The company of Thorin Oakenshield."
Much to the dismay of the elves of Rivendell, Estel's joyous laughter soon filled the courtyard.
"I like dwarves" he decided. "They're funny."

"Goodness. Everyone's really been doing their part, haven't they? I doubt the great eastern road has been in such good condition outside the Shire since Arnor fell."
"I still can't believe the elves and those ranger fellows agreed to just fix such big parts of it."
"Though it pains me to say it...it was likely so the caravan wouldn't linger for too long. The Company left quite an impression on Rivendell, and sadly I doubt it was even mostly positive."
"We weren't that bad!"
"I hate to say it, but you really were. Some worse than others, but none of you were exactly what I'd call gracious guests."
"Well, they're elves!"
"That's not a good enough reason. If it's a particular elf that's done you wrong, I could maybe see being a bit cool to them, but branding an entire race for the actions of one goes too far."

Bilbo dropped the conversation once he'd said his piece and concentrated on landing the ship without endangering any hobbits.
"That's not your house. Blimey, that's a pretty big hobbity-hole, isn't it?"
"No, it's not my home. That, my boy, is Buckland Hall. Thus far I've been sticking to the Shire proper when coming this way for food runs, but the last time I did I got an earful from my aunt Donamira about not stopping in to visit aunt Mirabella and my uncle and cousins. And anyway, with all the trips I've made for large food orders in the Shire, the folks there are starting to dread the sight of me, I think. We'll do this last food run here, stock up on whatever meat the Blue Mountains has for us and hope it's all enough to last us through winter...especially once the caravans get there."
"I don't think you need to worry, Bilbo. I've seen the pantries everywhere. We're stuffed to the brim. Not only that, but now that the men have come back we can get fish to stretch out our supplies through winter, and if worse comes to worse we can try flying further afield for more food."
"I suppose you're right. I do hope enough hobbits volunteer in spring to tend the land to get crops planted...and that they can actually do enough that they'll grow. Gathering food enough to feed an entire mountain is a full-time job, one I don't relish having to continue indefinitely. Go keep watch and give me a signal once it's clear. I don't want to squash any fauntlings when I open the door."
Kili hurried to the upper deck and called an "all clear" a few minutes later. As Bilbo had expected, there was a whole squirming tribe of curious children patting the ship and peering at it, and they rushed him, all excitement when he climbed out.

"Cousin Bilbo!"

"Hello, Rorimac… Saradas, Amaranth.. Ah, and there's the rest of you! Dodinas, Dinodas, Asphodel, and of course Primula. Are your parents in?"

"Right here, Bilbo. It's about time. We were beginning to think you didn't like us!" his aunt, Mirabella Brandybuck, mistress of Buckland hall, chided. "Well, come on. I'm sure we can round up a small snack, while you tell us what all you've been up to lately."

"I'm sure aunt Dona…"

"I'd like to hear it from you." she interjected smoothly. "Oh, and who is this fellow? Is there a flower crown in your future?" she asked slyly, only to frown when Bilbo simply looked at her like she was insane. "Aunt Mirabella, may I present Prince Kili of Erebor. Kili, my aunt Mira, my mother's youngest sister."

"Hello Mrs. Bilbo's auntie. Do you have any pumpkin pie?"

"Kili! Honestly!" Bilbo huffed, chivvying him ahead of him.

The children, of course, gathered around and began all asking questions at once and poking at Kili's furry cloak and his bow and hanging off his arms. He was obviously enchanted and began hamming it up for their entertainment. Mirabella absentely revised the dwarf's age backwards a good many years. He was a tween, or newly of age, but no older, and Bilbo treated him much the way he did his young cousins. So, this wasn't the "Thorin" Dona wanted more information on. He'd been remarkably closed mouthed and flustered once the extended family started showing especial interest in him. No matter. She had just the perfect tool to crack a recalcitrant nephew.

"Primula, love, come here a moment."

"Yes, mummy?"

"I have a mission for you."

Primula clapped happily and listened closely to her mother's instructions.

"Can you remember all that?"

"Don't worry, mummy. I'll get cousin Bilbo to spill his guts in no time. He can't resist me." she cackled gaily.

By the time Bilbo and Kili left two hours later, he was completely exhausted. He was fond of his cousins, but good heavens! Could they talk! Kili, who had enjoyed their visit immensely was handing out hugs to all the kids and clutching the bundle of goodies they'd gotten for the trip. He plastered on a smile and waved as they took off, almost eager to get to the Blue Mountains and deal with Lord Grumpypants.

"So? Mirabella asked curiously as the ship vanished into the distance. Learn anything useful?"
Primula and her sisters all giggled. "Oh, lots mummy! Thorin has black and hair and blue eyes the color of bellflowers in spring! He's very brave and honorable too. He plays the harp and sounds like an angel when he sings. He likes blackberry tarts and honeycakes and doesn't eat enough green vegetables, though cousin Bilbo has been sneaking them into dinner when he's not looking. What else? Oh! He's Mr. Kili's uncle and the nice dwarf lady with that big caravan was his sister! He's the king of all the dwarves."

"Cousin Bilbo's ears get red when he talks about him!" Amaranth giggled.

"Well done, girls." Mirabella praised. The girls all beamed at her and ran off to play.

"Halfling."
"Lord Grum…Goric. Lord Goric! It's so lovely to see your smiling face again."

"What is this I'm told?! There's to be another delay?!"

"So sorry. King Thorin's orders. The Great Eastern Road is still in terrible condition in many places. I've been commanded to see that the road crews are moved along to the next impassable section. The caravan is growing closer every day. We don't want the entire population…minus your good selves…to be stranded in wild country with winter coming on. There are still marauding bands of orcs and trolls all over the area."

"BAH! I cannot understand why the king didn't send you packing the moment your contract was fulfilled! You're completely useless!"

"Um…"

"Ah, Freya! You didn't have to bring it. I would have come by to fetch it before we left!"

Goric snarled at the young dwarrow-dam from the kitchens and stomped off, his knee length beard bristling as he did so.

"Bye!" Bilbo called out cheerfully to the angry dwarf lord "Lord Grumpypants" he added under his breath.

The dwarrow-dam snickered and then panicked, looking around to make sure he hadn't heard her. Bilbo winked at her and then scratched his head as he tried to figure how they were going to get the very large pie on the ship. It had been lucky the kitchens here had a super-sized pie tin meant for feasts on hand.

Freya suddenly blushed and got all bashful as Kili came strutting up--something he noted and seemed utterly delighted by. Bilbo was going to have to remember to pinch him again and deflate his ego a bit. Between this and his little cousins hanging on his every word earlier, the prince was strutting as bad as that blowhard Lord Grumpypants was. It was becoming a full time job to keep his head from swelling; the younger dwarves, and honestly some of the older ones as well, were all completely in awe of "Kili Dragonslayer"

"Well, come along, my boy. We need to get this loaded, grab the work crews and transport them to the other side of the forest and visit Beorn. I'd like to get home some time tonight!"

He wasn't sure at first why Kili was smiling at him in such unabashed delight.

"Bilbo! You just called Erebor home!"
"Oh! Ah…well, yes, I suppose I did. Force of habit."

"You like us!" Kili sing-songed before glomping him and nuzzling his head like an overgrown kitty-cat.

"Well, honestly! If you didn't already know that, I don't know where you've been these past several months! Oh, would you stop that!"

Kili stepped back, grinned at him once more, before hefting the rather large pie. "Come on, Bilbo! We need to hurry home!"

Once they traveled back across the Misty Mountains, they began their search for the road crew. When they finally found them, they realized they'd gotten there just in time.

"Oi! That's a troll down there!"

"What? Where?"

"Coming out of the trees there! Good thing uncle made all those black arrows? Swing her back around so I can get a good shot!"

Bilbo rose up a bit higher in the air, just in case, and swung back around. The road crew, who had been gathered together in a defensive knot and preparing to sell their lives dearly, cheered loudly when a black arrow took the troll right in the head and he toppled like a felled tree.

"Hello, boys." Bilbo greeted them as they tromped inside. "I see you've gotten everything on this side done. That's good. The caravan is at the mountains almost. We saw them in the distance as we were heading back."

"Ach, we need to get a move on then and get the rest of it finished so they're not stranded with the bloody elves waiting on us!"

"They do still have to come over the low pass with all the wagons and traverse the forest. That will take time, even under the princess' skilled leadership."

"We still gotta swing 'round that bloody great lake. Most of the road there is completely gone."

"Do you think you'll have enough time? If you need more help I can tell them to divert some of the stoneworkers to start from Erebor and meet you halfway."

"There's enough of us that we should be fine. We'll let you know the next time you drop off supplies if that changes."

"Oh, that reminds me. That pile over there is yours."

"Much obliged."

"You're quite welcome, all of you." Bilbo replied with a smile. "Alright everyone, next stop is Beorn's place, but we'll just stop by long enough to say hello and drop off a few things. After that it will be just a short hop to the other side of the forest."

"Beorn… he's the fellow that's a bear, right?"
"Yes, that's him. He's quite large and rather fearsome looking, but he's a good person and helped us out a lot. We'd never have made it to Mordor before Sauron did without his help."

"Yeah, we just want to make sure he's okay. The dragon came through on a rampage and we don't know if he'd gotten home by then."

"Indeed, it would be a poor repayment if the poor man lost everything while helping us."

The shadows were growing long as the ship swung past the Carrock and towards Beorn's house.

"Holy… Look at all the orcs!"

"Is that giant bear that fellow we're going to see?"

"Yes, that's him. You can see his house in the distance there. Oh, I do hope all his animal friends are alright!"

"Come on, everyone! Let's help him! Bilbo, swing it around just behind those orcs and open the door!"

"What are you planning?"

"Me? I'm going to be manning the ballista!"

"Then why do we need the door…"

"Just do it!"

"Oh, bother!... Meldo!"

"BARAK KHAZAD!"

"DU BEKAR!"

"AAAAAHHHHHH!"

Down below, the battle between bear and orcs came to a sudden, screeching halt as enraged dwarves began raining from the sky and beheading orcs on their way down. Those that didn't fall to axes on the first pass were either soon cut off at the knees or run through with a black arrow. Beorn, after freezing initially, was soon back to shredding whatever orcs were left once he realized it was friends raining down from above and not more enemies. The orcs never stood a chance.

"Well, thanks for the help, friends…though I can't help but notice you're not the same dwarves as before! Oh…wait, you are. I recognize you. Little bunny! Ah, you've been eating well, I see. Your belly is nice and round! That's good. Well, come along. You can tell me what you've been up to since I saw you last!"

The dwarves traded a bemused glance as their pilot was swooped up and put on the large man's shoulder and carried off without so much as a by-your-leave.

Kili and Bilbo took turns telling Beorn about all their adventures since he'd left them on the side of the river weeks prior while he and his animal friends plied everyone with mead and honey cakes. He was rather bemused by the chest of gold they brought him, and quite thankful for the pie Bilbo made him. When they were finished, Beorn told his own tale.
"Well, you did see a lot of trouble, didn't you? I'm glad to hear that dragon is dead. He set a lot of the forest on fire, and I've been getting overrun with giant spiders and orcs. I don't know where they're all coming from if the dragon and that volcano of yours killed as many as you say…"

"They probably are ones that escaped the dragon. They likely fled south to get away, only to discover the Ents tearing through southern Mirkwood. They pulled the rivers off course to put out the fires, and they've been slaughtering orcs and spiders as they find them. They probably figured they'd have better luck up here, only to run into you."

"Well, that is good news. Maybe there'll be an end to them soon."

"One can only hope."

"We should fly a patrol before returning to Erebor, see if there's any more packs of orcs running around. If they're meeting up and forming larger groups, we should take them out before they form a large enough group to do real damage."

"Probably not a bad idea. I guess it's a good thing your uncle forced us to bring so many arrows."

"That reminds me. We should probably retrieve the black arrows I already used. Uncle will be mad if he has to make a bunch more… and with the way he was acting before we left, he might not let us leave again."

The rest of the Blue Mountains dwarves, after drinking their fill of mead, were all for it.

"Let's do it!"

"Yeah! Give them some dwarvish steel, right up their jacksies!"

"Aye, the only good orc is a dead'un!"

"BARAK KHAZAD!"

Beorn threw back his head and laughed, slapping his knee as he did so.

"I'm becoming rather fond of you dwarves! Stop by any time!"

Vrooooooooooom
"Right up his jacksie!"
"Take that, ya filthy bog-trotting scrotum sucker!"
"BARAK KHAZAD!"
"That makes ten for me! HA! You suckers need to step up yer games!"
"HAAAAAAA"

Tauriel, captain of the King's guard signaled her patrol to halt. They had been chasing a pack of orcs through the forest when they heard a terrible commotion just ahead. More wary now, they crept through the trees to the edge of the forest and peeked out, only to see dwarves raining down from the sky, while another dwarf cackled on the upper deck of a flying ship, raining arrows down on the hapless orcs they'd been chasing. Painted by all the colors of the setting sun, and backlit by the first emerging stars of the evening, he seemed something out of a hero tale of old. His smooth, silky hair ruffled gently in the breeze, and the faint scruff of a beard leant his features a certain ruggedness that was strangely appealing. Tauriel found herself creeping forward to see better, only to have the dwarf
spot her where she crouched, gaping at him. He grinned at her and winked, then nearly lost his balance as the ship turned around. He stumbled, wheeling his arms and caught himself on the railing, then tried to pass it off as though he'd meant to do it. Tauriel found herself grinning at his antics. The ship flew down along the river and the dwarves that had leapt down off it earlier, charged back on, still waving their axes and swords and shouting war cries, though their enemies lay dead behind them. What had for all of them in the Woodland Realm become a grim duty, seemed to these dwarves to be a fun outing. Tauriel climbed higher so she could watch the ship as it flew off. The dwarf archer was leaning against the back rails, looking for her. He smiled jauntily and waved as they vanished into the distance. Without quite meaning to, she found herself waving back, which prompted another jaunty grin. Tauriel was suddenly aware of the weight of her patrol's eyes on her.

"I suppose we can consider this sector clear now. We should report back." she ordered, all business once more.

Two of the elves lurked behind and let her and the others get a bit ahead of them.

"Should we tell the king?" one whispered.

"Ha ha ha. No. That is, I will not be getting in the middle of that. If you want to tell him, be my guest."

"We cannot just say nothing. It is fairly obvious how he feels about her. It will be the scandal of the age if she runs off with some great, hairy dwarf of all things!"

"I suppose something was bound to happen. King Thranduil told her outright he didn't want his son ending up with a lowly sylvan elf. I've no doubt she took his warning to heart. I doubt she would go against the king's command, especially with his passing."

"Lovely sentiment, that." the second groused. She, as evidenced by her red hair, was a sylvan elf as well. "Nice to know we were so highly thought of by our king."

The first elf gave an apologetic shrug. "Well...if she goes and runs off with a dwarf of all things, maybe he had a point. Should have expected something of the sort, now that I think on it. Wasn't it one of her ancestors that ran off West with a halfling?"

"And so what if she did? Those folk from Rivendell are half man, and no one bats an eye at them!"
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

The Woodland Realm receives an envoy. Sigrid is ladylike, and Tilda cannot have a bear.

"My king, an envoy from Erebor is on its way in."

"An Envoy? Very well. Bring them in and treat them as guests. I'll send for them later after they've refreshed themselves."

"Very good, my king."

It had been weeks since his father had fallen in battle. In that time, he'd managed to stop reflexively flinching whenever anyone addressed him by his new title. It had never once occurred to him that he might someday find himself in this position. His father was hale, he'd survived more dangerous foes in his youth. Legolas was himself still considered rather young for an elf—of age, certainly, but a youth for all that.

He thought he'd have centuries to help cleanse the forest, and when it was done, centuries to explore the world once he was no longer needed at home to help keep back the darkness. He'd been so certain of that future that now the sudden upset to his plans felt like a cage snapping fast around him and trapping him in a role he was not actually certain he even wanted. He would much rather have his father back.

He was blessedly alone for the moment. He decided abruptly that he needed air. He didn't feel like entertaining guests and the walls felt like they were closing in on him. He fled out onto the grounds and slipped out into the forest and took a deep breath to center himself once more. Here and there faint shafts of sunlight broke down through the canopy. It was still day, which meant he did not even have the distant light of the stars to comfort him.

He walked the edges of the 'safe parts' of his father's…that is, his realm…and tried to assess the differences. They were minute, but there were differences. Each week that passed, the darkness that had shrouded their woodland home became less dense and less oppressive.

The damage the forest had sustained was great, but he could feel it healing already, in spite of it. It was the only bright spot in the past several weeks, and they had paid a very high price for it. It was quieter now, with the men gone. While he was happy to have their home back to themselves again, he couldn't help but notice how much less lively it was without the sound of the children's laughter echoing through the trees.

He could hear the rough voices of the dwarves and the softer voices of their elven escorts up ahead, so he turned himself in the other direction so he would not encounter them. He lost himself amongst the trees for a while, and sang a song of mourning for his lost parent. When the shadows grew long he climbed high into the trees so he could gaze upon the stars.
"My king."

Legolas turned away from his contemplations with difficulty and found his friend and guard captain Tauriel crouched beside him.

"Yes?"

"My king, the dwarven envoy awaits your pleasure."

"I said I would send for them after they refreshed themselves. Leave me be."

"My king… Legolas… It has been three days since they arrived. If you should leave them waiting much longer it may be taken as a grave insult. As it stands the envoy has grown restless and has repeatedly stated their desire to return to their mountain."

"Why cannot everyone leave me be? I don't recall Ada having so many clamoring for his attention day and night."

"And he did not, because he withdrew both his presence and his care from the forest we dwell within and the world without. I know your heart still grieves you, my friend, but you must allow yourself to engage with the world once more. Do you wish to repeat your father's mistakes and lock yourself away in a prison of your own making as well?"

Legolas let out a weary sigh, but he allowed his friend to pull him to his feet and chivvy him along. It took them quite a while to travel back to the stronghold; he hadn't been aware quite how far he'd traveled. His people looked both relieved and irritated when he came back inside, though he did not apologize or try to explain his absence.

"Where are the dwarves now?"

"Likely on their way to dinner."

"Very well. Send them to me once they've eaten."

Legolas was sitting on the throne, bored and slightly uncomfortable. Did his father used to have cushions that he hid when he wasn't sitting on it? With as much time as he'd spent lounging up here, he would have thought it was the comfiest seat in the house…

"My king, the envoy from Erebor." Tauriel announced.

Legolas, who was still mostly lost in thought, jumped slightly at the sound of hobnailed boots clumping across the floor and the thud of a heavy chest hitting the floor. When he focused on the envoy, he found a rather young dwarf with fiery red hair and a modest beard in the same color, who was scowling at him rather impressively for one so young.

"Gimli, son of Gloin, at yer service." the dwarf huffed irritably. "Look, I get that yer da bought it and all, and yer sad, but would it have troubled ye so much ter give us five minutes o' yer time before ye wandered off to sing sad songs for three days?"

Legolas' lip wobbled for a moment, which made the irate dwarf deflate.

"Ach. Letting myself get carried away. Me ma is always scolding me about that. I come by it
honestly though--me da is the same way. I've been a mite irritated. I've never taken well to waiting. I was just shy of bein o' age when the quest left for Erebor, so the king wouldna let me come. I had to wait with everyone else for months for some word on whether they lived or died. I got to come ahead o' the crowd ter help with cleanup and all… This is the first important job I'd been given and I was just left waiting again. I shouldna ha' taken it out on ye, what with yer recent loss and all. I'll start over. Gimli, son of Gloin, at yer service, here as an envoy from his majesty, Thorin son o' Thrain, son o' Thror, king under th' mountain. The Kingdom of Erebor sends its condolences on the loss of yer father, and wishes ye speedy healing from yer grief."

"Somehow I find that hard to believe." Legolas said quietly.

"Ah! Dinna be accusing me o' bein' a liar now! The king did indeed send his condolences and furthermore they were quite sincere! He dinna like yer father, tis true--and believe me that's me being all diplomatic there-- but my king lost his grandfather, father and little brother on practically the same day and found himself, not even of age, on a bloody battlefield surrounded by thousands of his people and realizing he was now responsible for what was left. He is in fact quite sympathetic ter yer plight, as it's one he himself knows all too well." Gimli lectured, wagging a finger at Legolas in admonishment.

"That there" he continued, pointing at the chest "is some jewels that yer da shoulda gotten before Erebor fell, but we had a wee dragon problem, so we apologize for the delay. Finally, I was told to ask ye ter not be declaring war on any Varyags, Haradrim or others of their ilk if they show up in spring, as they're likely traders and not here ter declare war on the west…at least they'd better not be. But if they are, well, I'll be there front and center to send them packing!"

The dwarf was obviously imagining his awesome prowess in battle, because he put his hands on his hips after making his bold announcement, threw back his head and laughed long and loud, snorting every so often as he did so.

Tauriel kept a solicitous eye on the king throughout the interview. Legolas was staring at the dwarf with slightly bemused horror, but he was aware and present and engaged with the present moment in a way he just hadn't been since his father's sudden death. It relieved her beyond words to see it. She had half feared he would simply fade away, so wan and listless was he.

Gimli, son of Gloin. She would remember the name. Even she, his dear friend, had won no more than a few words from him at a time, and had held his attentions no longer than an instant at a time. If this Gimli could get such a reaction from her king on merest acquaintance, she would fetch him back again by force should Legolas grow despondent once more. The fact that she would have to enter the dwarf mountain to accomplish such a deed, and might espy a particular dwarf had no bearing on the matter whatsoever.

Bard the Bowman, formerly of Laketown, and now, apparently, king of Dale, wandered around the open floor of his new palace--and didn't just that beat all?--and tried not to feel overwhelmed.

"Da, stop pacing, would you? It's rather distracting." his eldest daughter, Sigrid, scolded gently. She and Tilda, his youngest, were poking at a pile of moldering cloth that they'd gotten from somewhere or other.

"Sorry. I'm just not sure what I'm supposed to be doing with myself these days. What are you doing, anyway?"

"Going through these tapestries to see if any of them are salvageable. We've a lot more room than we
used to… and our wee bit o' furniture doesn't exactly fill the place. Even those bits folks scrounged for us from the Master's place don't really fill it proper."

"I don't know why I let everyone bully me in here. What do I know of being a king?"

"With you at least everyone knows you'll care if they're struggling, or if they're hungry. That already puts you leagues ahead of the Master."

"You'll be a great king, da!" Tilda chirped "and I'm going to be a wonderful princess. Do I get a crown? Oh! And a pretty dress too!"

"Tilda… Thank you for your faith in me. The dress and crown will be rather difficult, considering we have no money—either individually or the town as a whole."

"Thieving, cowardly snake in the grass." Sigrid snarled quietly under her breath.

"Sigrid…"

"What? I'll not apologize for calling that rat a rat. He stole the town's treasury and the rest of us could rot for all he cared! And that after bullying the town with his thugs for years and squeezing half the townsfolk till they were all but destitute! I don't understand why you continue to defend him!"

"I'm not defending him. I'm just trying to keep that kind of talk to a minimum. Once everyone starts talking about the man they start getting riled up and then they start talking about a mob hopping on the nearest boat to go hunt him down. We have more important things to focus our attention on. Settling in and surviving the winter, for one."

"How bad is it?"

"Not as bad as it could be. Most folks were sensible enough to grab food when we fled. Between that and what the elves let us take with us we should manage for a while at least. Also, without the master here stopping everyone from fishing and keeping what they catch, we may actually be better off than we would have been otherwise. Still, there's been a lot of disruption in all our lives recently. A good portion of the harvest was lost because of the timing of things. We'll manage though, don't worry."

"We'd manage a good sight better if we had a bit of gold in hand. You're the king now. You should go tell those dwarves to give you some of the gold they're hoarding in that there mountain. We deserve some of it! It was us risked our very lives all these years, living in the shadow of the dragon and all!"

Bard had cringed the moment he'd heard the man's grating voice. Sigrid had stiffened and muttered something about needing to start on dinner. Tilda had scowled at the man in distaste and followed her.

Alfrid Lickspittle, former lackey of the master and currently a pain in his ass, scuttled into the room in his usual cringing manner. He'd been making a nuisance of himself since the master had shoved him off the boat of stolen gold so he could go a bit faster. He'd attached himself to Bard for protection, and had stuck even closer once Bard was declared king of the restored kingdom of Dale. Between Alfrid's unceasing attentions and the fact that he felt quite out of his depth with the whole king business, he found himself often longing for the simpler days when he was simply a poor fisher and Bowman with no worries beyond how he was going to feed his family for a few more days.

"You should do it you know." Alfrid continued. "It was us was here, not them dwarves. We should have that gold. Think about how grandly you could rule with a castle full of gold… and yer a good
man, right? Think of all the, uh… starving kiddies and whatnot."

Bard glowered at the man. "They wouldn't have been starving if not for you, the Master and the rest of your band of bullies."

"What was I to do? Twas the Master what done it! I was just trying to get by, same as anyone else!"

"When your means of getting by was to step on your friends and countrymen's necks, it isn't something to be proud of. As for the dwarves, they've already done quite a lot for all of us. The damage to the city was repaired, allowing us to move right in. We'll have thick stone walls between us and the snows as winter settles in. You could try being more grateful."

"I'd be grateful for a bit of gold."

"That's enough. If there's nothing else…"

"Hello the castle!"

"Hello? Is anyone within?"

Bard frowned and headed towards the doors. The voices weren't any he recognized. When he got halfway, he saw two dwarves peeking inside and brightening when they spotted them. One was short, solidly built, with white hair in elaborate braids. The second looked much younger, red-haired and harmless looking, with a thin, lanky build.

"Ah, King Bard? Dori at your service."

"Ori. At your service."

"We bring greetings from his majesty, Thorin, Son of Thrain, son of Thror, king under the mountain. His majesty would like to speak to you on several matters, at your convenience, of course."

Bard opened his mouth to answer, but he was briefly distracted by Alfrid's greedy leer and the rather disturbing little snicker he made under his breath as he rubbed his hands together. The two dwarves glanced at Alfrid and gave him a rather thorough once over. They didn't seem terribly impressed.

"Are you any relation to the Master of Laketown, by any chance?" the younger of the two asked curiously while the white haired one gave him the hairy eyeball.

"Me? No relation. I did used to work for him. Recognized me as a person of quality, did you?"

The white haired one sniffed disdainfully and looked at Bard with grave seriousness.

"You should do what we did. Punch him in the chest and toss him in the river. It will likely save everyone a lot of trouble in the long run. It will also keep your treasury from disappearing on a boat downriver. He seems to be cut of the same cloth as that Master was."

Alfrid's greedy leer abruptly vanished and he began edging nervously towards the nearest exit.

"Oh, look at the time. I should be taking my leave now, sire." he muttered before scuttling off again.

"Ah. Thanks for that. I've been trying to get him to go away for weeks now, but he just keeps coming back."

"Toss him in the river." the dwarves repeated in unison.
"Ah…yes. So, um, your king wishes to speak to me? I seem to be free now…"

"Can we go too, Da?"
"Oh, say we can!"
"Please Da? I always wondered what the inside of the mountain looked like."

All three turned to see Bard's three children--Sigrid, Bain and Tilda, hovering in the doorway and shamelessly listening in. Sigrid, who'd been acting as the lady of the house since her mother's death felt herself far too old and dignified to resort to puppy dog eyes, but she had no problem encouraging her siblings to do so. She nudged each of them in the back while continuing to look demurely hopeful. Bain and Tilda's eyes suddenly seemed to triple in size and grow shiny with tears.

"Pleeeeaaaassssssseeeee?"

Bard sighed and turned a 'what can you do' look on the dwarves, but much to his relief they seemed charmed rather than annoyed.

"There shouldn't be any problem with them coming along."

"YAY!" the children cheered. Tilda grabbed her brother's hands and they did a little jig to celebrate. Sigrid even unbent enough to bounce on her toes, though she quickly caught herself and was dignified once more, though still smiling.

While the children ran off to get their coats, Bard had a moment to really think about what he was wearing and whether he should get changed into some of the 'fancy king duds' the townsfolk had pressed on him.

"You're fine as you are. I doubt his majesty expected you to come right away. He's working at the moment and is dressed as simply as you are."

"The king is working?"

"Well of course. There was a lot of damage from the dragon, hundreds of our lost citizens to lay to rest. The plumbing had to be checked for leaks and cracks, and of course the great forges haven't been lit in over a century. The structural integrity of the city and mines have to be checked over for problems. Stuff that had been left to rot had to be gathered up and disposed of, and a century plus of dirt, grime and dragon smell had to be cleaned up. Only a small portion of our returning citizens ever actually lived in Erebor, so we had a bit of a time tracking down family homes and matching them to the families they belonged to long ago… The market district had to be tidied up so it would be ready when the rest of the populace arrives, guild headquarters had to be cleaned up and repaired and a new chain of command set up… goodness, we've been busy 'round the clock since we arrived back here. We were fortunate that our kin in the Iron Hills answered our call for aid swiftly, and of course the flying ship has been a tremendous boon as well, allowing us to bring in food, as well as workmen from the Blue Mountains to help speed up repairs, and mothers with small children as well, while the rest of the citizens travel more slowly by caravan. Even with as much as we've accomplished, it will probably be years yet before it's truly back to its former glory…and yet, even with the little we've done so far its beauty is beyond imagining."

"Well. I cannot wait to see it. We've always been curious, of course, but living where we did we could barely see most of Dale, let alone the dwarven kingdom beyond it."

"We're ready, Da!"

"Alright. Let's go then."
“It took everyone's eyes a moment to adjust after the brightness of the day outside. Once their vision cleared, Bard was right there with his children, looking around in awe. "And to think—I worried I'd have trouble maneuvering in here! I didn't expect to feel small!"

Everywhere they looked there was another wonder—bridges over depthless chasms, stairs and mezzanines and even whole buildings hanging from the cavern roof hundreds of feet above their heads. In the center of the expanse was a long cone of stone that tapered down from the highest point in the cavern and ended in a massive throne upon a tall dais with several steps leading up to it. It was obvious that new stone had been fitted in to the throne itself. There were several gashes along one side that had been recently repaired--gashes that looked like they'd been made with giant, deadly claws, now that he thought on it.

Bard shuddered and thanked all the gods that the dragon had been content to ignore them during his rampage. Seeing such obvious proof of the sort of damage the beast had been able to inflict even without breathing fire made him realize just how lucky they all had been. He could have wiped out all of Laketown with a few swipes, by the look of it!

"It's so pretty! And look, Da, it glows like a star!"

Indeed, at the top of the throne sat a large, glowing jewel—likely the king's jewel, which was mentioned often in tales of the old dwarven kingdom. Bard looked away from it after a moment—it was pretty enough, he supposed, but sort of creepy at the same time. Jewels weren't supposed to glow like captured stars, after all. He noted Tilda and Bain were both leaning out rather dangerously from the bridge they were all on, and had to bite back the worried shout he wanted to give, fearing to startle them and make them tumble to their deaths. The two dwarves that accompanied them continued past the throne, so the children soon followed them, much to his relief.

They were led down a long archway—highly polished green stone with seams of gold running through it, covered in jewel encrusted murals that glittered in the light and looked strangely lifelike, sparking and dimming as they were bathed in alternating light and shadow as they all trooped down the hall. Bard could only shake his head in disbelief. He'd already seen more wealth than he could have previously imagined, all of it squandered on decorations for the walls and furniture!

As they ventured into the hallway beyond they could feel a breeze and smell the crisp mountain air; it was also strangely bright compared to the rest of what they'd seen. As they ventured closer, he realized he could hear the sound of hammers and picks and the sound of crumbling rock.

There was a dropcloth laid out on the floor, covering the rug and protecting it from the dust and grit that seemed to be all over the place. Ori and Dori led them all inside the room revealed. There was a dwarf on a ladder gently tapping a wood-framed window into place, the last of four that lay in a neat line over the rounded doorway across the room. When he was finished, another dwarf sprayed the wood with water to make the wood expand and fill the space more tightly.

"Just need to plaster over the edges there to seal it and all should be well." the dwarf on the ladder said with some satisfaction. "Up you go."

The blonde dwarf that had been waiting nodded and clambered up the ladder once it was freed and began to do just that.

"I wish we had something like that on our windows. I've got all the shutters closed tight and packed with rags to keep out the cold, but it keeps the light out as well." Sigrid murmured, all her attention on the work being done.
"We all would, but it's a foolish wish, I fear. We've no gold to purchase such luxuries." Bard told her quietly.

"King Bard, I presume?" the dwarf who'd just been adding windows asked curiously.

"So they tell me." Bard agreed wryly.

"Girion of Dale was your father?"

"Great-grandfather."

"Ah…right. You have the look of him about you."

Bard blinked in surprise a moment. The dwarf before him had a bit of silver threading his dark hair, but beyond that didn't look much older than Bard himself.

"You knew my great-grandfather?"

"Not well. I was quite young at the time. I only met him a few times when he had business with my grandfather."

"I see. So…you were actually here when the dragon arrived?"

A haunted look crossed the dwarf's face for a moment, and he nodded. It was strange for him to think it—the dwarf kingdom and the kingdom of men that was once perched on its doorstep had long been only the stuff of old stories among they who called Laketown home. It had been much the same while they sheltered amongst the elves. Many of them there had talked about the dragon's arrival over a century prior as though it had happened only the week before.

"I was told you…?"

The dwarf nodded.

"You wanted to speak to me?" he said instead, moving the conversation along.

"Indeed, but first…do any of you know anything about gardening?"

"Um, well, I tended our family's vegetable patch." Sigrid spoke up hesitantly.

"I helped!" Tilda was quick to remind her.

"Excellent. You can tell us then if what we've crafted will suit."

"I wasn't aware dwarves kept gardens."

The dwarf scoffed and looked at Bain, who had spoken, like he was quite deranged for ever thinking they would do such a thing.

"We do not. We have no facility with growing things, nor any desire to do so. We leave that to others. We were created for different things." he explained, waving a hand as though to banish the very idea.

"Why are you setting up a garden then?"

"It is for a hobbit. You must not mention it though should you encounter him. It is meant to be a surprise."

"What's a hobbit?" Bain wondered. Bard and the others were equally confused.
"They're a race of gardeners that live far to the west, though they originally started out not too far from here, though on the other side of the forest. One of them joined our quest to regain Erebor. Much like the plants they love, it seems they require regular sunlight, or so he has assured me. We have crafted a garden so he will not expire while living in the mountain."

"I see." Bard nodded. "Well, let's see it then. We'll be happy to give you any advice you need."

Thorin nodded regally and led them to the second doorway, which led outside onto the mountain face. It led into what looked to have been a natural cavern that had been converted into a terrace of sorts. The front edges of the cavern had been shaped and carved into a decorative latticework, allowing in more sunlight than likely got in before they started their work. A thin layer of soil had settled in the cavern over the years and there were some plants already in there and thriving, though of course most of them were slowly dying as winter approached.

The view out beyond the cavern was spectacular. On this side of the mountain, which had not felt the dragons wrath, there was a wealth of pine trees covering the slopes like a gown of green, and here and there in the open areas where no trees grew small white flowers dotted the hollows. Far in the distance, from this height, you could just make out the Iron Hills, though they were small and smudged to his sight.

There were stairs it seemed, at the end of the cavern. The dwarf headed that way and soon disappeared from sight. The rest hurried to catch up and found themselves following a stairway that followed the natural contours of the mountain as it meandered downward. When he glanced back up the mountain, he realized he couldn't see the stairs they'd just come down, as the whole of it was disguised by the stone walls that sheltered it. From the ground it all would be quite invisible, he wouldn't doubt. He looked up higher and saw the great mass of the peak far above, already heavily covered in snow, though down here on the lower slopes the last vestiges of autumn held on with a vengeance.

At long last they found themselves in a natural hollow that had been expanded and shaped into long hollow sections along the walls that were likely intended to be plant beds. Bain spotted a spigot sticking out of the wall at one point and curious, turned the handle, only to gape in surprise when water came gushing out of it. He quickly turned it off when he saw the dwarves who were out there still working on the place give him an exasperated look.

"Heh. Sorry."

"No worries, lad. Who might you all be?"

"King Bard and his children. They are here to advise us on gardens."

Thorin turned to look at them expectantly. Sigrid glanced at her father, looking bemused, then began to inspect the work they'd done, while casting occasional looks at all the dwarves who had stopped work to watch her closely as she moved around.

"Where do those go?" Tilda asked curiously.

Bard glanced over where she pointed. There were a few more steps leading out of the garden that ended in a path lined with wide flat stones that wound out of sight behind some pine trees.

"It leads to a field of flowers."

"Can I go see it?"

Bard glanced at the dwarves for direction.
"You may. Worry not, it is safe enough. There are small animals that live around the area, but they are all shy harmless sorts that should not trouble her."

Bard nodded his permission, though he sent Bain with her to keep an eye on her and make sure she didn't wander off chasing bunnies.

"These beds need some way to be able to drain out."

"Um…why? Plants need water, right? How they gonna get it if it all drains away?" the cheerful looking dwarf with the hat asked.

"Small holes, to let the excess drain away. The plants drink their fill as it trickles down through the soil, but it's all stone beneath here, so once they're filled with dirt, all the water will collect at the bottom and have no way to escape. The roots will start to rot away. If you could make a small hole every foot or so in all of them, and let the water drain out, even into the beds below, and then the bottommost into the ground here, that would work fine. Otherwise everything looks alright, as far as I can see. Plenty of sunlight and water close to hand to help any plants through a dry spell… It's lovely, really. Come spring I really should see what I can do with the gardens around our new house. This looks like a lovely place to spend a morning when you've naught else to be doing."

The dwarves all beamed and patted each other on the backs to celebrate their job well done. One of them went off to fetch a drill so they could add drainage to the beds. King Thorin, relaxed. Bard hadn't even realized how tense the dwarf was while awaiting Sigrid's verdict.

He sent Sigrid off to fetch her brother and sister--and to give her a chance to look around and chase bunnies if she wanted to, because he knew she would never ask--and followed the dwarf king inside.

In the short time they'd been gone, a door had been fitted to both doorways, and a whole flock of industrious dwarves had descended on the room beyond to remove all traces of rock dust, and laid several cheery rugs down across the floor. They were currently bustling to and fro, dusting and polishing, hanging pictures and bringing in furniture from elsewhere.

Bard noted a long oblong section of carven stone with cut-outs just the size of the windows that had been installed had been set in place over the wall there and hid the plaster from view, making it appear that the windows just grew naturally deep inside the stone walls. Thorin looked around at their progress with a proprietary air and nodded in satisfaction.

"Yes. This shall indeed be quite suitable."

Bard glanced at the portraits that had just been hung up over the fireplace. One was of a man, the other a woman. They both had full, smiling faces. They were sun-browned as though they spent many hours each day outdoors, with ruddy cheeks and a thick shock of curly hair on each of their heads. They also had pointed ears.

"Elves?"

If they were, they were the chubbiest elves he'd ever seen. Thorin bristled in offense at the question.

"Hobbits." he corrected very firmly. "Those are Bilbo's parents. They died some years ago. He likes to keep their memory close to hand."

"Bilbo is the hobbit the garden is for? I've never seen one. After what you said about fearing he'd die without sunlight, I thought he was some sort of plant man."

Thorin looked confused and frustrated by his answer.
"I have told you, he is a hobbit. He is not an Ent, nor any kind of elf." he made a slashing motion with his hand and nodded once, sharply as though to signal the matter was closed now that he had been properly instructed. "Come, we have much to discuss" he ordered abruptly.

With that he began marching out of the room. The workers nodded and bobbed in place as he passed. It seemed to make him vaguely uncomfortable. Bard was rather cheered by this; it seemed he wasn't the only one that found everyone bowing to you all the time an odd custom.

Thorin led him in to a new hall, and they were soon joined by a number of other dwarves. The table was rather larger than anything he'd seen so far, but then he realized it was man-sized, not dwarff-sized. The chairs down one side were all large enough to accommodate his own lanky frame quite easily. Down the other side they were smaller, but they were also set upon a dais that went halfway under the table, so when they sat they were at eye level, rather than far below as would normally have been the case.

His children arrived not long after, accompanied by yet another dwarf. He had bright red hair that had gone white in spots, and boar tusks woven into his moustache so they jutted out as though he himself was a boar.

"Look, Da! He's got an iron foot!" Bard blinked in surprise and looked.

"Aye! Forged it meself. Was a bit of a bother, having to lean on the anvil while I pounded it into shape. Bugger all if losing a foot doesn't wreak havoc on yer sense o' balance!" he laughed, a great booming sound that seemed to fill the whole room.

"Lord Dain Ironfoot of the Iron Hills" Thorin explained.

"Aye, and I'm ready to talk trade! Now that stinking wyrm is gone we can all get on with things."

"Trade would be very welcome, but I'm afraid our "kingdom" such as it is, is rather bankrupt at the moment."

"Ye great numpty! Dinna ye tell the lad ye've got 'is treasury here in the mountain?!"

Thorin sighed and cast an exasperated look at the other dwarf. "I was going to, but we'd only just sat down as you arrived."

"Oh. 'e's got yer treasury here in the mountain." he repeated to Bard.

"Our treasury? What treasury?"

"Dale. Laketown as well. We ran in to the Master on our way back to Erebor. He ran into a tree."

"He fled on a ship."

"The Ents moved the river to put the forest fires out."

"Aye, we saw the gold from the air and thought he'd robbed Erebor. We realized soon after it was actually man-made. He said he was the master of Laketown and it was all his. We didn't think much of a leader that would flee while his people were in peril, and leave them penniless to boot."

"Good." Sigrid said fiercely. "It will make a lot of people happy to know that."

"Did all yer people get everything they wanted out of yon town on the lake? It's just, there've been orcs creeping back this way from wherever they fled when they were trying to escape the dragon.
We've been sending out patrols to keep an eye on the area-- we don't want them settling in nearby." another redheaded dwarf asked.

"Nor do we want the filth creeping off towards the Iron Hills." Dain concurred.

"We took most stuff with us when we fled. Anything left behind has since been collected when we decided to try our luck in Dale. It seemed safer. The orcs don't seem to have any problem getting to Laketown whenever they want, even with the bridge pulled in."

"Aye, that was rather where I was going with things. A lot o' the houses there got a bit damaged. We chased a pack o' orcs we spotted and they fled there to yer town. Seems the beasts have been digging themselves in there. We're pretty sure we rooted them all out, but with no one living there it will likely attract more of them afore too long."

"If ye've all left the place behind, it might be best to just break it all down and use it fer firewood to last ye the winter. Something new can be built to take its place--berths for ships and warehouses to hold trade goods that the traders unload before they're carried on up to the city."

"In fact, Bombur has taken the liberty of drawing up plans for just such a place."

Yet another red-headed dwarf nodded and unrolled a long sheet of paper in front of him. On it were architectural plans for a port on the lake.

"Oh! It's pretty."

"This treasury…how much money are we talking about here?"

One of the redheads--not Dain or the architect, who it seemed was named Bombur--handed him a ledger on which the total value of everything had been painstakingly tallied and accounted for. Bard pored through it slowly, his eyes boggling and his ire with the master, kept tightly banked all this time so as not to set off an enraged mob when they had other things to worry about, began to burn with a fierce flame.

"So much gold, just from Laketown alone, and he hoarded it greedily and was still hungry for more, and all while the people starved. Bastard. Were he here now, I'd toss him into the river."

"You seem a nice enough fellow. I don't quite understand. If Girion of Dale was your great-grandfather, how was it you ended up taking orders from the likes of that Master?"

"My great-grandfather only had daughters, but his sister had a son. He became the new leader of Laketown at his passing. The Master is his grandson."

"So you're cousins then. Shame that line ended up so. But no matter. You're a direct descendant either way, and unlike your cousin, from all we've heard, you at least seemed to do your best to look after the people."

"Ah, here, these are yours as well. These here" Thorin held up a ring with two large keys "are for the gates to the city. Mind you don't lose them. This" he held up a single key this time" is for the treasury. Now that all of you are there and settled in we can start transferring everything."

Sigrid plucked the second key from Thorin's grasp before he could give it to her father. Bard huffed and gave his daughter an exasperated look.

"What? Who is it handles our finances and does the shopping? Me. You've no head for numbers, Da. There was a reason mum never let you near the household funds. Besides, knowing you you'd
end up giving it to that wretched Alfrid Lickspittle so he'll leave you be, or worse yet the Master should he come slinking back."

"If anyone should have it then it should be me. I'll be king after da. Once you're married off you'll just be some commoner." Bain grumbled.

Sigrid flicked him in the ear and quelled him with a single look and not a word spoken, all without missing a beat. "It really is best left with me." she concluded.

"If we have money now does that mean I can have a crown and a pretty dress?" Tilda asked hopefully.

"Once I've had a chance to look over the books and see what our necessities are we can talk about it."

"There's some jewelry amongst the treasury of Dale." Thorin offered helpfully.

Tilda grinned and turned puppy eyes on her sister "And the dress?"

Sigrid sighed, then smiled. "I'll make it myself."

"Yay. Can I have a bear that will carry me around and feed me honeycakes?"


"Eh, if Beorn comes by some day he may be willing to do so if you ask him nicely." Gloin said philosophically.

"What? How… NO. Don't encourage her please! No bears."

"If it is any consolation, he is not likely to visit as he has his own lands on the other side of the forest, and is not inclined to mingle with men."

"Though he may change his mind since we gave him that chest of gold for helping us out."

"You gave a bear a chest of gold?"

"He's a man sometimes, so it's alright."
There was a restless feeling in the mountain as the caravan made its final approach around the lake. Fili and Thorin, who hadn't seen Dis since they'd set off months prior, were both quietly excited. Gloin and Gimli whose wife/mother was also with the caravan, had been gussying up their quarters for weeks and planning a big welcome. Though the work went on, half of everyone's attention seemed to be on the front gates.

It was nearly noon when the first wagons slowly trundled their way to the gates. A great shout went up from the guards and soon the whole populace gathered to welcome the people home.

Thorin had dressed up for the occasion. Since arriving in Erebor he'd been more often than not in fairly simple workman's clothing like everyone else and doing his own part to speed along the repairs. He was politically astute enough to realize that the occasion called for a bit of theater. His "official" coronation wouldn't be taking place until spring to give representatives from all the clans a chance to travel to Erebor to retake their oaths--to himself and his heirs, not a glowy stone if he had anything to say about it.

Even with that being the case, he was already king and had been since his father's death. With that in mind, he donned the crown he'd not spent much time wearing, his mithril ring mail--which had since been decorated with sapphires and diamonds, and an ankle length fur surcoat. His hair and beard had been carefully oiled till they gleamed. His heirs had gone to similar lengths themselves, and wore the circlets that denoted them as heir apparent and prince.

Fili and Kili were neither of them used to the level of scrutiny that they would be under from here on out, but you would never know it to look at either of them. Fili gleamed golden, and held himself with dignity. Kili didn't fare quite as well--still just a bit too young and giddy--but even he managed to look almost regal as they awaited their returning people up on the lookout above the gates so that everyone could see them as they approached.

Almost as though scripted, a wide shaft of honey-golden sunlight slipped through the heavy cloud cover overhead and set the three of them to glimmering. The caravan broke into cheers as Thorin...
held out his arms as though embracing all of them and shouted:

"Welcome, my people, to EREBOR!"

The dwarves glad shouts echoed across the surrounding countryside. The folks of Dale, who had been watching the caravan's progress, cheered as well, and many waved handkerchiefs in greeting and celebration.

After the initial excitement, there was of course work to be done. The caravan, large as it was, began to disappear with rather amazing swiftness, all things considered.

The ponies, donkeys, goats and mules that had pulled the carts were unhitched and led away to the surprisingly large stables that ran along the outer edge of the mountain to the left of the gate. The wagons were emptied by the many willing hands that were present to do so and carted off with alacrity. Once emptied, they too were led off to the rather spacious cart and wagon storage hall that ran along the outer edge of the mountain to the right of the gate.

Even as the crowds began to disperse to their separate lodgings, and left the central areas all but empty, one could still feel the life that now filled the mountain. Bilbo wriggled his bare feet on the stone and listened. He was so intent on what he was doing, that he nearly jumped out of his skin when he suddenly realized Dis, Fili, Kili and Thorin were now all gathered nearby watching him curiously. The three boys each loaded down with part of Dis' belongings.

"Oh, goodness me! I'm so sorry! Welcome to Erebor, Dis! It's lovely to see you again."

"Thank you, yourself as well. What were you doing?"

"Oh, well." Bilbo flushed slightly, feeling silly. "I was trying to listen. It's funny… I can almost hear the mountain… well, singing? Oh, I'm not explaining very well. It's just, for a moment, I thought I felt, or heard… It's just, the Shire always sings to us, though it's not really a song, it's just the best way I can explain it. It's like we can feel the land, and the growing things in it. In winter, the song gets slow and sleepy. In spring, why, goodness! It's a bit like the whole world wakes up and shouts, though it's also not like that at all… and, oh, I am bad at this! In summer, it's slower, but sort of smug. Everything is content and just… Oh, never mind. It probably all sounds very silly to all of you. But, it's funny… as the mountain filled up with people, I could have sworn for a moment I heard an echo of that content, sleepy winter song, though slower and in a much lower key… though I really didn't hear anything at all, it was more a suggestion of a sound than the thing itself. I'm not making any sense at all, am I?" he concluded with an embarrassed little laugh. When he glanced up at the dwarves, however, they looked startled rather than confused.

"No, we do know what you mean." Dis said softly. "We can hear it."

"We're just surprised that you can." Fili added.

"In all the days since our people's awakening, we thought only we could hear the song of the stone. Elves and men alike assured us it was dead stuff. Men thought it of no importance beyond what lies within it. Elves assured us it was simply a foundation upon which to lay the important parts—the soil and plants—but of otherwise no importance. Given that you share the elves love of growing things…"

"I suppose we assumed you'd be the same—just dead stone except for the fact that we prettied it up and made it useful." Kili admitted.
"Can all your folk do this?"

"I didn't even know I could do this. I never heard it any time before. I always knew there were stones in my garden, but more for the eddies they made in the soil than because of their own song. Maybe it's because I've been listening to her for a little while now? I've been all over this mountain, cleaning and moving things and polishing them, admiring the architecture and marveling at the mines. Then these last few weeks I've been all over the surface, at least the eastern side, getting to know my new garden. I've been wandering and getting my toes in the soil, both on the mountain itself and the area immediately around it. The song is different, this side of the mountains, though that may just be because the land around here has been repeatedly wounded and then affronted by all the orcs, goblins and trolls bleeding and burning all over it. It may change once we've gotten it all healed up… But maybe that's why? I've been listening…and I think the mountain is happy to have you all back again, and that was something new, so I noted it? Yes… I think that was it. The mountain is happy you all are here."

"If you can hear her… perhaps she is happy that you are here as well."

Bilbo smiled. It was a content, genuine smile. They'd seen more of those in recent weeks. It had been a bit of a surprise when they realized that, though Bilbo had smiled often in all the time they'd known him, it wasn't until recently that the smiles had been real. Always before they were to cover up fear or frustration or because it was expected or polite.

He reached out and patted the nearest stone wall, still with that little smile on his face.

"That would be lovely. I think I've grown rather fond of the old girl."

Dis had to bite her lip and look away so she wouldn't laugh out loud at the utterly soppy look that overtook her brother's face at the hobbit's words.

"Oh! I made a celebratory cake to welcome you home."

"Yay! Cake!"

"For after dinner!" Bilbo scolded.

"Oh, come on! It's a special occasion!" Kili whined.

"If you're going to be like that, I suppose you don't want any apple tarts with lunch. Ah well. They'll not go to waste. I'm sure your uncle…"

"You made apple tarts?" Thorin interjected.

"No! Now the rest of us won't get any!"

"For after lunch! Honestly! You're as bad as Kili is!" Bilbo grumped, before he started to stalk away.

"Alright boys, settle down." Dis laughed as they all followed him. "Food first. And it does sound good…especially since I didn't have to cook it."

"It's a long trip to get here." Bilbo commiserated.

"Especially with a caravan, though it went far faster and more smoothly than I ever dared to hope. I was half-afraid we'd hit snow long before we got here and would have to dig our way through. We did hit some, but it was still light enough that it wasn't too great a hazard. I don't recall the roads being in such good repair the last time I came through this way."
"We, the Rangers and the elves of Rivendell all have been working on sections of it. How was it going through the forest?"

"Strange, and a bit unsettling. Everyone opted to burrow into the wagons among their belongings, and the animals all huddled together and stayed close by. It took us two weeks to traverse it. It was strange. It seemed to get just a tiny bit less uncanny each day--though I suppose that might just be that we had gotten used to it?"

"There may have been an actual change. From what the elves told Gimli, Sauron had been hiding out in Southern Mirkwood, and the whole thing was overrun with monsters, but for the area right around where all the elves were. They'd been all but driven out of the rest of the forest. I'm glad to hear things are getting better there."

"They offered you and our people no insult?" Thorin asked suspiciously.

"No, Thorin. If not for how uncanny the forest was, it might even have been a pleasant trip. The scouts who were leading us through were all rather young, for elves, I think. I got the impression none of them had ever left their forest before. They've spent their whole lives fighting orcs and spiders and getting driven from their homes ever northward. They seemed more curious than hostile, and I spent most of the ride through telling them stories of the places I've seen. The scout leader seemed especially curious. She wanted to hear about everything, and she seemed strangely curious about dwarves and Erebor, and whether many of us practiced archery."

Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully when Kili twitched just a bit.

"She apparently would like to see it someday. I told her if she was along for your coronation in spring I would give her a tour."

"Dis!"

"What? She seemed a pleasant enough child, and she was quite polite."

She fixed Thorin with an exasperated look.

"Thranduil is dead. His son, who is also quite young, is now king. You've been doing a good job of making nice with the neighbors so far. Let's not ruin it by backtracking now. We will need them if Erebor is to survive long term, and it will go easier if you set a good example for others to follow. We don't all have to be best friends, but a lack of open warfare wouldn't go amiss."

Thorin grumbled, but didn't disagree--though he did pinch Bilbo in the side when he offered commentary like 'sounds like good advice' and 'Hmm, where have I heard that before?'

"Did I hear you say earlier that you have a garden?"

She was hard pressed not to raise her eyebrows when this time Thorin twitched. Just what had been going on around here while she'd been traveling?

"Did you take over the mushroom farm?"

"Oh, no... though I have been there. I tidied it up..."

"And ate half the mushrooms" Fili added innocently.

"I did no such thing! I only had a few"
"Pounds"

"A few"

"Handfuls then." Kili snickered. "Hobbits sure love mushrooms. I caught him a few times heading down there and arguing with himself! "No, no, mustn't have any more….oh, perhaps a few won't matter..."

"He has some in his pockets to snack on between meals."

"Just one or two." Bilbo insisted with great dignity. "Not pounds."

Dis smiled at the teasing. "If not the mushroom farm..."

"Oh! The Company made a door and some plant beds and a lovely terrace. There's even a pathway that leads away from the garden, through the pine trees and to a field of flowers. I've been spending a lot of time out there, getting familiar with the place. It's quite enchanting. I told them it was far too much for little old me, of course. They wanted to make sure I got enough sunlight. I assured them that had I been so in need I might have just taken a day trip to Dale to remedy the lack...though, having said that, I am actually quite selfishly glad they did go to such trouble. Why, a hobbit without a garden is hardly a hobbit at all! Come spring, I shall have to take some cuttings from the garden at Bag End to transfer here. There's a certain symmetry there--we carried seeds with us when we traveled west, and now I shall do the same in reverse, even if not to quite the same spot. A lot of the plants in the garden back in the Shire were started by my parents when my father first built the place and added to over the years. It wouldn't seem like home without them. I do hope they'll grow here... I suppose if worse comes to worst I can set up hanging planters in the terrace or even in my rooms near the windows if I must."

"Sounds delightful...and how very thoughtful of Thorin to allow it. I should like to see it." Her smile widened slightly when Thorin began giving her the majestic glare of death.

"Oh, of course! I'm afraid it isn't much to see at the moment--just empty plant beds--but give me till next summer and it should be quite the view!"

"I shall count on it. I look forward to seeing what you do with it."

"I hope it lives up to your expectations. I've already made and discarded a dozen plans for what to do with the space!"

At long last they arrived at the palace. Kili ran a bit ahead, so he could open the door. They all wanted to see her reaction to their decorating efforts. Dis had been wandering along slowly, touching the walls, studying the carvings and decorations and smiling as they jogged memories she hadn't examined in decades. When she saw where they were leading her, her smile was bittersweet.

"Mother's old rooms?" she walked in a few steps and looked around.

"I remember this place. Oh, goodness...look how tiny we all were! Oh, Frerin, if only you could be with us today." she murmured as she looked up at the family portrait.

Thorin put an arm around her, equally subdued. She shook off her melancholy after a moment and moved to take a better look around.

Bilbo smiled at all of them softly and slipped off to get started on lunch, leaving them alone to catch up.
"It's heartening, to hear the old place so content. Never thought I'd live to see it, to be honest." Dwalin said quietly.

"Let us only hope it lasts."

"Ach, what're you bellyaching about now? The stinking wrym is dead, the mountain reclaimed, and yer people shelter once more in its halls." Dain demanded.

"All but the dwarf lords of Belegost, who expected to be welcomed and richly rewarded for taking us in so many years ago."

"Aye, they gave us shelter, in a dead mountain with no riches left to mine that they'd abandoned centuries prior." Dwalin scoffed.

"It was still more than many offered."

"So, they'll wait till spring. I dinna know why yer so worried about it. This place needed workers, not a bunch o' dwarf lords eating feasts every night an' rollin' about in the treasury. Yer wee hobbit, the traders and the kitchen staff were out nigh on every day fer weeks bringing back enough to last what's already here for the winter. Better to leave them till spring, or better yet market season, once those men o' yours get themselves together and start growing food and traders have a chance to come."

"I have a feeling that to their minds the delay will be taken only as a great insult. It could cause problems for Thorin in the long run. If he doesn't have their support he cannot expect to rule long or safely in the mountain."

"I say it may be better for him in the long run that they're excluded now."

"They'll stir up resentment and block anything he proposes until he caves to them if they're offended enough. He may end up ruling as a puppet!"

"Hear me out now, ya old grump" Dain sighed. Balin glowered at him and waved a hand as though to say 'by all means'.

"He was still a young'un when you lot all headed west. King or no, he likely had to humble himself to get aid, that's a given. The only thing them being kindly disposed to you all would have changed is how painful they made the humbling. Am I right?"

"Aye, you're right. " Dwalin agreed, his face dark with remembered humiliation. "It still makes me angry to this day to remember Thorin all but begging for their cast-offs. He tried not to show it, but it was obvious enough he was getting desperate at that point. We'd tromped all over the lands-- east, west, north, and south by that point. Nogrod was our last hope and both we and they knew it."

"I suspected as much. How do you think our lad would have fared as king, long term, had those fossils been here right from the start? Thorin has been working alongside everyone--not all the time, of course, nor even every week, but he has been. And the folks, they saw that and thought well of him for it. Think about it though. If you had Thorin, plainly dressed, doing common work…and then the common folk look up, and there on high are the mighty dwarf lords in their finery, looking down from above for a bit, and then retreat to their fine quarters, to be waited upon by servants and treated as kings. When ye add in that Thorin has more or less had to bend his neck to them for years now…They've had a good while to get used to things being that way--as have the common folks. How then do you think Thorin would have fared as king? He'd be a puppet for sure, because the folks would have gone on thinking of those dwarf lords as the guys in charge, because it's what they're used to."
Oh, they all know Thorin is their king, but he's been in exile most of his life, and so it was easy to forget when you've got him on the one side and the dwarf lords on the other, and you know it."

Dwalin frowned like a thunder cloud and his hands tightened on the arms of his chair like he was ready to throttle anyone who would dare. "We never forgot he was our king."

"I know you didn't. But nevertheless, even you would have likely found it easy enough to fall into the established patterns." Dain chided.

Balin looked thoughtful, and slightly less worried, though not completely. "Instead the populace will have the winter to get used to thinking of Thorin as the dwarf in charge."

"Aye. Just that. He made a good start with his welcome, but then he has always had a flair for the dramatic."

Balin was hard pressed to not roll his eyes at Dain--"I speak in a shout at all times, tend to burst into mane tears whenever I'm sufficiently moved, have vowed eternal vengeance on no less than fifty nine people and forgotten it the moment I calmed down--Ironfoot calling anyone dramatic.

"You know, oddly enough I think yer wee little hobbit man will help strengthen Thorin's position. I'll admit, I wasn't too sure about him at first. He seemed an odd choice for our Lord Mahal to give Thorin, but I see now that our creator knew best. Aye." he nodded as though agreeing with his own opinion. "Let's face it, a noble dwarrow-dam likely would have spent most of her time in the treasury to assure she got first pick of jewels to adorn herself with. She'd have given orders to the housekeeping staff and the kitchen staff and left them to it. She likely would have interfered with Thorin helping out with the work, thinking it would undermine his position and therefore her importance. Oh, there were a few might have served well, but even the best of them likely wouldn't have been off gathering food, or off cleaning and cooking with the staff, or minding the wee ones so their dams could get a break for a bit or do other things, making them treats and telling them stories. He's scholarly enough to appeal to the scholars, just seasoned enough to win the respect of the warriors, humble and hardworking enough to win the regard of the common folks. The dams all adore him as do the wee ones. If he and his kin can in fact fix the damage the wyrm did to the land hereabouts he'll have won the regard of the men and elves both. He's managed to silence the naysayers with only a bit of effort. Even the most hidebound dwarves who made the loudest objections to an outsider consort have mostly subsided, and you know, even when they were all still loudly objecting they never did so where he could hear them, even though he doesn't speak our language and wouldn't have known. He'd already won them over with cupcakes and didn't know it!"

Dain slapped his knee and laughed long and hard as though it was the best joke he'd heard in a long time.

"In fact, some of them that was the loudest objectors are now some of his strongest supporters! They tell others that it was Mahal's will, and that perhaps the hobbit is actually a sign from our Lord's wife that she no longer despises our existence! Why, I saw a fellow on the way back from the Dale the other day look around and pat a half-dead bush like it was a child. We've always known we had a father. I think some are rather keen on the idea that we might have a mother now as well."

Dain tamped out his pipe, rose and stretched.

"Well, come on then. Everyone's had time to reunite with their families. It should be just about time for the party!"

"Party? We're having a party? I don't recall authorizing that…"
"It was yer wee hobbit man that did it. Think he used some of his own funds. You lot were all tied up with that damage in the western mines. He didn't want to bother you, or so he explained to me. He gathered up some of the kitchen staff and some of the younger lads that've been running messages and such and took them off with him on a trip or two to gather food and ale for a welcome back to the mountain party. He even made funny little decorations with leaves and other tree bits to 'gussy up the hall and make it more festive'. I told him our decorating tended more towards priceless jewels and tapestries and he told me that wasn't festive at all! Can you imagine the cheek! I saw them when they came back. They were rolling the most enormous kegs o' ale I ever did see, and had a whole slew of pigs and fats birds and were loaded down with honey and spices and all sorts of things. He's been off with the kitchen staff baking pies and cakes for days now!"

"I had no idea. He never said a word."

"Hmm. He may have thought I would mention it… which I have, so no harm done. Come on! I want to get some of those sweets before Thorin and the boys eat them all!"

Balin blinked several times at the 'whoosh' that sped past him, only to see his brother high-tailing it out the door. He sputtered indignant and heaved himself out of his chair to chase after him.

"Bloody menace! Leave some for the rest of us!"

"Hey! Wait for me!"

"What do you mean there are elves in my mountain?"

"Just three of them. King Legolas, and Elrond's two sons, Elladan and Elrohir. You've met them before, remember?"

"Why are there elves in my mountain?"

"For the party of course."

"Party?"

"The 'hooray, everyone is back in the mountain and all is well' party."

"I do not recall authorizing…"

"You were busy. I arranged this. It seemed churlish to have a party and not invite the neighbors… their kings at least. If it wouldn't have meant so much more food and ale I would have invited everyone, but that sort of thing will have to wait until after Dale starts producing food and the forest has recovered somewhat so that everyone can contribute a bit to the proceedings… but never mind all that. There are three elves, and King Bard and his children as well, all here for the party. This is a happy occasion, so do try to be polite."

"Why did no one tell me of this? Am I not king?"

"Yes, and you've been working very hard and I'm quite proud of you. You had other things to concern yourself with than a little party that I was already taking care of."

"I do not recall authorizing funds for…"

"That's because I used my own, silly. Would you stop being an old grump and just enjoy it?" Bilbo
finally growled. "Though I am surprised Dain didn't mention it…"

"You told Dain about this but not me?"

"Well, he was there when we headed out in the ship and asked where we were going."

"He's married, you know."

Bilbo blinked and stared at him, puzzled at the sudden non-sequitur.

"Yes. I know. He's mentioned it. He also has a young son named Thorin, whom he brags about as much as Gloin does Gimli, but what does that have to do with anything?"

"Nothing. I just thought I would mention it."

Bilbo continued to stare at him, but he was distracted for a moment by Fili and Kili who seemed to be struggling not to laugh. He frowned at the two of them, wondering what he was missing, but got distracted again when Thorin abruptly steered him from the room after glaring at the two boys.

"Come along. We don't want to leave our…guests…cooling their heels for too long."

Bilbo focused back on the dwarf king and frowned at him suspiciously.

"You'll be polite?"

"I will be the very heart and soul of courtesy, I assure you."

Bilbo studied his profile a moment and nodded, satisfied.

"Wait…did you say you used your own funds for this celebration? I shall see to it you are reimbursed. Something like this should properly fall under kingdom expenses."

"Don't be ridiculous. For my part in the quest I apparently have my very own mountain of gold. What in the world would I spend it on? Throwing a party for my friends and their loved ones is a good use for it."

"Hmm." Thorin grunted, not sounding at all convinced. "I see you are wearing your armor. That is good."

"Only because full armor apparently counts as party-wear in these parts, not because I think I need it." Bilbo huffed, smoothing a hand down his replacement red dinner jacket that Dori had made for him. It had silvery embroidery and pearl buttons so it would match his shirt of mithril ring. Dwarves were a bit ridiculous, he often thought. He had a pair of long trousers that came with it--none of the dwarves were as yet convinced that he could in fact walk around with bare feet and his legs bare from the calf down and actually be warm enough. They too had silver embroidery down the sides, and three pearl buttons at the bottom near the ankle. They were still trying to convince him he really needed a nice pair of boots as well, but he'd stood fast on that at least. Hobbits did not wear shoes of any sort, thank you very much.

Erebor's great hall was already alive and filled with people when they arrived. Colorful bunting and table decorations made from pine boughs, fall leaves, and such gave the place a festive touch that was normally missing from the great stone cavern. There were already numerous dwarves playing music, dancing, laughing and of course eating, everywhere they looked.
Bard's children had waded right in to the festivities, it seemed, and were currently learning a dance from several of the dwarf children. Bard himself and the three elves were lingering just inside the door, watching the gleeful chaos with amusement and some trepidation.

"I guess they weren't actually being rude when they started that food fight." Elrohir suddenly remarked. "They're throwing food here too."

As they watched, one fellow threw bread rolls across the room to three other dwarves, all of whom responded by throwing back other foods—sausages, several eggs and a turkey leg, to be exact. The first dwarf simply caught them, added them to his own plate and dug in. They saw the same taking place elsewhere in the room.

"I'm rather surprised at all the greenery. I hadn't thought dwarves cared overmuch for things that grew."

"It was probably the hobbit's doing."

"I helped!" an indignant voice piped up from somewhere in the vicinity of their knees.

When they looked down they found a bare-faced, chubby-cheeked little dwarfling glowering at them. He pointed to one of the boughs of pine that had fall leaves entwined around it, all of them carefully arranged from lightest yellow to orange to dark red before going in the opposite colors as they continued along till the other end was light yellow once more.

"I made that one." he said proudly, puffing his little chest out.

"It's lovely. You'll be quite a craftsman one day."

The child's chest puffed out a bit more and he grinned at them, showing off a gap-toothed smile, before running off to steal a tart from the edge of a table.

Bard noted the small crowd that had just arrived at the door. He wasn't the only one—several dwarves noted their king arrived and shouted "Let's hear it for good king Thorin! Long may he reign!"

"Hip hip hooray!"

"King Thorin!"

The gleeful cheer rippled through the room, being picked up by more and more dwarves. Thorin took the accolades with a nod and a smile, before turning to his unexpected guests.

"Welcome to Erebor."

"Thank you for the invitation."

"Just being…neighborly." he managed to answer with a reasonable facsimile of welcome on his face. "Come. We should join the festivities. I've been told our own Mr. Baggins and the kitchen staff have been working for a week or more to ensure us quite the feast this evening."

Bilbo, after saying his own hellos, was about to head off into the crowd to look for some of his friends, but Thorin once again steered him off, with every intention of him sitting next to him at the table. He cast him a look that let him know in no uncertain terms he was not allowing him to leave him there alone to talk to a bunch of elves all night. Bilbo rolled his eyes and went without argument. Dain was already at the table, his plate piled high.
"About time you all got here. I was going to eat the lot without you if you took much longer. I think those are your seats" he indicated to the elves. "Plates full of weeds and such, just like you like it. Oh, and Bilbo gave you some mushrooms too. He's a generous soul indeed. That must have been right painful for the wee fellow."

Bilbo threw up his hands as Fili and Kili started snickering. "For goodness sakes! You all make me sound like some sort of mad mushroom maniac!"

Dain reached out stuck his finger in the pocket of his jacket and withdrew a mushroom, which he held up tauntingly. Bilbo snatched it back and stalked off muttering, leaving the three of them roaring with laughter.

Legolas sat down beside Bilbo at the table, and managed to muster up a smile for him. He indicated his plate, filled with greens and several mushrooms, with a wave of his hand.

"I do thank you for your great sacrifice. Do be assured I will devour them with great thankfulness for your generosity." he teased with a small smile.

"You're welcome." Bilbo grumbled back. Legolas grinned again, taking no offense.

"So… king of the woodland realm. Can you tell me about your home? I've never been there, of course. I'm going to hazard a guess it isn't much like Rivendell, which is the only elvish place I've been to… you know, with the orcs and spiders and all."

Legolas nodded his head, conceding the point. "Even with all the darkness that has filled the forest in recent years, my home is a beautiful place, filled with many wonders. Much of it has been lost, but with every day that passes I grow more hopeful that it will once again be as it was. It used to be that you could walk for days, and lose yourself beneath the green and marvel at the beauty of the sun as it filtered down through the trees, the light so thick and golden you were certain you could reach out and grasp it in your hand. There are fragrant mosses that grow alongside the streams that make it look as though the ground and the stones are wearing a cloak of emerald velvet. There is a small ravine near the center that's filled end to end with dark purple flowers whose fragrance is so lovely that a contest was once held composing epics to the beauty of them. I could speak for many weeks on the many wonders in Greenwood the Fair, but words cannot truly capture the beauty of it. If you wish to know of its wonders you shall have to come to visit one day."

"Oh, well that sounds lovely, truly. Um…there won't be any more giant spiders, I hope?"

"Only time will tell if we've truly cleared them all. We have gone for days at a time lately without spotting a single one, which is a good sign, I think. Before the dragon's rampage not a day went by when our patrols were not set upon at least once."

"Goodness! How very dreadful. I couldn't even imagine living like that. I'm afraid we're a bit spoiled in the Shire. The Dúnedain Rangers patrol the lands around the Shire. We've only ever been attacked by beasts once in living memory. Not spiders. Wolves. But those were quite bad enough. We're not very big, we hobbits, nor are we warriors. Between the cold, the lack of food and the wolf attacks a lot of hobbit lives were lost that year. The South Farthing and Buckland were the worst hit--both close to the river, you see, which is how they crossed over, when it froze. We didn't see as many in Hobbinton where I used to dwell, but we had our own problems even so. There was a terrible flu that year. Had it not been so cold, and the winter gone on so long that we were running short on food it
likely would have been fine. Everyone was already weakened when sickness hit though and so it took a far greater toll than it likely would otherwise. It was a terrible time, all told. Thank goodness for the Rangers. They appeared towards the end of winter and brought enough food to perk up the farmers enough that they were able to do the spring planting that year, or we'd have a famine on top of everything else. Do you know those silly men felt guilty when they found out how we'd fared during the winter? Goodness! They were apparently all off in the north battling orcs, and they felt guilty they hadn't done enough! Well, I set that one fellow straight. Hopefully he was able to talk sense into the rest of them."

"You speak so calmly of these terrible events."

"Well, they were quite a long time ago. Those sorts of hurts heal, given enough distance. It's getting to that point that's hard. While it's happening it seems like the pain will never end. It does though, in time. You just have to keep moving forward. Eventually it dulls enough that you can remember those you lost with a smile instead of tears. No one is ever truly lost so long as they're remembered."

"It is a comfort to think it might one day be so. I thank you, sir hobbit."

"Oh, none of that now. Bilbo Baggins is the name, and I'll thank you to remember it. And don't think to start with any Master Baggins nonsense either! Why, this great lump had to be reminded constantly that I had a name and he should use it. I haven't the patience to go through that again, so you shall simply have to remember it."

"How am I to maintain the respect of my people when you constantly disregard my status?" Thorin grumbled to his left.

"I respect you plenty…it doesn't mean you're not a great lump anyway." Bilbo teased.

Thorin sighed and looked at Bard, who was seated on his left. "Do you see what I have to put up with?"

"My daughter stole the key of the treasury because she thinks I can't be trusted with it." Bard sighed back. They both glanced over at Legolas.

"My king, I used to change your nappies. You really should listen to your elders." Legolas said mournfully. "I'm three thousand years old. I shouldn't have to put up with that."

Bard mouthed "three thousand" with some astonishment. He and Thorin traded a look and nodded.

"You win." they both agreed.
CHAPTER SUMMARY

Bilbo visits Dale. Alfrid Lickspittle is a slacker.

"Hello, Borin, Corin. How are the two of you this fine day?" Bilbo greeted the nearest guards on the lookout. "Oh, my. It's a bit windy up here. Don't mind me. Just taking a look around." he shivered slightly and pulled his cloak a bit tighter.

Winter hadn't even properly arrived yet, but it was already getting quite cold, especially high as they were on the lookout over the gate. Several small snowfalls had lightly dusted the ground with a thin layer of white, which had quickly turned grey because of all the soot and ash--both from the fires set by Smaug, and from Mount Doom which had been spewing ash even this far north for weeks now. Honestly, it was all rather depressing. High as he was, he could see dozens of men climbing all over Laketown, which was slowly being dismantled. About a fourth of the houses had been brought down, and the pieces transported to several boats docked nearby, where dozens more were waiting to receive them.

"Those men do work quickly when they want to, don't they?" he remarked idly to one of the guards that was standing watch.

"Aye, that they do. Of course it helps that it's getting to be bloody cold these days, and they need the wood for fires to keep them all from freezing to death over the winter. They're also gathering up the windows from yon town on the lake to try to fit them in their new homes so they can get a bit of light without bringing the cold in with it."

"What are the folks on the boats doing with the wood?"

"Taking the nails out, o' course. Any ones can't just be reused will be given to us to be melted down and made into new ones. Our craftsmen will have plenty o' work to keep 'em warm and busy this winter."

"I thought the most pressing repairs were already done?"

"Aye, they were. Still lots to be done, but all the important stuff is out of the way. No, we've reams of forging to do. Word of the caravan coming through spread ahead of it. All the little villages of men between here and the Blue Mountains brought goods to sell along the road and put in orders for things when they found out none of them would be around long enough to do the work then and there. All kinds of things--pots and plows and locks and gates, a few for knives and swords, cups and bowls. We even got a few orders for jewel work, fancy cloak pins and the like. Our sister is trying to get 'erself ranked as a journeyman, so lots of work means she'll have plenty o' chances to show off and show 'er mettle. We didna have the materials back west for her to have too many opportunities before, so this should be good for her."

"Oh, well, I'm glad to hear it. Dis…the princess, said much the same. Not enough good materials to exercise her craft before. She's been locked away in her work room more often than not since she arrived, and has been putting the boys…the princes, through their paces. They got a lot of practice blacksmithing with their uncle, but not as much working with jewels…though Fili at least got a
chance to do engraving on some of the fancier orders. I guess I'm just not a good judge of things. They've each shown me several bowls and plates with fine engraving work on it that I thought were quite beautiful, but they insist they're garbage and not fit to be seen."

"No one wants to put forth less than their best effort, is all. If I recall, neither of the princes are masters of their crafts yet. They won't ever be if they canna present a flawless work. We've a reputation for excellent craftsmanship. You don't hold on to that if you allow shoddy work to get out into the world."

"I suppose. Though I honestly didn't see any flaws. It was lovely work and I told them so."

He peered down towards Dale, trying to see if he could see people out and about in the city.

"Trying ta see the market? It's open. Their womenfolk, youngins and old folks are still there, it's only the young men that are working on the town there."

"Ah, good. I didn't want to walk all the way down there if there was no one in the city."

"You're heading down there now? Best let the folks downstairs know. They'll provide ye an escort."

"Oh, I don't want to be a bother. It isn't that far. I'm sure I can manage." Bilbo laughed.

Borin and Corin exchanged an alarmed look over the hobbit's head. Should the king learn he'd wandered off without an escort and anything happened to him, it would likely be their heads on a pike--but he was well known to be both stubborn and independent, which meant convincing him was going to be difficult, unless they came up with a good reason.

"It's a safety issue. Everyone's encouraged to go in pairs." Corin said hurriedly.

"Aye, uh… Sudden storms and the like. Sometimes whip up outa nowhere this time of year."

"And we are still seeing the occasional orc."

"That's right. Better safe than sorry."

"And these sudden storms are dangerous enough you need to go in pairs?" Bilbo said dubiously.

"Oh definitely!"

"Hail!"

"Large enough to crack yer skull!"

"Sudden snowdrifts!"

"Bury ye right under in an eyeblink!"

"Wild rain storms!"

"Aye, come sheeting down the mountain and'll wash ye away right into the river and off ter the sea before you know it!"

"Twisters!"

"Big wind spouts that'll whip ye right off the ground and off to foreign parts!"
"Very dangerous."

"Best take an escort."

"G-goodness. I had no idea."

"Ye just wait a mo and I'll see if any of the lads was planning to head that way. Ye can just join their group, see? No trouble at all."

Bilbo gave a wary look at the sky and land around them and nodded slowly. "Yes…perhaps that will be for the best."

Borin and Corin relaxed and grinned at one another. Crisis averted.

Before Bilbo quite knew how it happened, he found himself perched atop a goat and bracketed to all sides by a burly dwarven warrior in full armor.

"So, seven of us to Dale! What are all your names?"

"Fron"

"Ron"

"Dibley"

"Mack"

"Uther"

"Umar"

Bilbo waited a moment to see if they'd offer anything more, but they stayed silent.

"Well met, everyone. I've never ridden a goat before. It's much nicer than a pony…not that my pony wasn't a lovely thing, but well, she was just a little too wide to really offer a little fellow like me a comfortable seat. This is much better. Our goats in the Shire aren't big enough to ride…our pigs either. We usually just walk everywhere, not that we usually go very far. Why, before I joined the Company, the furthest I'd ever been was to Bree!"

"You've come a long way since." Fron commented.

"And don't I know it! I've seen far more of the world than even my ancestors did when they wandered. Some of them wandered a bit towards Rohan, but they never went very far south. Everyone else just crossed the mountains and started west till they eventually reached the Shire. I've already been further east, south, west and north than any of them, past or present! If I were anything but a hobbit, I'd probably be quite famous among my people. As it stands though, I've likely lost all trace of respectability. Ah well. Live and learn, I suppose. Looking back, I think perhaps respectability is overrated."

"I always thought so." Ron agreed.

"So… not a talkative bunch, are you?"

"We're keeping an eye out." this from Dibley.
"You don’t really think a sudden storm or a tornado is going to hit, do you?"

The dwarves exchanged a look over his head.

"Never can tell. Could be. Best to be on the lookout just in case." Was Umar's take on things.

"Yes, I suppose that would be wise. So… what is the city like? I haven’t had a chance to see it before. I was busy with the ship and with cleaning all this time."

"It's nice enough, I suppose. The market areas are the middle parts. The upper parts are all homes. There's some shops and a few restaurants." Mack this time.

"What's in the lowest area?"

"Fish, and a lot of empty spaces for traders to set up in when they come. I was too young to remember Erebor and Dale before the dragon came, but me mam said Dale used to triple in size when the traders came, and you could find most anything in the markets there. No traders have been through yet, so it's likely slim pickings." Uther answered.

"Well, I guess we'll see, won't we? I do hope they at least have some yarn. I used up all mine. I've still four more scarves and pairs of gloves to make."

Uther, who was in the lead, patted his own hobbit-made scarf fondly. He'd been worried about them standing guard on the overlook with the weather getting colder and had started making scarves for everyone that worked the front gate. Mack, who was one of those who'd not gotten a set yet, perked up and smiled. It did get cold on guard duty.

As they neared the city they could smell fish, cooking meat, ale and hear the sound of many voices. His dwarven escort nodded to the fellows watching at the gate and started downward once inside the city limits.

Bilbo craned his head around in interest. Everything seemed built on a grand scale—though honestly, after Erebor he was a bit hard to impress these days. Large stone buildings, all of them with red tile roofs, towered high overhead to either side of the winding streets. He caught the occasional flash of sunlight sparkling on glass, but most of the buildings had their shutters closed tight and stuffed with rags around the edges. Most of the buildings in the residential section had window boxes, and throughout the city could be seen the remnants of trellises and arbors that spanned the road in places. The city would be rather beautiful in spring and summer if they utilized them. He rather hoped they did; this poor blasted countryside certainly needed some color.

The market area did have some folks in it, though not many as so many were working on tearing down the old village. It was slow enough that the shopkeepers all perked up when they saw all of them coming.

There was an empty building at the end where they left the goats, before heading off to the shops on foot. There were all sorts of things on display—shoes, scarves, books, paint, cooking spices and oil, candles and candy. Bilbo was delighted.

He scurried into the first shop on the end and wandered through the whole place, grabbing small items as he wandered. He spotted a rather nice lantern; he sometimes needed a bit more light for reading in the evening, and open flame candles and books were always a dangerous mix. Something like that would certainly come in handy. He studied it a bit longer and set it back with some regret. He had a feeling the dwarves' feelings would be hurt if he brought back anything made of metal. No problem, he had quite enough to be getting on with already. He headed to the till and set his basket down with a thump.
"Quite a haul there."

"Well, yes. With snow coming more often, I don't know when next I'll really have a chance to come down here. Not to mention I'm now a bit paranoid about sudden freak weather flinging me off to parts unknown…"

"I don't follow. What freak weather?"

"Oh, the gate guards in the mountain mentioned that I should travel with a group…” he explained his earlier conversation. "After they said all that, I realized that I honestly should have thought of that myself. I read a traveler's log from a fellow that spent some time in Rohan. Tornadoes are a problem there, because of all the open grasslands. He even said hail sometimes comes first. And I suppose heavy rain pouring off the mountain really could sweep a small fellow like me right off my feet. After the dragon's rampage, any small bushes and the like that were out on the plain are gone now. There's plenty of room for a small dust devil to form up into a giant twister. He lived through one, you know. He said it was terrifying. Hail came raining down, then the sky got dark and kind of green…then it got real still and then there was a great roar. It was the wind. It was blowing so hard it sounded like a great beast about to attack! He said it looked sort of pretty from far away, twisting across the grasslands…but then it got close and he said he could barely stand and there was debris flying everywhere and he covered his eyes so he wasn't blinded… then he saw the twister touch down, tear up a couple of houses and a dozen horses and just suck them right up before it continued on its way!"

Bilbo shivered.

"I can't even imagine. I suppose your fellows in the tower are probably watching for that as well? Well! If one does come through, I'm sure we'll all be happy to be behind thick stone walls, not trapped out in open grasslands like those poor horses…not to mention any people that were in those houses! Brrr! Gives me the shivers just imagining it! I like my feet on the ground, thank you."

"Don't we all." the shopkeeper said faintly as she handed over his purchases.

"Well, thank you! Have a nice day!"

"You too. Um…green, you said?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Green skies mean a wind spout?"

"That's what I read."

"Hmmm. Maybe I should tell the boys in the tower to keep an eye out. We never got nothing like that in these parts before…not that I can remember, anyhow."

"It probably wouldn't be a bad idea."

"Take care now."

"You as well."

"What say we all break for lunch?" Alfrid Lickspittle whined pitifully. The rest of the men there, who had actually been working all this time, eyed him with contempt.
"How about we get the last of the windows before we do that? We've only what... four more houses
to do? A lot of people are waiting on them." one of the men growled.

"So they'll get them tonight. The ship's just about weighed down. I don't think we can fit no more. I
should sail it on back to town and let them unload. By the time they do that you'll be done eating and
I should be back by the time you've cleared the rest o' the houses. Same for the wood piles. They're
full up, and we've got eight barrels o' nails." Alfrid, undaunted, appealed to Bard.

"We should just take them back and come out tomorrow to get more. By the time we unload all that
stuff it'll be near dinner time."

"I'm talking lunch and you're worrying about dinner! I'm hungry now!"

Bard held up his hands for quiet as all the men started arguing. He eyed the boats, which were
actually quite full--overfull even. Given the size of the haul it was going to take a while to unload it
all once they got back to Dale.

"We'll break for the day and eat on the ride back to town. We can get all this unloaded and parcelled
out today and bring them back empty tomorrow." he decided.

The men cheered. They'd been out here since dawn or near enough. It was cold on the water, and
had been certainly no picnic prying apart their former town, which they'd built to last. They were all
tired and stiff from the work they'd done and were looking forward to getting home.

"Winds are picking up. Might be a storm coming in."

"Just as well we're heading home then. I hope it doesn't rain too much. The wood takes long enough
to dry out as it is."

There were plenty of ready hands to haul the wood and windows back to the city when they arrived
at the temporary docks they'd set up. Even so, it was a time consuming process. The bundles of
wood were simply tossed arm to arm till they reached the city walls. The barrels were carefully rolled
to shore and then up the road. The windows took special handling, and were taking the longest to
unload.

"We're going to be here all day at this rate."

"More working, less complaining, Lickspittle. We can still toss ya in the river if ya like."

"Yeah. Don't think we didn't notice how you tried to get out of doing anything."

"I'm not a ruddy construction worker!"

"Neither am I, and yet here I am. Get ta work and be more careful with those! If ya break any of 'em,
they're the ones going in yer house!"

"Too right they are."

Alfrid glowered at everyone and hunched his shoulders under their frigid stares. Several of the
townsmen had objected to him getting an equal share of the Laketown treasury along with the rest of
them. That he'd not stopped complaining even after such a windfall hadn't done any more to endear
him to the rest of them.

"Move a bit faster. If there's a storm coming in, I don't want to be stuck out here when it breaks."

Bard ordered.
Everyone else picked up the pace. Alfrid crept around until he was out of sight of everyone and hunkered down for a bit of a break. They'd been working him like a dog…trying to. He hadn't put up with it. He'd taken a nap when the work crew had moved off to the next house. It had been cold with all the windows gone, but, eh, still better than working. He'd only been awake now for two hours, but he was tired again. All this slave driving was for the birds. He missed the Master something fierce. Times were good when he was the fella in charge. He hunkered down into the hold behind some tar barrels and wriggled a bit to make himself comfy. A little nap wouldn't hurt anyone. He was sure to hear them when they finished up. He could just slip in the back of the group and pretend he'd been there all along.

"That's the last of 'em. We need to get moving. That sky doesn't look good at all."

"Horses ain't happy about it either."

"Where's Lickspittle?"

"Who cares? The little rat slunk off again. Good riddance. Maybe he'll drown."

Two of them grabbed the horses and began leading them towards the city, while the rest started pushing the wagons from the back so they'd move a bit faster. They'd only gotten about half-way down the road when the bell in the tower began clanging a warning.

"Do they know something we don't?"

"I don't know. I do know I don't want to be out here anymore. Come on, lads! Give her a good push!"

"OW!"

"Bloody hell, what the…"

"It's hail. Move faster!"

Luckily for them, the horses, burdened as they were, wanted out bad enough that they dug in their heels and started trotting for the gates.

"Damn! These winds are crazy!"

"Da…"

"Stay close, Bain!"

"I hope we tied the ships up well enough!"

"Come on, ladies, put yer back into it!"

The horses put on a final burst of speed as a horrendous roar filled the skies.

"Bloody hell! Look at the size o' that wind devil!"

"That's not a wind devil… Run!"

Even once inside the walls, the winds were terrible. The horses, knowing warmth and safety lay just ahead, didn't need to be steered back to their stables. There was just room for all of them and the two wagons, though it was a tight fit. It took two of them to wrestle the doors shut and drop the bar to keep it in place. The others got the shutters on the windows closed just as a horrendous cacophony
erupted outside. They could hear debris pelting the roof overhead.

"WWWAAAAAAAUUUUUUHHHHHHHHHHH!"

"Uh…did the rest of you hear that?"

"Yeah."

"Sounded like someone screaming."

"Sounded like that bastard Lickspittle."

"Can't ha' been him. That sound went shooting past us."

"He's right. Who ever knew that bastard to move that fast?"

"Maybe he spotted some gold. That's about the only thing that would do it."

The men all laughed. Two of them started unharnessing the horses, while the rest hunkered down to wait out the storm.

"I don't know where you put it. Most grown men can only finish one of those."

"It's our superpower."

"It's something, all right."

Bilbo licked the last of the gravy from his fingers and dabbed his lips with a napkin, before sitting back in his seat looking quite content.

"Master Peabody's Meat Pies. You sir, I shall certainly remember!" Bilbo laughed, patting his stomach.

"Always nice to be appreciated." Peabody laughed.

"Ah, after that I need a pipe and a nice nap…unfortunately, I'm here in the city with some others, and I don't want to either be left behind, or miss out on a chance to finish my shopping. I think next time I'm in your fine city, I'll save your meat pies for the walk back, so I can actually have a nap afterwards! In fact…that actually sounds like just the thing. I shall have to remember to stop by before we leave!"

"Blimey! Don't tell me you think you can eat another! Why, each of them is near big as you are! Where do you put them?"

"A question that has haunted the ages, apparently, considering how often I'm asked that question in just that tone of voice! I daresay you'd been flabbergasted by my relatives! Why, I'm not even considered a particularly big eater by Shire standards! Why, once upon a time, my old granny could usually out eat all of us and then drink us under the table to round it off!"

"My word."

Bilbo just chuckled good-naturedly and wandered out of the pie shop to continue his explorations. He was nearly to the end of the market district. His new friends from the guard station had offered to take his various purchases back to the goats as he'd gone along, so he'd been able to just wander at
will without being weighed down. He did hope he hadn't gone too overboard. He didn't want to weigh down the poor goat, after all.

To his delight, he'd finally found someone selling wool. He'd been half-afraid the remaining guards would have to remain scarfless and gloveless until he was able to get more from the Shire in Spring, which would rather defeat the whole purpose.

"Oh, my goodness. You've quite a stock here. Look at all the colors! Sadly, the poor guards will have to stick with green and yellow, as those are the colors I used for everyone else… but that doesn't mean I can't indulge my friends in a bit of…oh! …that's definitely Ori's color and…oh!" Bilbo picked up one of the skeins of yarn and ran his hands over it in wonder. "What is this?"

"Wool. That stuff there is from the long-haired goats hereabouts. The rest of them are regular sheep wool. Goat wool's more expensive."

"This is the softest wool I've ever felt. Oh, this is lovely! Goodness…I don't know if there will be any room on my poor, beleaguered goat…but then again, wool's not very heavy, so… No. Bad Bilbo. Think of the poor goat. Stick to what you need!"

The shopkeeper bit her lip to keep from laughing at the little man arguing with himself so earnestly.

When Bilbo finally left the shop, he had a large sack flung over one shoulder, all of it full of skeins of yarn. He'd tried very hard to only get the green and yellow he needed, but there were so many lovely colors, he hadn't been able to resist grabbing just a few more.
He ran into Uther outside. Uther looked at the giant sack he was carrying, sighed, and held out a hand to take it.

"It's luck we have seven goats with us. We're going to need them."

Bilbo, rather embarrassed now, handed it over. He glanced up to get an idea of how late it was and frowned at the sky worriedly. "My word. That doesn't look promising at all."

Uther nodded. "Yeah. I came looking for you so we could return to where we left the goats and get under cover. It looks like a wicked storm rolling in."

"Probably a good idea. Where are the others?"

"Just ahead there. They've been helping Ron find something for his anniversary."

"Oh, well that was nice of them. Have they been married long?"

"Only a year."

"When is their anniversary? I should bake them a cake or some…AAAHHH!"

Bilbo stumbled, suddenly seeing stars.

Uther glanced back at him and paled, then flinched as he started being pelted by hail. He whistled sharply, calling the others, and grabbed hold of Bilbo, who was stumbling around looking rather dazed.

"What is…oh, damn! The king's gonna kill us!"

"One of you slap some snow on it or something. The rest of you, shields up."

"Yes sir!"
As they were unstrapping their shields from their backs, a sudden gust of wind whipped down the street, carrying dirt and leaves with it. They all closed their eyes and turned their heads away so they wouldn't be blinded, only to snap them open when they heard an alarmed shriek.

"AAAAHHHHH!"

"GET HIM, BOYS!"

"LET HIM GO, RUDDY WIND! THAT THERE'S OUR HOBBIT!"

Bilbo, who had been facing the oncoming gust and was still rather dazed from being slammed in the head with a golf-ball sized chunk of hail, got a face full of dirt and leaves before being sent stumbling backwards, out of control. He was pretty sure he'd felt his feet leave the ground at least once.

"AH, CRAP!"

"GET HIM QUICK! THERE'S A WIND SPOUT A COMIN'!"

The dwarves lunged as the wind kicked up a notch higher, lifting Bilbo right off the ground. They managed to catch him before he was swept away. Once they had him wedged between them, they put their shields up to protect them from the flying debris and started quick-stepping to the nearest shelter.

"DIDNA YA HEAR US, BLOODY WIND?"

"THIS ONE'S OURS! GET YER OWN!"

They all stopped, and looked up in astonishment as the wind spout careened past the city. It seemed to be screaming in anguished denial.

"WWWAAAAAAUUUUUUUHHHHHHHHH!"

The dwarves exchanged a panicked glance and began trotting faster.

"Hurry up boys, before it comes back!"

Up on the lookout, from the safety of the doorway, Borin and Corin could only gape at the tornado that was hopping across the plain, before eating most of Laketown and several boats.

"Blimey. We're bloody prophets!"

"Cor, you're right. We've got the gift o' prophecy! Wait till we tell mam."

They both winced as a large, shredded section of a roof landed on the edge of the lookout before tumbling off and crashing far below.

"They called everyone in and shut the gates. It should be fine."

Corin just nodded, still marveling at the destruction left behind after just a few minutes. He suddenly realized something and turned to his brother in horror.

"The king's hobbit is still out in this."

"I hope they're all under cover. Between the hail and the chunks of Laketown that are raining
"The king's gonna kill us, ain't he?"

"I think there's a good chance of it, yeah. The rest of 'is Company will likely stomp what's left of us inta paste."

"I really hope they're under cover."

They gripped each other's hands and turned imploring eyes to the west.

"Oh Lord Mahal, creator of our race, please watch over our hobbit!"

"Please. We don't wanna die!"

They both flinched when they heard a wail of terror and peeked outside, only to duck back in when they saw half a ship coming right at them.

"WWWAAAAAAUUUUUUUHHHHHHHHHHH!"

There was a horrific crash and thud. They peeked outside, half afraid of what they'd see. They crept up to the edge of the lookout and peered over the side, only to see a horribly maimed man sliding down the gates, only to tumble the rest of the way and land with a meaty thud on the ground far below amidst the wreckage, which was still raining down.

"Mahal! Look at that poor bastard!"

The man twitched once and went still, obviously dead.

"Prolly should warn the lads about the mess when they open the gates back up."

His brother could only nod.

"Thorin!"

The council meeting with the newly chosen heads of all the guilds came to an abrupt halt as the doors to the council chambers slammed open to reveal a wild-eyed Kili in the doorway with his sword out.

"Kee?" Fili asked worriedly.

"Kili? What is the meaning of this?"

"A wind demon tried to kidnap Bilbo!"

Thorin just stared at him blankly as he tried to make sense of what had just been told to him.

"What in Mahal's name?" Balin huffed impatiently.

"Yer getting a might old to be playing such tricks." Dwalin, who was standing guard behind Thorin, echoed his brother.

"It's no trick! A group of guardsmen went down to Dale with him earlier because he wanted to see the city and he nearly got carried off! They said it howled in fury when they managed to rescue him!
It was so mad that it grabbed some man from Dale instead and killed him!"

"What?"

"It's true! The folks at the gate saw him! The wind demon flung him at our mountain and squished him!"

"Where's the hobbit now?" Dwalin demanded as the guild heads all began talking at once.

"He's in his room with Oin…"

"He was hurt?" Fili gasped.

"Yeah, I'm not sure how badly though. Mum, and Gloin and Bombur's wives are with him waiting for Oin's prognosis."

Thorin half-rose from his seat, but then sat back down when he realized he was still in the middle of a meeting.

"Fili, go with your brother. Keep me updated."

Fili looked for a moment like he was going to protest, but he swallowed down his words and left, after briefly touching his uncle's shoulder in commiseration on his way out. He shut the door behind himself and glanced at it, before sighing and starting towards Bilbo's rooms.

"What's with you?" Kili asked after they'd started walking.

"I think I just really understood for the first time what it means that I'll be king someday."

"What do you mean?"

"Well… I think I got my head turned a bit. Crown prince of Erebor, richest dwarf kingdom in the world, living in a room with diamond studded murals on the walls. It was a big change from before." he explained. Kili nodded with perfect understanding. It really was a big change to go from relative nobody to being the rich and famous "Kili Dragonslayer" practically overnight.

"But it's more than that. It has some nice perks, but at the end of the day what it really means is having to stay away when you want to be elsewhere because everyone is depending on you. It means humbling yourself to get house room and making nice with people who let you down because everyone is counting on you… It means not really getting a chance to take a moment for yourself, because you have to be strong for everyone else. I always knew uncle made sacrifices for us when we were little… I don't think I really understood until right now that he's been making sacrifices for everyone pretty much his whole life or near enough because that was his job."

"Well, we always knew uncle was pretty awesome."

"That we did. I think we didn't appreciate how awesome though."

Kili nodded thoughtfully. He spotted Bilbo's door up ahead and his face creased in worry. "I hope Bilbo is alright. I don't even want to think what it will do to Thorin if anything happens to him."

"I don't want anything to happen to Bilbo either, but I don't think you're giving uncle enough credit. He's lost people before…"

"Too many people, and all of them a long time ago…and mostly people who could have been counted on to take care of him while he was trying to take care of everyone else. Bilbo is really the
only one he ever really just let take care of him. Even Amad he never really let do that. He's her older brother, so he figures it's his job to take care of her. Bilbo takes care of him and won't be put off."

"And not because he's king either."

"Yeah, he's never been too impressed with the whole 'king under the mountain' thing. If he thinks he's being a bit of an idiot he tells him so."

They both snickered, remembering some of their arguments. It was always funny to watch. Thorin, for all he could be gruff and stubborn, wasn't really much for shouting…except at Bilbo, but it was alright because Bilbo always shouted back, and never seemed to care that Thorin was a king or that he was twice his size.

They exchanged a last worried glance and ducked into Bilbo's sitting room, which was filled with color from the sunset coming through the windows. All the Company, minus Oin, Thorin, Dwalin and Balin were there. Gloin and Gimli were sharpening their axes, Dori was polishing his flail, Nori was sharpening the many knives he kept secreted about his person. Bombur was stress-cooking, Bifur and Bofur were fretting, Ori was stress-knitting. The scarf he was making was already about four foot long and he showed no signs of stopping.

"Any word from Oin yet?"

"No. Not yet. Not sure if that's a good sign or a bad one."

The boys nodded and moved to take seats with the rest.

"Tell us what ye know about his here wind demon that thinks it can just attack our hobbit and get away with it."

"Don't forget that poor fella from Dale."

"Where do wind demons hale from? We need a direction to travel if we're going to mount a quest and avenge our burglar."

"I can check the archives." Ori offered.

"See if you can find out how to kill one. Not gonna do us much good if we can't land a hit and just get blown away."

"If it can pick folks up there some parts solid enough to hit! Just let me at 'em!"

"That's the spirit, Gimli me lad! We'll give that ruddy bastard what for!"

"Too right we will!"

Gloin and Gimli began chortling madly, as did Bifur, who seemed to approve of their fighting spirit.

"Prolly came from the north. Lots o' unsavory things up that way. Seems to be where bad things come from."

"Except when they come from the south."

"Or the east."
"Yeah. Leaves a lot of ground to cover, doesn't it?"

"Probably some eastern bastard. They all cavort with demons in foreign parts, everyone knows that."

"Think it was traders? Maybe they wanted the flying ship and just figured they'd steal Bilbo too, since he's the one usually flies it."

"Yeah, that was probably it. Bastards!"

"Probably some of those folks what roams the badlands on those smelly hump-horses. They saw a chance to roam around in comfort, away from all that stinking sand and grabbed it!"

"Or maybe it was the sea folks. They're always battling each other out on the water. They saw a chance to get an unbeatable ship and rule the seas!"

"Or maybe it was those Wainriders. Their chief wanted a fancier transport and called up a demon to acquire it!"

"It might have been Gondor. They've been fighting Mordor for years and they don't have a flying ship. They're probably mad and decided to steal it!"

"What if wasn't any of them...what if...what if wind demons eat hobbits!"

Ori gasped and paled. Dori sent an affronted look Fili's way and covered his little brother's ears.

"I don't want Bilbo to be eaten!" Kili wailed.

The whole group turned as one as Oin, Dis, and Frigg and Rumla--Gloin and Bombur's wives--exited Bilbo's room and joined the rest of them.

"Is he alright?"

"Aye. Got a knot the size of me fist and a bad gash that bled all over, but he'll live. Poor mite's in a bit of pain and feeling cranky, but he'll recover."

"Damned wind demon!"

"What?"

"Didn't you hear? A wind demon tried to steal and eat him!"

"I thought he got caught on the edge of a wind spout?"

"It was a wind demon! It tried to kidnap Bilbo, but the guards rescued him and told it to go away. It screamed in fury and then picked up a man of Dale and smashed him against our mountain! The guards all said so!"

"I've never heard of such a thing as a wind demon."

"It was screaming!"

"Well! The nerve of the thing. No matter. If it comes back we'll be waiting and we'll give it what for." Rumla scoffed.
"But as it was probably just a wind spout I wouldn't hold my breath." Frigg objected.

"I'm still going to check the archives." Ori said stubbornly. The rest of them nodded grim agreement.

"Suit yourselves. If there is such a thing, it will only help us be prepared." Dis sighed. "Bombur? You've been cooking? Good. Dish up a plate for our hobbit, and then we should probably leave him to rest."

"But we want to see him!"

"Uncle did ask me to keep him updated."

"Go ahead and peek in on him, but don't linger too...long. Why do I even bother?" she sighed as the whole group stampeded towards the door—except for Bombur, who made a detour to the kitchen first to fill a tray.

"BILBO!" all eight of them shouted as they charged into the room.

"Ach. I'm sure he appreciates that with his aching head." Frigg tutted.

"Our males are a bunch of idiots." Rumla added.

"Don't lump me in with them. I know better." Oin grumbled.

"Very well. That seems to be the last of it. I look forward to seeing your work in the coming years."

"We'll do our very best sire."

"Aye, that we will. The craftsmanship of Erebor will once again be known world-wide."

"It'll take a while to clear out all the back orders—we'll take a bit of a hit to our reputation, with so many left unfilled for a hundred and fifty years, but at least we've a good excuse for the lapse. Luckily our folks have always kept excellent records...sadly, it will be a bit of bother tracking down descendants after all this time, since a lot of the clients were men. Ah well, we'll do our best."

"That's all anyone can ask for." Thorin assured them. "Now that we've gotten all this out of the way, in the next few weeks Princess Dis will likely be meeting with you each individually. You'll be reporting any problems to her, and she'll bring them to me if she feels whatever the problem is warrants my intervention."

"Alright, sire, we'll be expecting her."

"I'll have the finished contracts we all agreed on to all of you by next week." Balin added. He stood and cracked his back with a wince. He wasn't getting any younger, and guild negotiations were hell even on a young dwarf.

"It's getting late. That will be all."

Thorin nodded regally to all the guild masters as they passed. When the last of them was gone, he groaned, took off his crown and slumped in his seat tiredly.

"All damned day. I thought this meeting would never end."

"Well, look at it this way, laddie, at least now that it's done it won't have to be done again unless
circumstances change significantly. They all left satisfied, which is the important part. No mountain
can survive without the whole-hearted support of the guilds, not if you want it to be a happy and
prosperous place, anyway. The lower than usual taxes for the first five years was a good thought."

"Bilbo was right about there being a ridiculous amount of gold in the treasury. Truthfully we don't
need the taxes, but that won't always be the case given how much of it we've been sending out
everywhere. I don't want to bankrupt the kingdom over time, but neither do I want to unfairly burden
the populace when they're all trying to start over. I didn't want to leave the lower taxes for too long
either, as it would be a much greater shock when the normal rates kick back in otherwise. A five year
grace period was the best I could come up with."

"It was a good thought. It will help our people a lot. Let's just hope they don't get too giddy at their
sudden wealth and go wild with it. It's been a long lean season for all of us."
"Something I'm all too aware of, believe me."

"You look tired, lad. Get something to eat and then get some sleep. We've got all the smith guilds
squared away. There's still the miners, stonecutters, architects and engineers, as well as the
merchants, the jewelers, the weavers, glassmakers, potters, soldiers, housekeeping and food service
guilds to get through."

"Don't remind me." Thorin groaned.

The three of them made their way to the palace dining room. It was empty but for the three of them.
Everyone else had already eaten. The kitchen staff brought food soon after they arrived. It was a bit
dry, since it had been left warming for a while as they'd all missed dinner, but they were tired and
hungry enough they didn't really care. Oin appeared when they were nearly done eating.

"Hello."

"How's our hobbit?"

"Same as earlier. I wasn't expecting any problems, but head injuries are tricky sometimes. I thought it
best to check on him, make sure nothing changed. He was coherent, can still speak Westron,
Sindarin and a wee bit o' Quenya, can walk around and touch his nose when asked, no blown pupils,
so there's no concussion. We got another meal into him and some more willow bark tea, I changed
the dressings on his wound and he went to bed. He was asleep when I left, so if you want to see him
wait till morning."

"That's good to hear. We were all rather alarmed when Kili came in shouting about a wind demon."

"It probably wasn't, just a regular tornado, which is bad enough on its own, and some poor soul from
Dale that got sucked up ship and all and smashed into the mountain. Ori's still planning to check the
archives for wind demons even so."

"Let us hope it was only a storm. I think we can all agree demon attacks are not something any of us
wants to deal with."

"That we don't."

"We'll probably be getting some orders from them for glass for windows. They still had four houses
worth to recover, but can't now as the wind spout tore apart what was left of Laketown and half their
fleet o' ships before it moved on. That one fella was killed, but that still means three families left
without, so we'll likely be hearing from them at some point."

"Good to know."
"Well, I'm for bed. Goodnight, all."

"Good night, Oin."

Balin patted Thorin on the arm as he rose to go find his bed as well. "There lad, see? He'll be fine. We'll likely see him in the morning at breakfast, ornery as ever."

"Don't stay up all night brooding, or you'll be miserable to be around tomorrow." Dwalin added.

Thorin sighed and rolled his eyes at the brothers.

"Good night." he said rather pointedly.

"Good night to yourself as well, most gracious majesty." Balin snarked back. Dwalin snickered, holding up a hand in farewell as he followed his brother from the room.

Thorin finished eating and rose, to stretch and shuffle off to his room. He managed to resist temptation while performing his evening ablutions, but afterwards found himself lying sleepless in bed, and trying not to look at the door that connected his room to Bilbo's. He had promised himself he wouldn't abuse his access. He had passed it off to Bilbo as an odd quirk of dwarven architecture, but in truth it was there because Bilbo's rooms had once belonged to his grandmother, the former queen of Erebor. His grandparents had maintained separate rooms so that, on nights like tonight, when kingdom business kept him for long hours, he would not disturb his grandmother's rest unduly, as she often had to be up first thing with his father when he was young. That wasn't the only reason, of course. It also gave her a place of her own, to entertain her own friends, work on her own projects, and a place to retreat when grandfather's snoring go too much. He and Bilbo did not share such a relationship. Barging into his room was a betrayal of trust… but he knew himself well enough to realize he would get no sleep this night until he'd verified Oin's prognosis with his own eyes. He struggled for nearly an hour longer before finally cursing his weakness and slipping out of bed.

"Just a peek, and then back to your own room." he ordered himself as he slowly opened the door and slipped inside.

The moment he was inside, he realized Bilbo was moving restlessly in his sleep and making small, distressed noises. He was illuminated by the spill of moonlight falling through the window, so he could see him clearly. His head was swathed in a white bandage that did little to disguise the size of the lump beneath it, or the extensive bruising. His heart clenched at the sight. He knew, now that he'd seen him, he should go back to his own room, but his feet carried him to the bed without his conscious decision to do so.

"I can't just leave him suffering a nightmare." he argued with himself.

He reached out, tentatively and rubbed lightly at his head, far from his injury. Without quite intending to, his fingers slipped down to stroke lightly at his cheek, only to freeze when Bilbo's eyes fluttered open, confused and still half-asleep.

"Thorin?"

"My apologies. I did not mean to wake you." Thorin replied quietly. "I was in meetings all day and could not come sooner. I wanted to see with my own eyes that you were alright."

"s'okay. I wasn't having much fun sleeping."
"Nightmares?"

"…"

"I heard you when I came in. I was just going to peek in and seek my own bed…"

"I was dazed and seeing stars when the tornado sped past us. It was out on the plain and we were in the city, but the winds were terrible. I felt myself get lifted off the ground. If those guards hadn't of been with me… I was going to go alone, but the fellows at the gate warned me it might be dangerous. I was going to ignore them, but they said there were some that were planning to head down anyway, so it wasn't any trouble. If that hadn't of been the case, I would have been alone and it might have been me smashed against the mountain. We saw him, you know, when we came back…"

Bilbo swallowed thickly, his gaze haunted

"I threw up when I saw him. He was like a bag full of jelly. They said every bone in his body was broken… There was blood on the mountain…blood everywhere. I just keep seeing him and thinking 'that could have been me'. " he smiled then, one of his fake smiles that he seemed to sprout when he didn't know what else to do. "I haven't gotten much sleep, as you can imagine. My head still hurts, so it's hard to fall asleep in the first place, and then I keep…"

Thorin sat gingerly on the side of the bed, wary of imposing too greatly, and reached out to lay a hand on Bilbo's arm.

"You must think I'm being ridiculous. After all we've been through, a wind storm…"

"That wind storm, from what I've been told, tore apart what was left of Laketown, as well as several of their ships. Orcs, goblins, trolls, dragons… they're all living things, however fearsome. They can be reasoned with, spoken to… it does not do you any good, but you can. A wind storm cannot. It is mindless and destructive, with no motive and no chance of turning it aside."

"Still…"

"Would you like me to stay until you fall back asleep?"

"I don't want to be a bother, or keep you from your rest."

"If it was a bother I would not have offered."

"Still seems silly."

"Were you not the one who told me there was no shame in asking for help when you were hurting?"

"That was completely different. You nearly got bit in half by a warg. I just got a fright and a bump on the head."

"Bilbo…"

"And no fair using my own words against me."

A faint smile creased Thorin's face and he repeated his question. "Would you like me to stay?"

A wind outside set the pine trees to dancing, which made the moon-drenched shadows careen about the room. Bilbo shivered in disquiet and scooched over, throwing back the covers.
"Yes please." he admitted in a small voice.

Thorin's heart lurched. He had been planning to sit by his side until he fell asleep, but how could he turn down such an invitation?

"Stop that right now. He's injured and afraid. It wasn't a proposition. Behave yourself." he told himself sternly as he slipped into the bed.

They lay there awkwardly for a moment once he was settled. That would never do. Thorin raised his arm in invitation. "Come here."

Bilbo scooched closer. Thorin put his arm around him and pulled him the rest of the way, settling him so his head was pillowed on his chest and shoulder and he formed a warm weight against his side. Bilbo lay there stiffly for several long moments, long enough that Thorin worried he'd greatly miscalculated, but then he went boneless and nuzzled at his chest a moment before settling down.

"Think unsexy thoughts. He's injured."

In an effort to distract himself from how very nice this felt, he cast around for something to talk about.

"Before the wind spout, did you enjoy your trip?"

"Yes, I did. I think that just made how it ended all the worse. There was plenty to see…and I think the poor goats were mostly laden down with my purchases."

"You were in need of so many things? Why did you not speak up sooner? Any member of the company would have been glad to accompany you."

"Oh, I didn't get anything for myself… well, I did get those meat pies. I almost bought a lantern-- I thought having an enclosed flame to read by at night would be safer around my books, but I didn't end up getting it." Bilbo hinted.

If he was lucky, maybe Thorin would make him one when he had some free time.

"No, mostly I bought some more wool so I can finish the guards' scarves and gloves, and I bought some scented soaps I thought Dis, Frigg and Rumla would like, and some rather tasty candies I thought the boys and Bombur's little ones would enjoy… I picked up a few books for Ori to add to the library once I translate them… things like that."

"You spoil everyone and take nothing for yourself."

"I had two lovely meat pies. I meant to go back and get another before we left to eat on the way back, but then the wind spout happened…” Bilbo yawned and snuggled a bit deeper into Thorin's side.

"Where were you all day?"

"Meetings. I'll be tied up all week at least, and possibly for the next few while we get all the guilds' contracts worked out."

"Contracts?"

"Yes, setting prices for work, laying the bounds for good working conditions, setting procedures to air grievances and such. A mountain like this, when it is working properly, runs like a well-oiled machine. Everyone knows who they are and what they can and cannot do, what fair market value is
for their work, who is authorized to do what and so forth. The guilds hold a general meeting and address the wants of their workers, which they then bring to the crown. We and they negotiate the terms of their contracts until both sides are satisfied."

"That seems a sensible way of doing things. We don't have contracts in the Shire. Things like that get sort of worked out along the way. We're a small community. Each Farthing usually takes care of its own local business. Everyone knows each other and knows everything going on--hobbits are terrible gossips--so it just gets sorted over tea, during family visits and the like. Anything that can't be worked out that way gets taken to the Mayor, and everyone has lunch and argues about it for a while until things are decided on. It's all rather informal. It's just generally understood that if you step too far outside sensible and respectable behavior there will be consequences. You'll be politely shunned until you straighten up. That doesn't really happen often. When it does it usually requires a lot of visits, baked goods, and kissing up to prove yourself to the community before you can really get on with things. It's a lot of bother really, so hobbits generally try not to do it." Bilbo yawned again.

Thorin could feel his own eyelids getting droopy though he tried to stay awake. He was supposed to leave.

"This is nice. We should do this every night." Bilbo murmured.

His breathing evened out and Thorin knew he was asleep. He seriously contemplated going back to his own room… but it was warm, and comfortable… and he would probably wake Bilbo if he moved. Plus, hadn't he just implied he wanted him to stay? He was certain he had…

Conscience satisfied, Thorin soon followed him into sleep.

"Morning Loran. Porridge is hot." Besla, head of the household staff in the palace greeted the young dwarf who acted as the king's chamberlain when he came in yawning.

"Ah good. I need to be fortified this morning. Contract negotiations with the smiths' guilds ran late last night. Hopefully his majesty got a good night's sleep. He's a bit of a bear in the mornings otherwise."

"Well, just remind him breakfast should be hot and ready once he's up and ready for the day. That should sweeten him some."

The rest of the cooks tittered. The king, the crown prince and the princess were all a bit grumpy and monosyllabic in the mornings, and ate their breakfast rather mechanically. The younger prince, by contrast, usually greeted the morning with a smile. In fact...

"Good morning, everyone! How are all of you this fine day!" Kili chirped as he sauntered in to the kitchen, inhaling the smell of cooking food with a grin.

"We're well, thank you for asking, highness. Is everyone waiting on breakfast?"

"Yeah. Fili and Amad and Balin and Dwalin are all in the dining room. Bring more coffee. I think they finished what was out there waiting already."

"I'd best go get the king. I hadn't realized it was getting so late."

"It's not that late. I, uh, might have woke everyone up by accident." Kili grinned sheepishly.

"Even so. He'll be grumpy if breakfast is half over before he gets out there."
While Loran bustled off, Kili wandered around the kitchen, to peek in the pots and swipe any unattended warm muffins that might be lying around.

He was in the midst of savoring a warm bran muffin when he saw Loran go bustling past, looking worried.

"Loran?" he called after hurriedly swallowing the muffin.

"Ah...prince Kili, you, uh, didn't happen to see the king wandering around anywhere, did you?"

"No. He's still asleep, as far as I know. I've been up for awhile, and I was talking to the palace guards earlier. If he'd gotten up already or left they would have mentioned it."

"He's not in his room. His surcoat and his crown are laying on the couch. I looked all around and I can't find him anywhere. I even checked his forge to see if he got up early to work on something, but he's not there either. I'm going to be in so much trouble..."

"Well, he has to be around somewhere. The king can't just wander off and no one see him." Besla interjected.

Kili's eyes grew enormous. "Do you think it was the wind demon, back for revenge?"

A nervous stir went through everyone. Besla put her hands on her hips and glared at everyone until they settled down. "Don't go borrowing trouble! Was the king's room a mess? If that out on the plain yesterday was a wind demon, well, they're noisy and messy! I don't think one could sneak in here and steal our king with no one the wiser! And why would it steal our king, anyway? I thought they ate hobbits?"

Kili paled, and turned to run from the room. "BILOOOOOOOOOOO!"

The guards, hearing Kili's cry, came running. The cooks, now alarmed, hefted ladles and frying pans and ran after them. Besla threw up her hands and started loading the food cart.

"Damn youngins!"

Dis, Dwalin, Balin and Fili, hearing the commotion, came running as well.

Bilbo and Thorin snapped awake as the door slammed open, and the whole unruly group charged in, weapons at the ready.

There was a long moment of awkward silence as the two in the bed, and the impromptu war party stared at each other.

"Heh, heh. Uncle! Bilbo! You're still alive. Just checking!" Kili said brightly, while trying to shove everyone back out the door. "It's, uh, time for breakfast...you might want to get up."

The door slammed shut, leaving a ringing silence in its wake.
"Agh. Stinking beast!"

"I never thought I’d say it, but I'm tired of battling orcs."

"I cannot help but agree. What a miserable season. There's no glory to be had in this butcher's work."

"Stand fast, men! Keep in mind, every beast slain now is one less to trouble us later. If we're thorough in our work, it may be an age or more before we need ever fear another attack on our fair city."

"A fact of which I am well aware, my friend. It doesn't make travelling through this blasted wasteland or cutting down these foul creatures any more enjoyable."

BOOMBOBOBOOM

Everyone was left trying to rein in their spooked horses, who danced in place and tossed their heads at the sound of distant explosions.

"What in the world was that?"

"Likely the White wizard. We were at a loss as to how to extract the wyrm from its stone prison. He said he had 'blasting powder' which could explode the rock holding it fast so it could be dug up. I do hope he succeeds. I'd rather not be king of a penniless kingdom. Doesn't sound like a recipe for success."

"My lord father would be no more pleased should I return without the wealth on its scales. I know he's been fretting about the state of our own treasury."

"Well, we'll find out one way or another when we rejoin those we left with the wizards and those elves." Thengel answered absently as he studied the wealth of black stone spread across the interior of Mordor from when Sauron's tower fell.

"Something on your mind, friend?"

"Well...I was just thinking. From what the men told me, Sauron led that dragon to Edoras in an effort to save himself from its wrath. As a result, I lost my treasury and what should have been my home. Edoras will need to be rebuilt. I was just thinking it would be rather fitting if it were rebuilt using the stones of the dark lord's tower. It's certainly sturdy stuff. Tumbling all that great height doesn't seem to have harmed it overmuch. It's so black, it will make for a rather grim hall, but I rather like the symmetry of it."

"Were I you, I would consult with the wizards before making too many plans, my friend...not to mention your lady wife may not be too pleased to be uprooted from her home to go live in a hall built on stone scavenged from Barad Dûr." Ecthelion warned.
"I daresay my lady wife will be displeased no matter what. I've yet to tell her of our imminent departure. She'll not be happy in the least to leave the comforts of the white city to reside in a provincial backwater. That she will reign there as queen will likely be the only comfort she will find. It will not matter overmuch to her I think should the hall be made on the dark lord's leavings, or of solid gold. It will not be Gondor, and that will make it lacking in her eyes."

"A sad state of affairs. Ah well, she'll adjust. Eventually."

"Yes. Eventually." Thengel sighed.

A distant cheer went up, carried on the chill winds that seemed to constantly blast across the icy wasteland that Mordor had become since Sauron's fall.

"It sounds like your countrymen have had some success. We should see how the scavenging progresses. I should like to be done with this place. The sooner the better."

Thengel grimaced at the empty land, filled with sludgy grey snow, colored so by the seemingly endless ashfall Mount Doom had been spewing over the whole countryside the last several weeks. Before they'd left for their extended stay in Mordor, even the white city itself had become a rather dreary grey from the volcano's antics. It had finally stopped, and the skies were once again clear, though winter grey. A most miserable season indeed.

Ecthelion and Thengel turned their horses to start towards the base of Mount Doom, where the men of Rohan and the two wizards were gathered to extract the dragon. Ecthelion glanced southward, where dozens of columns of thick, black smoke rose high into the air, joining together to become a large black cloud.

"Blast it all. We've had clear skies for what, a week? Now we're going to have ashes raining down on our heads again."

Ecthelion shrugged dismissively. "Had to be done. There will be no mercy for any creature that offered succor to Mordor nor the fell beasts that called it home. Their storehouses, what's left of them, will be added to our own supplies, their fields and houses will be put to the torch, and any man nor beast that dares show its face to our forces will be cut down be they man, woman, or child. I mean really, can you even countenance the sheer gall of the people, living there in the shadow of Mordor for all this time, feeding orcs and offering support to the dark forces? There shall be no forgiveness for such acts."

"It seems a terrible waste, destroying the only parts of this wretched wasteland that have any life or beauty to them." Celeborn noted sadly as they watched the fires consume what had once been rich plains of grass and farmland. Dotted among the fields were small grass huts, simple constructions with dirt floors covered in woven grass mats, a hole in the center of each roof, beneath which stood a simple cooking pot on a tripod. The people that once had lived here had literally nothing. The all were gone now, and now the only traces that they once had existed were burned away to soot and ash. As far as the eye could see there was only black, blasted ruin.

"Cleared out the last of the storehouses. Wasn't much left in any of them. We've barely enough to feed half a squadron on what we've gathered here. Still, better than nothing, and if it's with us, it's not here for any stinking orcs or allies of Mordor to feast on."

"I still don't understand why it was necessary in your minds to fire the fields. They'd already been harvested. All that was left was grass. The orcs weren't likely to be eating that...and if they were,
they’d truly grown desperate."

"You saw what their wretched little hovels was made out of, right? We’re making sure the people that lived here, if any still survive, cannot return here for any reason. No food, no shelter, and the soot and ash raining from the sky will make the water difficult to stomach for a while at least. Any of them that didn't get eaten can wander these blasted lands and die a slow, painful death of starvation and exposure. Least they deserve for daring to provide aid to orcs."

"Sir!"

"Ah, you lot are back from the mountains, eh. What's the situation?"

"The Haradrim rallied and were driving the orcs that fled south back this way. We've been cutting them down in the mountain passes when they tried to come back. The Haradrim turned back a week ago. We think we got the last of the stragglers. We had to wait for the fires to die out to return this way. We've not seen an orc for three days, near enough."

"Good, good. Just have to wait on…ah, there it is. Took them longer to get around that blasted sea than I was expecting." The squad leader said with satisfaction as columns of smoke began to rise to the east.

"There were more grasslands on that side. Beyond it is all desert wasteland. Once it's all burned away, there won't be any place for the wretches to hide."

Celeborn watched the distant columns of smoke grimly, but comforted himself that come spring, this whole area, all of Mordor in fact, would likely bloom far brighter and more beautifully than it ever had in living memory. It still seemed a waste to him.

"Form up, men! Time to rejoin the rest of the army. Once the last of their pretty grasslands has become a blackened ruin, our work here may well be done!"

The men let out a ragged cheer and began forming up into columns for the long ride back.

None there noted the cold eyes watching from the shadows.
Of lanterns and loudmouths

Chapter Summary

Aftermath of the morning 'wind demon' attack. Bofur goes a-courting.

Chapter Notes

Sorry it's been so long between updates. Enjoy!

The door slammed shut, leaving ringing silence in its wake, but for the sound of panicked whispers and many running feet just outside. Thorin sighed and rubbed at his eyes. Bilbo slumped back into place leaning against Thorin's chest and waited for his heart to stop racing. He covered his now very-red face and made a distressed whimper.

Thorin glanced down at the top of Bilbo's curly head in concern, and lightly rubbed his back.

"I apologize for my nephew. He's an idiot, but he normally means well. Unfortunately." Thorin glanced at the window and tried to estimate the time. "I'm normally up by this time. I would imagine my being missing in no small part added to the idiocy this morning."

"I can never show my face in public again."

"I do not understand. You are slightly mussed from sleep, but you look fine. It's quite a fetching look on you in fact. Surely you are not so vain as that?"

Bilbo glared at him. "I'm not being vain! I'm a scandal! I'm a…a loose hobbit!"

"I would not describe you as loose. If anything you are far too tense."

"Not..." Bilbo sighed and closed his eyes. "I meant loose in a moral sense. Oh, it isn't as though hobbits don't get into compromising situations, or even just situations like this that look compromising but really aren't... it's just understood that one doesn't get caught at it. A-and confirmed bachelors are fine, so long as they continue to be the odd folks that aren't married... It isn't as though they don't pair off, but everyone maintains the polite fiction that they're just good friends, or roommates or something. Well, the Tooks don't care. Why, one of my Took cousins took up with a lad a few years back. They held a wedding for them, flower crowns and everything. It was just the family, of course. It would have been considered scandalous outside of Tuckborough... It's things like that that make the Tooks considered 'wild' and unrespectable, even though they've provided Thains for generations. They've always done things their own way. And now everyone has seen us and I'll be run out of the mountain before I corrupt you..."

"You think that I have dishonored you?"

"No... that's..."

"While this situation might be considered slightly risqué, there is no dishonor here. You...that is
Bilbo opened one eye to peer at Thorin suspiciously.

"Thorin? Is there something that you're not telling me?"

Thorin looked shifty for a moment, but Bilbo poked him until he talked.

"When you defended me from Azog… had you been a dwarf, it could have been considered a declaration of intent."

"What?"

"While it is true things aren't done that way these days, it does have historical precedent."

"Historical precedent." Bilbo repeated flatly. "Thorin, let's pretend I don't know anything about dwarven historical precedent and just state things plainly."

"There are several historical tales among my people that feature such wartime declarations, where one rushes to defend another in battle in such a way."

"Thorin. Are we engaged?"

"Maybe?"

"Thorin."

"It is as I have said. When you defended me from Azog, it could have been considered a declaration of intent. I did not say anything as I knew it was unlikely to be the same among your people as you are not warriors but…"

"But?"

"I will admit, even knowing that, it did make me see you differently. I already thought you comely…"

"You did? Since when?"

"Ah well…"

"Thorin?"

"The first time I saw you. I may have come across rather brusquely…"

"Understatement"

"But I was perhaps slightly disconcerted at the feeling you evoked and I was also focused on other things."

"If it makes you feel any better…I thought you very handsome."

"You did?"

"Until you opened your mouth."

"Ah."
"Is there anything else?"

"Well…"

"Thorin…"

"Your rooms…"

"Yes?"

"They're the… they used to belong to my grandmother."

"Former queen of Erebor?"

"Yes."

"And the door… the quirk of dwarven architecture?"

"Connects the king and queen's suites."

"Is this considered a declaration of intent?"

"As you made the first declaration… should one choose to view it that way… it would be more like… an answer."

"So you're saying I proposed?"

"Yes?"

"And you accepted?"

"Yes."

"And we're engaged?"

"Should you wish it."

"Does everyone know about this but me?"

"They may suspect, but in the absence of any formal announcement they are likely unsure."

"Were you ever planning to tell me?"

"I had some hope that you were of a similar mind and would not take it ill. It was my thought that so long as you remained here I would have time to allow things to develop once the worst of the rebuilding and such was finished."

"And I won't be run out of the mountain for being a scandalous loose hobbit?"

"As I have said, while this situation might be considered risqué before the wedding, we are neither of us children, and so far, as far as the populace knows, proprieties have been observed and an honorable suit has both been offered and accepted. I would not dishonor you, nor press my attentions where I knew them unwanted."

Bilbo said nothing, lost in thought, though he was still far more tense than Thorin liked.

Thorin ran his hand up his back in one long, smooth stroke, and then gently began carding through
his curls. "Are they unwanted?"

Bilbo's already red face darkened, and he peeked up at Thorin through his lashes before he answered.

"No… They're not unwanted." he admitted quietly.

The tension oozed out of the dwarf king and he let out relieved breath that Bilbo hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"Ah. Good. That is… good."

Bilbo squeaked as he was suddenly cuddled within an inch of his life.

"Thorin! I do need to breathe!"

"Sorry…sorry. You are well?"

"I'm fine. Just, you know, a bit of warning next time."

"Warning? Very well. I'm going to kiss you now."

"Oh…!"

Bilbo's thoughts scattered as Thorin suddenly loomed over him.

"Yes?" Thorin prompted making no move to do so, even though he'd given warning.

"Yes." Bilbo agreed.

Thorin took his time, savoring the moment. He ran his fingers lightly along his cheek, ran his thumb delicately over the shell of his ear, all the while watching intently and cataloging every reaction. His trailing fingers moved southward--neck, collarbone, down his arm. Bilbo shuddered as his wrist and the palm of his hand were each nuzzled in turn.

When his hand was released so Thorin could continue his slow exploration, Bilbo reached for him, mimicking his earlier actions and then tugging lightly on the back of his neck to bring him closer. Thorin nuzzled their noses together before finally, finally leaning in to delicately sip at his lips, as though still uncertain of his welcome.

Bilbo whimpered in frustration and wriggled so his other arm was free. He wanted his kisses, damn it! Once free, he wasted no time burying his hand in Thorin's thick dark hair and pulling him closer. Thorin rumbled deep in his chest, a sound like distant thunder that he could feel vibrating through him, splayed one large hand on his back and pulled him tight against him. Their kiss quickly grew more heated and they pressed on until the necessity of breathing forced them apart.

Thorin looked completely wrecked--lips swollen, pupils blown, hair disheveled, gasping like he'd just run a mile. It was a lovely look on him. Bilbo vowed then and there to be sure it was a look he sported as often as possible.

"Amralime." Thorin whispered reverently as he pressed their foreheads together.

"Amralime" Bilbo repeated. He didn't know its exact meaning, but he could guess a lot from context.
"Hellooo? Bilbo? Are ye around?"

"In here. Is that you, Bofur?"

"Aye, it's me. In the kitchen? Should have looked for you here first off."

"Bofur?!"

Bofur grew bashful under Bilbo's astonished stare.

"It's too much, innit?"

"No, not at all! You look rather fine, really. It's just, I hardly recognized you without your hat!"

"It was a sacrifice, but Bifur wouldn't let me keep it on. Said it ruined the aesthetic."

"It wouldn't have really matched." Bilbo offered apologetically.

Bofur was wearing a rather snazzy blue coat with a thick leather belt, tooled with the geometric designs the dwarves seemed to favor. He had new boots to match. His hat was gone, and his hair had been freshly washed, tidied and oiled, with neat braids and a smattering of beads to jazz it up. His moustache had been trimmed and tidied as well. All in all he looked rather dapper.

"What's the occasion?"

"Well…I was hoping you could help me with a little something." he admitted, cheeks pink.

"Gladly…if you don't mind helping me deliver these." Bilbo gestured behind him to the trays of cupcakes. Most were regular sized, but there were several larger ones--small cakes more than cupcakes really.

"What's the occasion? We having another party?"

"No, at least not that I know of. Those are for the gate guards. A little thank you for not letting me blow away yesterday. It seemed rude to bring enough only for them, so I made more."

As he spoke he finished the glove he'd been working on and set it with its mate.

"I've made so many of these recently I've gotten much faster, and I wasn't bad before. I still have two more sets to make, but they'll have to wait till tomorrow."

"Who are those for?"

"The gate guards as well. The poor dears have to stand outside up on that lookout in all sorts of weather. I've made a set for all of them but two now. So, what was this favor?"

"Well…you know how you were saying you wanted a lantern? Well, I know of a smith that could probably whip one up easy enough…"

"And you wanted me to come along so you'd have a reason to talk to her?" Bilbo hazarded a guess.

Bofur's sheepish smile was answer enough.

"Alright. So, who is this girl?"

"Ah, she's lovely! Dark brown hair, a full, fluffy beard, a wicked right hook…"
"Uh…"

"Some lads was givin' 'er a hard time in a pub once. 'twas the first time I saw 'er. They wouldn't leave her be. She finally had enough and laid the bastards low, one after another! HA!"

"Goodness. Good for her, I suppose. I am surprised you didn't intervene though."

"Oh no, that's always a chancy move with a dam. They're quite capable of taking care of themselves, and will thank you to remember it. Now, had it been obvious she was way overmatched and likely to come to a bad end, every dwarf in there would have risen to 'er defense. So long as she seemed to have it under control, it's best to leave 'er be, or you have to deal with 'er once she's taken care of the others. It really is a pity most of our dams, 'cept those that chose a warrior life, never go to war. Honestly, I think a group of dams on the warpath would be the most terrifying sight ever to be seen. We'd prolly have a nigh unstoppable army were that the case."

Bilbo thought back to some of the rampages he could recall from his female relations when they were angered and shuddered. "I think perhaps that wouldn't be limited to just dwarves. Though I'll grant you, you're sister-in-law is a bit more terrifying with an axe than my granny ever was with a frying pan… though she wasn't not far off."

The two of them shared a laugh, as Bofur loaded up the cupcakes.

"I can take some of them."

"'s alright. They're not heavy."

"If you say so. So, what's your lady love's name?"

"Agdis."

"Are her brothers Borin and Corin?"

"Uh… might be?"

"Oh! I already know her. She's trying to get journeyman status."

"Shouldn't be hard. She's pretty good. As much as I want a reason to talk to her, I wouldn't take ye to get a crappy lantern."

"Good to know. Well, let's be off then. This stuff won't deliver itself."

They set off in companionable silence.

The palace was a bit removed from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the mountain, so it was sometimes easy to forget how large and busy it was. Every way one looked there were dwarves carting stuff, building stuff, chatting with friends, haggling for goods. Bilbo glanced up at the buildings that hung down from the roof of the cavern and saw the windows were all lit up. Those buildings held the great library of Erebor, far removed from the bustle of the rest of the mountain, and far out of reach of the areas Smaug had frequented.

Bilbo had gone up there once, but he'd found it a bit unnerving. One had to travel upwards as far as the normal pathways took you and then ride a mechanical lift to get to the bridge that led out to the main library building, which held the main stacks, as well as dozens of study tables and had librarians there to answer inquiries and help one find what they were looking for. There were more books and scrolls in the other building, the third held a museum of sorts with old weapons, armor and
mechanical contraptions on display. The last held the scribes and junior librarians, all of them hard at work translating texts and making new copies of older works that were becoming brittle. They also did research for the crown and for the guilds on whatever subjects were requested. It was a fascinating place, but it was so high up, he found himself not wanting to go up there more than he had to. He was going to have to steel his nerves for another visit soon--he was nearly done all the books he'd borrowed. He'd have to find out when Ori was next on duty so he could go up with him. It was slightly less unnerving with company.

"How are Bombur and Rumla anyway? And the little ones?"

"Doing well. Bom's been out doing surveys of the lake and making adjustments to the plans for the port. The folks of Dale are supposed to be voting on the final look of the place. They're already quarrying stone for the place come spring. It should be nice once its finished, though we'll be lucky if the place is done by summer's end. We work fast, but it's going to be a big job. He should have plenty of volunteers to work on it. He's going to forego his usual commission for the job--he figures he's got more money than he knows what to do with already. What would normally have been his commission is going to get split among the workers, so they'll be making more than usual on the job. Rumla's been mostly with the wee ones, though we've been all taking turns watching the young 'uns so she can help fill the orders picked up by the caravan."

"She's a blacksmith?"

"Aye, and a good 'un too. One of the reasons she's so terrifying. She's got strong arms, that one. She's trouble with an axe, but you put a smithing hammer in her hand and she's far worse. If she ever comes at ye with an axe, it means she's mad but prepared to forgive ye if you grovel a bit. If she comes at ye with a hammer…"

"Run?"

"Yeah."

"Good to know."

"The kiddies now, they keep asking when 'uncle Bilbo' is coming to visit."

"I take it they liked the candy?" Bilbo asked dryly.

"Yeah." Bofur laughed "But they were keen on ye before that. They like your stories, and they were all real proud of the job they did on the party decorations."

"Well, they did a marvelous job. All of them did. What's Bifur up to these days? I haven't seen him much lately, except for when you all came to visit yesterday. I wasn't exactly the best company…"

"We didn't hold it against ye. How's yer head doing, anyway?"

"Better. Still sore."

"I can imagine. That bump's so big ye look like yer growing a second head!"

"It's gone down quite a bit."

"Still huge. And colorful." Bofur remarked. "As for Bif, well! He's got himself a girlfriend!"

"He does!? Who is it?"
"One o' the scribes. She's fluent in ancient Khuzdul. She works in the oldest archives. She's had him helping her go through some of the really old stuff. He's more fluent than even the best of them."

"Why is that anyway? Did he used to be a scribe? It's just, I got the impression no one really speaks the ancient form anymore…"

"Well, now this is just speculation, mind, there's some thinks he got sort of 'reset' when he got his head injury."

"Reset how?"

"Well, word is our long ago ancestors, the fathers of the dwarves, and mothers, were all created knowing the language Mahal made for them. Now, languages evolve over time, so it changed as they lived and had children and so on. We think he just reverted to the inborn language when the newer stuff got wiped out when he got the axe in his head. It's really the only explanation that makes any sense. He weren't no scribe, no scholar even. He was a miner, same as me. We can all read and write, but book learning wasn't a real priority for us. Being able to read the stone was more important."

"Fascinating. If it's inborn though, why don't more people understand him?"

"They do if they take the time to listen. The thing is most folks get put off when they don't get it right away, and so they get nervous and find reason to wander off. If they put in a bit of effort they would understand fine. That's how it worked for me and Bombur…and you, seems like."

Bilbo slanted a look at him to, but he saw no censure there.

"I know your language is supposed to be some big secret and all…"

"Technically, we're not allowed to teach it to outsiders. If a clever fellow hears enough he learns it on his own, well, there's not really anything to be done about that."

"You're not angry?"

Bofur knuckled his head and grinned at him fondly. "Bilbo, you're part of the company, which means you're not exactly an outsider…more even than that though, you took the time to try to communicate with him, which is more than a lot of folks have done. You've not only been trying to learn Khuzdul on the sly, you've been trying to pick up Iglishmek as well."

"Well, it's all very well that he can understand me. It's rather rude to just chatter at him and him unable to reply!"

"Exactly. You cared enough to want to know what he was saying. A lot of folks, not everyone by a longshot, but enough, they're fine with just chattering at him, or just ignoring him. Bif's good people, and I'm not just saying that because he's me cousin. It means a lot to me and Bom, and o' course Bif himself that you cared enough to want to hear him."

They shared a smile and wandered along through the bustle companionably for a while.

"You know, I just realized. I have no idea what Dori and Nori have been up to lately."

"Ah, Dori's thinking of opening a tea shop in Dale. Seems he enjoyed it. He doesn't need to work for a living anymore, but he likes to keep busy. He's still undecided. Nori's been splitting his time between the pubs and the locksmiths and jewelers guilds. He's mostly be overseeing the training of some of the youngins for their journeyman and master's testing. He decided he wasn't going to work
Bilbo just grinned at him and pulled him along. "Just be yourself, Bofur. You're a wonderful dwarf, and any dam would be lucky to have you."

"Oh, lordy. I didn't think this through."

Bilbo looked around in interest as he followed Bofur into the smiths' guild hall. He had stayed away from this part of the mountain for the most part—it was always busy and quite noisy, not to mention hot with all the forges going day and night. Bofur looked around and then brightened. He smoothed his jacket and swaggered over to where a pretty dwarrow-dam was busy oiling up a bunch of iron pots and preparing them for seasoning. At other tables he could see other dwarves sharpening blades, inspecting several ploughs, polishing silver goblets and trays.

"Excuse me, miss?"

"Yes? Looking for someone?"

"My friend here is in the market for a lantern. Likes to read, doesn't trust the open flames."

"Master Grokk can help ye with that. We're all apprentices here."

"Are ye sure lass? You look like you know your way around a hammer."

Agdis just snorted in amusement and shook her head at him. "Is that the best ye've got?"

"Nah, I got better material. If ye come to dinner with me, maybe I'll let you hear it."

Bilbo rolled his eyes at his friend and looked around for 'Master Grokk'. Bofur seemed to be doing fine on his own. The young fellow polishing silver pointed him towards a short, broad dwarf who wore his hair in a long braid down his back that was made of numerous smaller braids. Probably a Broadbeam, unless he missed his guess. He'd been around enough dwarves at this point that he thought he had a fairly good handle on telling them apart somewhat.

"Master Grokk?"

"Yeah?"

"Hello. I was hoping to commission a lantern…"

"Yer the king's hobbit."

"I'm Bilbo Baggins, yes."

"You willing to make me one o' those brown cakes with the fiddly bits and the poofy stuff on it?"

"Brown… You mean a chocolate mousse cake with whipped cream icing and chocolate sprinkles?"

"…? I guess. Don't know what it's called. I had some at my brother-in-law's anniversary party. My anniversary is coming up soon. I need one."
"Ah, well, certainly I could do that. When…?"

"Three days. I'll have yer lantern waiting."

"Ah, well. Alright then. I'll see you in three days."

Master Grokk nodded and rubbed his hands together in anticipation. He cast a glance over the room and frowned when he spotted Bofur.

"Oi! Enough o' that now! She's got work to do! Bother her on yer own time! She'll be done at nine."

"Master Grokk! What if I don't wanna be bothered? You can't just do that!"

"So tell him to go away…or punch him. I've seen ye in a pub, lass."

"So have I." Bofur said a bit dreamily.

Master Grokk glowered at Bofur and then turned back to Agdis with a frown.

"Maybe you shouldn't punch that one. He might like it."

Bilbo tugged him from the room while he was still spluttering, and the rest of the apprentices were still tittering at him.

When they were gone, master Grokk suddenly smacked himself in the head.

"Bloody hell. I just promised him a lantern for the price of one cake! Oh, he's a tricky one, that hobbit."

"So, how did things go?" Bilbo asked once they were clear of the guild halls.

"Well… she thinks I'm funny, that's good, right?"

"Yes. A sense of humor is very important."

"She did turn me down though. She said right now she's focusing on making journeyman, and doesn't have time to be off having dinner."

"That's not a no. That's a 'now's not a good time'. If you're patient and wait till she passes her testing I think she'll accept."

"Yeah?"

"Both you and Master Grokk have mentioned her being rather forceful in rejection. I think if she wasn't at all interested she would have said 'thanks, but no.' Have heart. If you're patient you'll win her yet."

Bofur smiled happily. "Think I'd be pushing things if I waited for her after she's done work?"

"Yes. She told you right now wasn't a good time." Bilbo reminded him. "Although…"

"Yeah?"

"You could give her a small gift. Food works well. You could meet her when she gets done and offer her food. Tell her you'll be waiting to hear from her once she's attained her rank. If she seems
amenable, you could offer to escort her to her next destination. If she doesn't, just smile and wish her a good day and leave."

"Turkey leg sound good?"

"How about a tin of cookies." Bilbo suggested.

"Alright."

"You're still making toys correct?"

"Yeah. Mostly just giving them out to the kiddies."

"Are there any places in your designs that would benefit from the attentions of a smith? If she's amenable to you walking her home you could discuss your work and suggest it as a means of practice. Then you'd be both respecting her wish to concentrate on work and showing faith in her abilities."

"Bilbo, you're a courting genius! Well...for others, at least."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well... I mean, it's no secret that you and Thorin seem to have something going on, but there's..." Bofur trailed off at the sight of Bilbo's suddenly red face.

"What's this then!

"Oh well...um, it's funny really. Apparently Thorin and I are engaged."

"Oh ho. And how long has this been going on?"

"Well, um...since this morning, actually."

"What, he just rolled out a bed and said hey..."

"We were still in... Moving on!"

"OH HO!" Bofur chortled. "This morning, huh? Damn, I gotta find Nori!"

"Nori? What does Nori have to..."

"Well, I need to find out who won the betting pool!"

"Betting! You..."

Bofur just laughed and drug him along behind him. "Come on! He's usually at the Bearded Lady this time of day!"

Thorin, Balin and Dwalin exited the meeting room after the guild masters had all gone.

"Things went much quicker this time. We may actually make dinner!" Dwalin said cheerfully.

"I hope so. Eating dried out leftovers every night will get old rather quickly." Balin agreed with equal cheer.
They had just stepped out into a busy thoroughfare when Thorin spotted Bilbo across the way, with Bofur, Bifur, Ori and Nori. Bilbo flushed pink and smiled when he spotted him. Thorin could feel an answering smile breaking across his own face, one he was helpless to stop.

"There ye are, ye rascal!"

Thorin tore his besotted gaze away from Bilbo when he heard Dain call out. He was a level up, on one of the many bridges that spanned the interior of the mountain. Dain smiled cheerfully and gave him a thumbs up.

"I heard all about this morning! Good job that!"

Dwarves loved gossip, so naturally everyone in earshot turned to see what was going on.

Thorin gaped at his cousin in horror. He wouldn't...
"What am I thinking? Of course he would."

"I was wondering what put that spring in your step! Everyone knows you're a bit of a bear in the mornings. Can't hardly speak till you've stuffed yer gob! Honestly, I didn't think you had it in you, but look at you! Chipper as a bird in spring time in the morning, and now after being stuck in meetings all day, you're still cheerful! He seems to have fired your forges right up! Well! I have to say, if spending the night with your wee hobbit man can do that for you, why, you should sneak into his room every night!"

Thorin had to work very hard not to sink into the floor in embarrassment, especially when excited whispers broke out all over.

"Actually…maybe not every night. He's just a little fellow. Don't want to wear him out!" Dain threw back his head and laughed delightedly at his own wit. "Don't know what he sees in you, frankly, but to each his own. I've decided I approve. He's a charming laddie and he'll be a good addition to the family! Mahal's blessings to you both! Now, I think we all want to know, when's the wedding gonna be?"

The whole crowd turned from Dain to look at Thorin in interest.

"That hasn't been decided yet, but probably not until spring at the earliest. I would imagine he would want his kin to attend." Thorin managed to croak out.

"Aye, wouldn't be proper otherwise! And they're already coming to help heal the land and all, so that works out nicely! Where is the lad anyway? I should offer him my congratulations too. 'bout time is all I can say! Good show, cousin!"

Dain spotted Bilbo then. His face was so red it was near incandescent. "Ah! There ya are, laddie! Congratulations!"

A lifetime of ingrained politeness allowed Bilbo to speak. "Ah…Th-thank you, Lord Dain."

"THREE CHEERS FOR OUR KING AND HIS FUTURE CONSORT!" Nori called out gleefully.
"HUZZAH!"
"HUZZAH!"
"HUZZAH!"
Bilbo was so embarrassed he wasn't seen outside the palace for nearly a week, except for a quick foray to the smith's guild to drop off a cake and pick up a lantern.

"Oi! Thorin! Where's your hobbit man been? I told you not to wear the wee fellow out!"

"Mahal's beard! Dain, would you shut up!"
Spring

Chapter Summary

Spring arrives, lots of people travel in different directions.

"Bilbo! We were beginning to wonder if we were going to see you again!" Adalgrim Took, current Thain of the Shire said with some surprise. "Come in, come in!"

The Great Smials of Tuckborough were as welcoming as always. Adalgrim and his family, as well as several of his brothers and their families resided within its massive, sprawling halls. Various Took relations called out welcome as they headed towards the dining room, and packs of faunts sped past, shrieking in laughter at some game or other as they navigated their way deeper.

"Sorry about that. As it started getting colder the wings on the ship would ice over. It made the ship heavy and hard to maneuver, so I had to stay put for the winter. Spring thaw has well and truly begun now, so here I am again."

"Are you staying for a bit?"

"At the moment, no, not for long. I just stopped to drop off some invitations and to say hello. I need to head to the Blue Mountains to pick up some straggler dwarves that didn't get transported before it had gotten too cold. After that I'll be back to pick up the farming volunteers that are going to help heal the land. Then I'll be back again in a few weeks to pick up anyone that decides to answer my invitation."

"You having a party?"

Bilbo's cheeks still flushed slightly pink when he thought of his upcoming nuptials, even though by rights it should have been burned out of him by now. Dain Ironfoot was a lovely dwarf, but he had no sense of propriety whatsoever.

"I'm getting…married." he admitted.

It still made him dizzy to think of it. He'd long been resigned to spending the remainder of his days alone but for occasional visits with aunts, uncles and cousins.

"WHAT?!" a dozen voices all shouted at once.

Bilbo's face flushed a darker red. They had just reached the cavernous great hall, which had room for several dozen hobbits at once to dine, and it was occupied.


"Yes, yes. Did you say you were getting married?" Aunt Linda interjected impatiently. "To who? What's her name?"

"His name is Thorin. He's a dwarf."
"A dwarf? You're marrying a dwarf!"

"King of the dwarves, no less." Donnamira said with some amusement. "Bella would have laughed herself sick if she could see the look on your face right now."

"And my dear brother likely would have fainted." Linda Proudfoot, nee Baggins--sister of the late Bungo Baggins, Bilbo's father, said with some resignation. "Looks like you were all right." she added with a dirty look at Dona and Mira. She turned back to Bilbo, already looking resigned.

"Bilbo lad, why him? I mean, I suppose if your tastes run that way there's nothing to be done... but a dwarf? There's plenty of fine Shire lads you could have run off with! Now you're going to be running off to live permanently in foreign parts with some dwarf?"

Bilbo fidgeted under the curious stares of his family, and twisted his hands in distress. This was all so embarrassing! And what could he even say? It simply wasn't done--a hobbit running off with a dwarf, and to the other side of the world! Most hobbits never even got as far as Bree or Buckland! He could picture his dwarf so clearly-- blue eyes like bell flowers in spring, a beautiful smile that often seemed just for him... and yes, he was stubborn, and often ridiculous but...

"Because there isn't anyone else. Not for me."

Linda's distressed gaze softened and her smile grew sadly reminiscent.

"You truly are your father's son. Bungo was the same way. The first time he saw your mother, he said much the same. We all despaired for him of course. Your mother was wild still in those days. No one thought she'd ever settle down. We thought my poor brother was just going to pine away like an idiot for something that was never going to happen."

"Except it did, in time, much to everyone's surprise." Donnamira laughed. "And now their son is following both their footsteps."

"So it would seem."

"What about Bag-End? I guess Lobelia will be..." Fosco began.

"She will NOT. I won't do that to my tenants. The way they all like to put on airs, they'd keep raising the rents until they drove half of Hobbiton out of hearth and home!"

"You're not going to just leave it empty, are you? Unless you and this king of yours are moving in?"

"No. I'll be staying in Erebor. I had thought perhaps Drogo and Primula, when they eventually wed, would like the place. Their children will be equally related to both of my parents. I thought it a good compromise. They're young and Bag End deserves to be filled with children. It was never meant for one little hobbit all on his lonesome."

"Oh my goodness!"
"You're giving us Bag End?"

Bilbo turned and found a slightly disheveled Drogo and Primula standing in the doorway looking stunned.

"Well, look at you two. Out "picking berries" were you?"
"Uh, yeah. Sure were." Drogo nodded, his face flushing.

"Drogo, lad, that excuse works better in the summer when there are actually berries out." Bilbo teased.

"It's right generous of you. I don't know what to say." Drogo refused to be distracted.

"Say thank you and let that be the end of it."

"Thank you, cousin."

"Yes, thank you, cousin Bilbo!" Primula echoed, bouncing over to hug him. Drogo joined her a moment later. Bilbo patted them both fondly on the back. "You're quite welcome, my dears."

"You must promise to stay with us when you come back to visit."

"I'll have you know I was already planning to!"

"So… when do we get to meet your dwarf anyway?"

"Very soon if you come to Erebor for the wedding."

Primula squealed and hugged him again. "HA! I knew it!"

"Really? You're marrying a dwarf? I mean, I know Prim said but… A dwarf? Really? They're kind of…"

Bilbo smiled wryly at his cousin, remembering how scandalized his hobbit sensibilities had been when he'd first been introduced to his dwarves.

"Yes, they are "kind of"… but they're so much more, if you're lucky enough to get to know them. They don't trust easily outside their own race, but once they do, you've got a friend for life. I know they seem rather gruff and somewhat intimidating at first sight, but in truth they're very kind, and generous, and loyal. They're very passionate as well—whether they love something or hate it they do it with their whole hearts."

"Well, that's good to hear, but… can you really do it? Live your whole life in a dark hole in a mountain?"

"HA! I can't wait to see your face when you actually see Erebor. It is very far from a dark hole. It's one of the most impressive engineering marvels I've ever seen. Inside the mountain everything is green stone. In places the walls and floors are warm to the touch, even in the depth of winter, now that the great forges are up and running around the clock again. The whole of it is filled with golden light. It's very different from the Shire, but it is beautiful in its own, very dwarvish, way. I am not a dwarf, however, and it's is true that on its own, the halls of Erebor wouldn't be quite enough, however lovely, and they know that. My dwarves built a garden for me on the slopes of the mountain. All I have to do is step outside my door and there it is, all the greenery and fresh air a hobbit could want."

"Well, as long as you're happy, we're happy." Aunt Mirabella interjected firmly. "Congratulations, dear boy."

"Why, this calls for a celebration! Our Bilbo is getting married!" Adalgrim announced grandly.

The gathered hobbits cheered, and a dozen or so bustled off to raid the pantries. In little time at all, the whole population of the great smial had gathered, and a merry party was in progress.
"What a difference a few months makes." Thorin said with pride as he looked over the city.

"Aye. Erebor looks like a living kingdom again rather than a broken graveyard." Balin agreed. He dithered for a moment before addressing the worry he'd come to speak about. "The hobbit farmers that Bilbo brought back with him… there have been some complaints about the presence of so many hobbits in the mountain. They're not real happy about Beorn being here either, for all that he's been staying in the stables with the animals and not in the mountain proper."

"Certain ornery dwarf lords have been running their mouths again, you mean. They seem to have done little else since they arrived a few weeks ago. They can think what they like so long as that's as far as it goes. They'll be going back to the Blue Mountains once the coronation is over. We have to live here, and in the few days since the hobbits and Beorn have been here bits of green have started sprouting up all over the countryside, and the men of Dale swear that the food they've helped plant has already started growing as well, and flowers have begun sprouting in their city. Let them complain. Everyone but them would see a hundred more come to the mountain if that's the effect they have."

"There have been some complaints about Bilbo being given control of the flying ship as well."

"He found it. He also speaks enough Elvish to work the thing. They can put a sock in it."

Thorin fixed his longtime friend with a stern look.

"Balin, you need to stop worrying so much about what those old fossils are muttering in corners. Nori's been keeping an eye on them. If they decided to do more than mutter they'll be taken care of. In the meantime, let them complain. When the call went out for the quest, they refused outright, but now that we've succeeded they expect to be catered to and to displace members of the company. They complain and they grouse and demand luxuries, but not a one of them has lifted a hand to see to the restoration of the city. They stayed put in Ered Luin until the very end and demanded to be transported by ship, rather than coming by caravan as everyone else did, then they have the nerve to badmouth the very hobbit who transported them. All they've done since they arrived is make a nuisance of themselves and get in the way of those actually working. Being a dwarf lord is a responsibility not just a privilege. Until they remember that I've no time for them. Mr. Baggins and the 'common miners' and the 'bastard children of Durin who have some nerve showing their faces in polite company' are worth a dozen of them. I'll not slight the company or our hobbit for their sakes, and neither should you. Let this be an end to it Balin."

"They're powerful men. They could turn the populace against you."

"They might turn the heads of a few, but I think you overestimate their reach. Many of those here now were ones that went without because those grumbling geezers wanted to live in style. They're rewarded handsomely for their hard work, and those with skill and initiative are being given chances to move into respectable positions in their field, regardless of whether they were once 'common miners' or 'nobodies'. Because of that they are eager to work hard and prove themselves. I'm certain they all realize how much poorer their prospects would be were they to listen to the grumbling dwarf lords in the corner who are loudly complaining about being surrounded day and night by 'uppity commoners'. Any that do listen to them deserve what they get so far as I'm concerned."

"The other clans won't look kindly on you upsetting the natural order either."

"The natural order, is it? I am king. My word is law. If I say it shall be so it shall be so. Any who would gainsay that are the ones 'upsetting the natural order' should they rebel."
"But Thorin…"

"But nothing. Our company saw to the end of Smaug, greatest calamity of the age. We saw to the end of Sauron before he could strengthen himself enough to bring war and destruction to the world. We saw to the reclamation of Erebor and have made it a home once more. Our people are prosperous again and will continue to be. We did that. We, not the dwarf lords, not the other clans. You need to decide Balin, just whose side are you on?"

"It's not a matter of sides! It's tradition and law and…"

"Fortunes rise and fall. Ages come and pass. Things change, Balin, and not always for the worst. What did I tell you when we set off? Loyalty, honor, and a willing heart. I'll not betray that now, not after everything. The dwarf lords will simply have to learn to deal with it."

"That's the stuff, laddie. Spoken like a true king. Ach, but I do pity you having to beg house room from them. They can't have made it easy for you." Dain commented as he wandered closer.

"No, they did not, but we were in such dire straits at the time that we were grateful nonetheless. I will send them home with gold, which is what they really want."

"They want more than that if the way they've been parading their dams under your nose is any indication. Delusional lot, that bunch. They've been told you're already spoken for."

Thorin stared at Dain blankly, which made him hoot in delighted mirth.

"You dinna even notice, did you? HA! You're completely besotted! Too busy staring at your hobbit to notice all the fine ladies all but throwing themselves at ye! HA!"

"I know, it's embarrassing, isn't it?" Dwalin teased, before smirking proudly. "Bilbo noticed though. He's a vengeful little thing, isn't he?"

"What did he do?" Balin asked worriedly.

"He soaked a bunch of those really hot peppers in some oil and then rubbed their plates, cups and knives with it. All their food ended up being super spicy, as did their ale." Dwalin laughed.

Balin's eyes widened. "Is that what they were all flailing about last night?"

"Yeah. Their food looked just like everyone else's, so no one knew what they were carrying on about. And then Dori offered them some pepper sauce to 'spice it up some', because it was all 'so terribly bland' otherwise. I thought they were gonna cry!"

"AAAHHH! Killer tree! They're real!"
"Ah!"

Beorn jumped to his feet and looked around wildly when the hobbits all started yelling and came running at him, only to hide behind him.

"What is it, bunnies? Did something hurt you?"

"Killer trees!"

"We have them in the Shire, well, north of the Shire in the old Forest. They usually only bother Buckland. They built a giant hedge to keep them out."
"I thought they were just stories!"

"Who ever heard of trees that move!"

Beorn peered across the plain and saw what seemed to be a moving forest headed towards them from the direction of Mirkwood.

"Those are Ents, little bunnies. The bad trees are Huorns. They're regular trees that wake up and get angry for some reason. Ents were made by your Green Lady to take care of the trees and keep them safe. They shouldn't hurt you. I'll go talk to them, alright?"

"Be careful, bear man."

Beorn smiled down at the wee hobbit lad and patted him gently on the head, before striding off to meet the moving forest coming towards them. He turned into a bear to charge towards them. Animals were also the Green Lady's province. He hoped the fact that he was both bear and man would make them more likely to talk to him.

The Ents shuffled to a halt as he got closer.

"What manner of creature are you?"

"I'm a skinchanger. One of few remaining."

"What became of the others?"

"Captured by orcs." Beorn said shortly.

"We know of orcs. Terrible creatures. Spiders are worse. Our poor little brothers were dying."

"Yes. My friends and I stayed away from the forest. It was too dangerous to go near. If you've been through it should be better now."

"Marginally better. Somewhat. A bit perhaps. There is still a lot to be done."

"We have reminded the elves of their responsibility. If they would shelter amongst our little brothers, they should take care of them."

"What brings you all out this way? There aren't any trees over here. You scared the little bunnies. They have Huorns near where they live, from what they told me. They don't like trees that move."

"Trees, no, we are not trees, nor Huorns either. We are the Lady's children and we felt her power here. It was a welcome respite after so long walking the forest among our sickened brethren."

"The little bunnies came here to heal the land so it would grow again. The dragon burned it and made it sick. They were singing her a song and asking her to heal it."

"Our lady has always been fond of bunnies, but I do not recall that they sang. Did the elves teach them too?"

"Ah, they're not actually bunnies, but they have furry little feet and round little bellies and big ears and twitchy noses. They're gentle creatures that live in little holes in the ground. They seem to have your lady's favor. They like all things that grow. Their land is a land of gardens and green grass."

The Ents peered in interest at Bilbo and his gardener, Hamfast, who were both toting wheelbarrows full of thick mud dredged from the bottom of the Lake to spread across the blasted plain. They were laughing at some joke, then noticed the talking trees and froze in fright.
"It's alright. They just felt your lady's blessing and came to investigate. They're your lady's children. They'll not harm you."

Hamfast, whose eyes looked ready to bug out of his head at any moment, looked at Bilbo for direction. Bilbo let out a shaky breath and straightened his shoulders before heading towards them with a firm step.

"Cor." Hamfast said in a shaking voice to the other hobbits nearby. "Maybe Mr. Bilbo really did run off to battle a dragon!"

"My king. Visitors have come."

"Ah, that must be grandmother and the rest. I told you they were on their way." Elladan commented to Legolas.

"There are men with them as well. Warriors of Gondor and Rohan, as well as the king of Rohan and the son of the Lord Steward."

"Very well, show them in when they arrive. Have refreshments arranged for everyone."

It took a while for the White Council and their escorts to arrive, but when they did a small blur darted out to meet them, calling out excitedly. "ADA! You're back!"

Elrond braced himself as Estel threw himself upon his legs and hugged them tightly.

"Estel! What are you doing here?" Elrond demanded.

"Ah, that would be my doing." Glorfindel commented as he sauntered out from the same direction Estel had come running from.

"Why?!" Elrond demanded again.

"I got invited to a wedding! Mr. Bilbo said there would be lots of hobbit kids, dwarf kids, and man kids that I could play with!"


"Mr. Bilbo and King Thorin." Estel chirped brightly.

He looked at Gandalf curiously when he started choking on his pipe smoke, but then turned back to Elrond to continue explaining.

"He said I could stay for king Thorin's coronation too if I wanted. Elladan and Elrohir and king Legolas are going."

"Here, before I forget. This is for you. I told him I'd give it to you if I saw you. I told him you were off south on business." Glorfindel interjected, handing a small envelope with Elrond's name on it in fancy calligraphy.

Elrond opened the envelope and pulled out a card. "You are cordially invited to the wedding of King Thorin, called Oakenshield, second of his name, and Mister Bilbo Baggins, Esq. of Bag End in the Shire..."
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Guests from the west arrive for the wedding. Bilbo learns some surprising things about the origin of hobbits...and the line of Durin.

"Hello, Cirdan!"

"Greetings, young Bilbo." the ancient elf who ran the Grey Havens greeted him gravely.

Cirdan was the oldest elf in existence still on Arda--old enough that he actually had a beard! He also knew how to make flying ships, as he'd been around when they were originally made. In fact, he was commonly known as Cirdan the Shipwright. Bilbo had stopped by once during his many flights to the Blue mountains to question him about the ship they'd found. To his astonishment, Cirdan actually knew the ship from before, and had even been able to tell him a bit about those who had last flown it before Sauron had stolen it.

Unfortunately, the dwarves would never be able to realize their hope of making more ships unless they managed to reconquer Khazad Dûm--the construction of a flying ship required a lot of mithril, of which there was no longer a supply due to some monster named Durin's Bane stealing the mountain ages ago, and it becoming overrun with orcs in the years since. Their last attempt to reconquer the mountain had led to a three year war that had decimated the dwarven population and still haunted Thorin and the others to this day.

It really was too bad; even the hobbits of the Shire were interested in acquiring a flying ship. Many hobbits had expressed that they might even be willing to travel if they had one, as it meant safety, and the ability to carry large amounts of food with you as you went--no missed second breakfasts or elevensies ever again!

Ah well. It was a nice thought, but truthfully they weren't going to need a fleet of ships. The one they had could be turned to other things once the men of Dale started producing food and drawing traders once more.

"I had thought you kinsmen were coming as well?" Cirdan questioned when he realized the ship was empty.

"Oh, they still are. You were the furthest west, so I figured I'd get you first, that's all."

"I see. Well, let us be off. It has been a little while since I last saw the east. I must admit I'm rather curious how it has changed since I last passed that way."

"How long has it been?"

"Oh, not terribly long. Only since somewhere in the midst of the third age."

"Um...the third age has already lasted, um, two thousand nine hundred and forty one years!"

"Yes. As I said. Not terribly long, all things considered."
"I fear you will find the world greatly changed, my lord."

"Worry not for me, child. I have seen a great deal of change in the time since I awoke. Right now we stand at the edge of the known world…but it was not always so. The coast used to be quite a distance away. A good many of the lands I walked in my youth lie now far beneath the waves, perhaps never to be seen again until the remaking of the world."

Bilbo tried to imagine living long enough to see the whole of the Shire and the lands around it torn asunder and sunk beneath the waves and shuddered. He might be leaving the home of his youth to set roots elsewhere, but the Shire was still there. He couldn't even imagine the coastline being Bree, and standing there, knowing that a once beautiful land of green gardens and peace lay buried beneath the waves, lost forever.

"Doesn't it break your heart? Being here and knowing it lies now out of reach?"

Cirdan's gaze grew abstracted, and the air of melancholy that the elves seemed to carry with them at all times beneath their merry and wise demeanors grew sharper. Bilbo's breath caught in his throat. For a moment he could really feel how ancient the being in front of him was, and in his faraway gaze he could see unnumbered tragedies.

"I think that…once you live to be a certain age… perhaps brokenhearted becomes your default setting. All of us among the first born have seen beauty that would bring tears to the eye. We were, many of us, here when the world was young, when everything was brand new and just waiting for us to discover it. Those were glad days indeed. We knew nothing of pain or of evil in those days."

Cirdan's melancholy smile grew sadder still.

"That changed of course, as all things do, even us. The enemy began to spread his darkness. Many of our people were lost… Can you imagine it, child? How terrible it was, to know only peace and joy, beauty and gladness, to not even understand that things could be otherwise? To know such idyllic peace and then have it suddenly shatter. To have pain and suffering, war, and horror inflicted on you from all sides. To see the world you loved the moment you opened your eyes, torn asunder? So it was for us in those days. Then the call went out for our people to join the Valar in their homeland. Our people were sundered further. Some refused the call altogether and were lost to us. Some traveled a small distance and would go no further. Some, like myself and my people, made it as far as the western shores, but then our lord vanished and we settled here to search for him. Only a small remnant managed the entire trip, weighed against the whole number of our people. I have seen things of great beauty, noble acts that stir the heart, known love and the joy of true companionship. I have also seen deeds terrible and fell, seen beauty turned to ugliness and suffered losses that tear the heart."

Cirdan came back to himself and smiled sadly at Bilbo's shiny eyes and trembling lip.

"But even in the midst of all these changes, there is still beauty in this world, nobility and sacrifice, honor…and love. Even in the most unlikely places. Long and long ago, by the reckoning of the mortal races, Beren and Luthien knew love that transcended the boundaries of race and mortality. And now another such love has bloomed, is that not so? Although, your very existence is testament that such love exists, in spite of everything."

"I'm not sure I understand…"

"Halflings."

"Hobbit. We're not half of anything." Bilbo interjected firmly.
He did get tired of how everyone who wasn't a hobbit insisted on calling them by such a derogatory…

"No. No you are not. Not anymore at least. Your people have become something new and altogether different. It just goes to show how even after so many ages there are still surprises to be found, even for the Eldar."

"What…?"

Cirdan studied him curiously a moment and then nodded to himself.

"Ah, yes. We of the firstborn do tend to forget sometimes how short the memories of the mortal races are, and how much gets lost as the ages pass. Do your people not even know you own history?"

"We know we originally lived in the Anduin valley. We know there were originally three distinct clans that fled westward at different times and met up again near Breeland many years later. We know two brothers from the Fallowhide clan approached the king of Arnor for permission to settle the Shire. We know the three clans have intermarried so extensively over the years that now there is little distinction among us."

"Then you do know much, but some very important things were left out of your recollections."

"They were? What things?"

"The peoples that fled westward were all halflings."

"I told you…"

"Hush a moment, child. Let me explain. I spoke earlier of the sundering of the Eldar, if you recall?"

"Yes. I had read about that before…though no mention was made that any elves refused and were lost."

"It is not a thing spoken of."

"Then why are you telling me?"

"Because it has some bearing on you. Those that refused, the dark elves, stayed behind in the far east where we all first awoke. It was also they who first discovered men, the second born. Unlike the Eldar, when men awoke they did not know how to speak, they did not know the names of the things around them. They were like babes—helpless and ignorant. The Avari, for that is what we call them, the unwilling, taught the men how to live and survive and thrive…and in time, when the men had established themselves, some of the Avari took spouses from among their number, and children were born."

"Halflings."

"Indeed. Unlike the children of Beren and Luthien, they were not given a choice to choose to be one or the other. They had turned away from the Valar…and in turn, the Valar turned away from them. The halfling children sometimes favored one parent over the other, but they were a blend of both. They were something new, not seen before on all of Arda. And because they were new and different…they often found they could not fit in easily with either of their parents' people. The Avari, for turning away from the Valar who helped create them, lost their grace. Elves they were, but mortal. Still much longer lived than men, but mortal all the same."
"So...you're saying that hobbits are half-man, half-elf?"

"Not quite." Cirdan chuckled. "There were other halflings as well. In time, long after the first awakening of men, a third race awoke in Arda. There was one among them that woke alone..."

"Durin the Deathless. Thorin's ancestor."

"Just so. An Avari maiden became his bride. Their children came in two flavors--both favored Durin in height, some favored him in personality and skill...the rest were smaller, and were a strange blend of dwarf and elf..."

"Part elf, part man, part dwarf?" Bilbo said faintly.

"Just so. I regret to say that the halflings who didn't quite fit in with the rest of the dwarves left the mountain...and when they did they were hunted."

"HUNTED?"

"They never managed to kill any of them. They were good at hiding. In defense of my people, they didn't know what they were. Those particular halflings were half-dwarf, so they were rather hairy. They were also wearing furs. In time they met the dwarves of the mountain and realized they must be of the same people. They called them the 'petty dwarves'. They had a tendency to make burrows in the earth, rather than mine stone like their cousins, and they were smaller and didn't quite look like the rest of them. In time they traveled east with the Avari, who also found no welcome in those areas settled by the Grey elves, my own people, and settled near their kinsmen in the Anduin valley. There was a third group of halflings...part dwarf, part man, who also ended up settling there. Much like the other two groups they found scant welcome among either of their parents' folk. In time they formed three distinct groups due to intermarriage amongst themselves. Those who took most after their elven kin roamed between forest and glen. Those who took most after their mannish kin settled the river, and those who took most after their dwarven kin in the foothills of the mountains."

"The Fallowhides, the Stoors and the Harfoots."

"Just so."

"I asked Lord Elrond about where hobbits came from. He told me we were an offshoot of men." Bilbo said sourly. "Which is true from a certain point of view, I suppose, but certainly doesn't tell the whole story!"

"Perhaps he felt it unfair to burden you with your origins? I could not say."

"How is it a burden?"

"Two of the peoples from which your people descend were amongst those who sided with the Shadow, child. The dark elves, the men who in later years became known as the Dunlendings, and dwarves. Even with part of your heritage being from the dwarves of Durin's line...well, there are still some amongst the Eldar who, while they accept that the dwarves are part of the world and Eru Ilúvatar allowed them to live, still do not consider them to properly belong here. Not like elves and men belong-- though Lord Elrond is not among those who feel this way..."

"Durin's line. Maybe that was why. Thorin...has a bit of a grudge against elves. It has gotten better, but... Perhaps that was why he gave such a misleading answer. Thorin wouldn't have taken it at all well, being told he had elf heritage... though honestly, it seems obvious in retrospect. The Durins on the whole are taller than the other clans, some of them at least. Thorin plays the harp. His nephew Kili is an archer. Bombur likes salad. Bifur likes flowers. Fili loves the stars..."
"Ah…perhaps that is why then." Cirdan glanced at Bilbo questioningly. "Your beloved dislikes elves? Will my presence be a problem?"

"No. Like I said, he's gotten better. I got him to accept that holding a grudge against an entire race for the hurtful actions of a single elf is rather counterproductive. I got him to make friendly overtures to the Woodland realm and to send a thank you gift to Lord Elrond for hosting us before. Plus, you have a beard. I have a feeling that will win a lot of points with them."

Cirdan smiled at the comment about his beard, then replied.

"You seem to be a good influence on him."

"I can't take all the credit. He has a good heart. He's noble, honorable and self-sacrificing. He's had many sorrows in his life, and tends to hold on to the hurt and the bitterness long after the injury that caused them. I would say that his improvement is due to his own healing more than any influence of mine."

"Love is a tremendous healing agent, child. You should not sell yourself short. And your beloved… is he a good influence on you as well?"

"He is. Before I met Thorin, I was alone…and very lonely. I dreamed of faraway places…but I had never stepped foot beyond the boundaries of the Shire lands. I was wasting my life away, doing and being nothing. I now have close friends that I wouldn't trade for all the world. I have a new family. I went on an adventure rather than just dreaming about it. I've learned to care about others again… not that I didn't before, but… I held everyone at arm's length. I never let anyone get close to me. I thought I was all alone in the world. It wasn't until after I met my dwarves that I realized I never had been… they were just waiting for me to let them inside. I think I'm closer to my family now than I have been since I was a fauntling. And of course I helped the dwarves get their mountain back and there was that whole business with the ring…"

Cirdan laughed delightedly. "That whole business with the ring? You make it sound like a minor squabble with a merchant!"

Bilbo flushed in embarrassment.

"I know it was important…and it was rather scary in parts… but in the end, I just kicked a little gold ring into a volcano. I suppose it's that the horror of it all is rather academic for a little hobbit like me. There is none of us who remembers any part of the days when he roamed free and whole. In truth, we've been rather spoiled, I think, in the Shire. With the exception of the Fell Winter, we've led peaceful, idyllic lives for the most part, untouched by the horrors the rest of the world has had to face quite regularly. With such a life, it is hard for me, even after all my adventures, to really appreciate what was done to the same degree as you elves."

"Indeed. It is still startling to hear the ring of power and all it entailed dismissed so readily!"

He was still chuckling as they boarded the ship. "Let us be off, friend hobbit. I find I quite look forward to meeting the dwarf that stole your heart away."

"Dwarves. Thorin just got the biggest piece." Bilbo admitted with some shyness. "It's funny. For so long I guarded my heart so jealously, thinking it was a finite thing, like a pie, that could only be given to so many before it was gone. Since meeting my dwarves, I've discovered a heart is more like a boundless ocean. Even when you give large parts of it away, you discover there's still so much more left to give."
"Ship incoming!"

"Clear the way!"

Dwarves who were nearby stopped what they were doing so they could watch the ship fly in. No matter how many times they saw it, it was still a sight to see. Even if it was Elvish.

"Do you hear singing?"

"Yeah. Wonder where it's coming from?"

They found out the answer soon after. It was hobbits. There were several on the upper deck, lounging amidst the baggage and smoking their pipes. The rest of them were singing.

\[
\begin{align*}
&"Up\text{ }\text{up \text{ }to \text{ } the \text{ } sky,} \\
&\text{to fly among the stars,} \\
&\text{And leave our dear beloved Shire} \\
&\text{way back yonder!} \\
&\text{Oh we're going to the mountain!} \\
&(\text{after crossing other mountains!}) \\
&\text{To see our own dear Bilbo wed a dwarf!"
\end{align*}
\]

The hobbits all laughed as the ship landed, congratulating each other on their song-writing prowess. "Not bad lads! That one might be a keeper!"

"Look! Dwarves! Hello, everyone! Adelard Took at your service! Well, would you look at this place! This is some mountain!"

"Adalgrim Took here. I don't suppose you fellows would give us a hand? We need to toss the luggage down."

"Aye, laddie. Send it down."

"Much obliged!"

As the cousins began tossing down luggage, on the other side of the ship the door had opened. The dwarves jaws dropped at the sheer number of hobbits that came trooping out, one after another.

"I thought he was just bringing his family." Balin murmured to Thorin as they watched.

Thorin grinned at his old friend wryly. "Believe it or not, that IS his family."

"There must be a hundred hobbits there!"

"Not quite as many as that, I don't think, but your point is taken. You should keep in mind that his mother had eleven siblings…and his father four."
"Good heavens. That would explain it."

"Why don't you go make sure everyone is rounded up and in the feasting hall. We'll be having dinner as soon as they drop off their luggage."

"So soon? You don't want to give them a chance to settle in?"

"They're hobbits."

"Ah. Yes. Your point is well taken."

After Balin left, Thorin strode towards the ship to greet his betrothed and his family. He had dressed for the occasion; he was wearing a shirt that Bilbo had embroidered for him over the winter. He had embroidered flowers of all shapes and colors in and among the more usual dwarven knotwork at the collar and cuffs, so it looked like a garden trellis when he was finished. It wasn't the usual dwarven fashion, and he'd gotten some teasing from the company and his sister, but it mattered not to him. Bilbo had made it for him with his own hands, and for that alone he would wear it proudly, teasing or not.

He wondered a moment later if he had miscalculated in some way. Bilbo had smiled when he first spotted him, and his smile had widened when he saw he was wearing the shirt, only for his eyes to widen in horror a moment later. He would have questioned him, but he saw then that Bilbo's relatives had all zeroed in on the shirt and were staring at the embroidery rather gleefully. Several hobbit ladies broke free from the pack and approached him, two of them each grabbing an arm so they could examine the cuffs, while the other studied the collar and chest section.

He glanced at Bilbo and found him rather red-eared and hiding his face while the rest of his relatives laughed and elbowed him in the side or patted him on the back.

"Um, excuse me, but what is going on?"

"Just taking a look see."

"I agree it is quite well done, but surely you have seen work like this before?"

The ladies looked at him, looked at each other, and then huffed and looked at Bilbo.

"Do you mean to tell me he has no idea?"

"No idea about what?"

Seeing Bilbo was still hiding, the center lady took it upon herself to explain.

"Flowers mean something, you see. We call it the language of flowers. Bilbo tells me flowers don't figure very much in your wedding traditions, so we were all a bit disappointed that we wouldn't get to see what he chose for your flower crown. This is better. Some of these aren't in season at the same time, or you have to go rather far afield to find any. He was able to say a lot more."

"So you are saying there is a message on my shirt?"

The ladies at each of his arms, who were probably sisters given how alike they looked, smiled impishly.

"We'll let Bilbo tell you what it says."
"Yes. Later. When you're alone."

"Indeed. Poor boy already looks ready to combust." the center lady snorted.

"He forgot we could read what he wrote even if you couldn't."

"If you've all had your fun." Bilbo finally huffed. "I believe dinner should be soon."

"I want to know more about this love letter." Thorin objected, pulling him to his side and tucking him neatly beneath one arm, before gesturing for the rest of them to follow.

Bilbo elbowed him in the side. "Later."

"I shall hold you to that ghivashel" 

"On one condition. You have to tell me what all the stuff you keep saying to me means."

"Ghivashel. Treasure of all treasures. Now what does this one mean?"

Bilbo, whose blush had started to fade, pined again.

"Love at first sight."

"Oh?"

Thorin looked entirely too pleased with himself. Bilbo grunted and pointed to another.

"This one means 'mistaken first impression'. That one means 'stubborn' and that one means 'pig headed'." he added.

"This is not a good love letter."

Bilbo felt guilty for his grumpiness, so he continued. "This one here means 'reassessment'. That one there is 'joyous surprise'. These here: 'honorable', 'brave', 'loyal', 'admirable'."

He glanced at Thorin's face to see how he was taking it so far, he looked hopeful.

"These" he pointed to the long strip down the chest where the laces were "are 'you are in my dreams', 'friendship turned to love'….and 'you are necessary to me'"

"And the rest? There are more around the collar." Thorin prompted.

"What does Amralime mean?"

"Love of mine."

The two of them smiled at each other. Bilbo grew shy again and looked away to explain the rest of his 'love letter'.

"The last few are 'I will only be yours', 'passionate love', 'devotion'….and ahem the last one is well…"

"Don't be shy, laddie! He's looking forward to yer wedding night!"

Thorin grinned when Bilbo flushed scarlet and hid his face again. He squeezed his shoulders gently.

"Good. So am I."
The hobbits all laughed merrily.

"Does sound carry well in this here mountain? Yer folks likely won't be getting any sleep for a while!"

"Too right. They've both likely got quite a bit of an itch to scratch after waiting so long!"

"We'll have to get you a pillow for the trip back to the Shire, or you likely won't be able to make it!"

"The court scribe, Ori, will actually be returning all of you to your homes."

"Ah, well, that's to be expected. Probably should still get him a pillow so he don't miss breakfast."

Bilbo whimpered. And to think, all these last weeks, he'd thought if he could survive Dain Ironfoot...

"Oh no."

"Something wrong, beloved?"

"Dain. Hobbits. They're going to meet. I may spontaneously combust from sheer embarrassment before we ever get to the wedding!"

Thorin just smiled ruefully in turn. They both knew too many bigmouths it seemed.

"I thought you were bringing a "really old" elf with you?" he asked curiously as they reached the feasting hall.

"I left Cirdan in the care of some of the Woodland Realm's scouts. He'll come with the rest of the elves. He thought we should have a chance for our families to meet without intrusion. The scout told me Estel was there too. With Glorfindel.

"The Balrog Slayer?"

Bilbo grinned at Thorin impishly. "Is that...admiration I hear?"

"Perish the thought. Bah! Elves." Thorin grumbled, though it lacked much of the bitter edge it used to.

"Did I tell you Cirdan has a beard?"

"Truly?"

"Yes. A rather fine one, actually."

"Sounds like a sensible fellow of good taste. And he knows how to make flying ships as well. Perhaps he won't be so bad." Thorin allowed, though grudgingly.

Their attention was diverted to Fili and Kili, who were eyeing the seemingly never-ending wave of incoming hobbits with awe.

"So many hobbit cousins!"

"And hobbit aunties and uncles!"

"And wee hobbit farmers!"
"Can't forget those."

"Fee...they brought cookies."

"And cakes"

"And pies!"

Bilbo squawked as he was suddenly torn away from Thorin's side to be squashed between two happily grinning soon-to-be-nephews.

"Hooray for hobbit relatives!"
"You're the best uncle Bilbo!"

Bilbo was released as abruptly as he'd been grabbed. Fili and Kili looked around at all the hobbits and grinned excitedly.

"Hello new relatives! I'm Kili, and this is my older brother Fili. Do any of you like to play pranks?"

Several of Bilbo's wilder Took cousins grinned and bustled forward to shake their hands.

"Well met, cousin!"
"Aye! I'm sure this will be the start of a beautiful friendship!"

Thorin, Dis, Balin and Bilbo exchanged an alarmed glance.

"Is it just me, or did the rest of you get a cold chill down your spine just now?"

"It wasn't just you." Dwalin said with horror.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Spring has finally arrived, and with it the coronation of the king, and the wedding of the king and hobbit burglar.

"From the sounds in the city, the men of Dale, and the traders that are there now, have started celebrating early." Elrond remarked wryly.

All of them were in the home of King Bard of Dale, waiting till a bit closer to dusk to approach the mountain.

"They are not attending the coronation or the wedding, so I suppose they're free to begin whenever they wish." Bard himself remarked. "The dwarves sent down several large barrels of ale and spirits a few days ago. I know everyone in town has been eagerly waiting for them to be broached. It was a long winter—not a particularly harsh one, thank goodness, and we were spared further tornados—but long, as winter always is. Now the first signs of spring are all around us, the acres and acres of crops the wee folks helped us plant have started sprouting, and everyone is eager for an excuse to celebrate. He peeked down from where his home stood perched at the top of the hill, down into the streets below. "Besides, they aren't just my people. I believe some of them are yours." he added with a wry grin of his own.

"Ah, let them celebrate. Our people need an excuse to celebrate as well. We spent the autumn and the early part of the winter season in Mordor slaughtering orcs." Ecthelion shrugged.

"And after that it was a long trip northward to get here." Thengel agreed. "I do believe I'm looking forward to the celebration as much as anyone."

"Have any of you been to a dwarf's coronation before? It is just, the mountain has been humming since early this morning." Bard asked curiously.

"They sing praises to the Vala Aulë, their maker, and ask for his blessings upon their king, their mountain and their people. I had not realized they still did such things, but then it has been long by their reckoning since I have witnessed it. They began at dawn and will continue in shifts until dusk. While the citizens sing, the king himself will be ensconced deep in the mountain. He will bathe in a spring that wells deep at the mountain's roots, and he will visit the tombs of his ancestors and ask for their guidance. When it is time for the coronation he will begin making his ascent towards the throne. One by one, the dwarf lords will add to his raiment and then join him on his walk. As dusk falls, and the song ends, and all is silent, he will be crowned and ascend his throne to receive the oaths of fealty." Celeborn explained.

"Sounds like quite the ceremony. All we did was plop the crown on Da's head, and have a party." Sigrid commented.

Thengel laughed. "Ah, well, that's pretty much what we did in Rohan as well…once we retrieved the crown from the belly of that stinking dragon!"

"We just had to retrieve da's from the mountain. I guess we lucked out there."
"From the mountain? That was probably as difficult as what we had to do." Ecthelion commented. He raised an eyebrow when king Bard and his daughter just stared at him blankly.

"No...it was actually quite easy. We were invited to the mountain, King Thorin asked us to take a look at a garden he was building for his intended to make sure it would suit, then he told us he had Dale's treasury, and Laketown's as well, and that now that they'd finished repairing the city treasury and the gates they could start transferring it." He looked at all of them in some confusion when they all seemed shocked, though they were obviously trying to hide how much. "We were quite relieved. The master of Laketown had made off with the treasury and we were rather worried about how we were going to make it through the winter. We were suddenly awash in gold, and they even let some of our traders ride along with Bilbo now and again when he was visiting foreign markets in search of food."

"I did try to tell all of you that they had been quite diligent in clearing up old business since taking control of the mountain once more. My father's jewels were returned without prompting soon after, and since then we've gotten several more visits to drop off commissions that were made and paid for before the dragon came. I've also been told that the ship went out to deliver any ploughs that were ordered before the winter season had properly passed as Bilbo assured them the men would need them in time for spring planting. He took the ship the long way around the mountains for fear of the wings icing over. Gimli son of Gloin, who has been acting as the emissary for Erebor, was along on that trip. He told me many of the men were quite surprised to get both a plough and their money back as their grandfathers or great-grandfathers had ordered and paid for one before the kingdom fell. In fact, Lord Ecthelion, King Thengel, it would not surprise me if your own people return to your homelands laden down with goods that were never delivered, should there be any that were ordered." Legolas added.

"And Thorin did all this? King Thorin, dwarf, about yea high, grumpy, ridiculously stubborn?" Gandalf demanded.

"I will admit he can occasionally be quite solemn and formal, but overall I've found him to be a rather pleasant fellow." Bard objected.

"Myself as well, even if he does tend to tease me about my nursemaid." Legolas admitted wryly. Behind him Tauriel giggled.

"The coronation starts at dusk, right? I should probably start getting myself and Tilda ready." Sigrid interjected.

"I should probably retrieve Estel as well."

"Let me." Sigrid offered. She moved to the nearest window, threw it open, and whistled loudly. The children's laughter and shrieking they could hear faintly in the distance cut off and a disappointed "Awwwwww!" echoed up in its stead.

"I was told the king's wedding will take place after the coronation is over, and that we were invited to stay for that as well, as the celebrations will not begin until it is finished. I've never been to a dwarf marriage before. I'm not sure what to expect." Legolas said leadingly as the procession left the city.

"I have. Before the fall of Moria and the coming of Durin's Bane, though I would imagine the particulars will be somewhat different as one of the participants is not a dwarf." Galadriel mused.

"It is strange to me that they want witnesses." Tauriel spoke up hesitantly. "I would think it a private
thing."

Elrond, who had started to smile a bit when Legolas began, decided he'd best explain. "Peace, child. Much like the race of men, their marriages are made quite differently from our own people. They hold a ceremony so the community will know that the two are now wed."

"They cannot tell?" she asked curiously.

"No. They cannot, hence the ceremony, the gathering of the community and the symbols some adopt to signal their status to others. It helps stave off misunderstandings later."

"How strange. One would think such a big change would be easily seen."

"Alas, it is an ability I fear only the Eldar were gifted with. Men and dwarves are both less spiritually aware than we, it is simply the way they were made. Changes which are obvious to us are not always so for them." Cirdan added. "And even among our people there are levels of spiritual awareness. Something that might be obvious to say, the Lady Galadriel, might pass by my notice or yours. It is the way of things."

"I see. Thank you for instructing me, my lords."

"I don't know what that little fool was thinking. I go away for a short time, and look what happens! I need to speak to Bilbo Baggins before this nonsense continues. He's a hobbit! He'll waste away to nothing, trapped under stone!" Gandalf muttered irritably.

"I will assume, Mithrandir, that your grumbling comes from worry, and so I will let it pass without comment…"

"I do believe, Cirdan, that you are commenting right now." the wizard pointed out. Cirdan easily ignored his grumbling.

"I have seen your hobbit more recently than you and I will tell you your fears are unfounded, my friend. It is a true match, unless I am greatly mistaken. And you need not fear the child will waste away for lack of sun. The king fashioned halls for him with windows looking out to catch the rising sun, a garden for him to tend, and even a pathway to a field of flowers for him to wander in should he wish it."

"Thorin did this?" Gandalf said with some consternation. "That seems greatly out of character indeed. He's earth blind even for a dwarf. It wouldn't surprise me to know he cannot tell a tree from a flower!"

"You forget, Mithrandir, the dwarves are children of stone and so seem unchanging…except when they fall in love. Much as stone can be transformed deep within the earth to a new configuration under the right circumstances, so too are children of stone changed when they meet their heart's ease. That this particular dwarf's match is a child of earth makes the metaphor all the more fitting, now that I think on it. " Cirdan mused. "Your child of earth has been similarly changed. Things that grow cannot always thrive when transplanted to new soil, but in his case it seems a successful endeavor. He has put down new roots, and the mountain has nourished him, not made him frail. You may ease your worries on that account."

"Hmmm." Gandalf muttered, lighting up his pipe. It was obvious he wouldn't do so until he'd seen and spoken to Bilbo for himself.
"Ridiculous dwarves! I'm not sure I'll be able to move under all this!" Bilbo complained. "And just look at me! I sparkle!"

"Aye, like the very sun, you are." Aunt Belba snorted. "I don't know what you're complaining about though, you're the one who decided to up and run off to marry a dwarf. You had to have expected something like this."

"I suppose I did. You have to understand though, the last time I saw this suit, right after having it made and trying it on, it wasn't covered in jewels like this!"

Bilbo had gone with tradition for hobbit weddings in his choice of clothing. His trousers were a deep, dark brown, like rich fertile soil—it symbolized laying down roots for new growth. His shirt was white for purity, his weskit was a bright sunny yellow—symbolizing happiness and peace, and his coat was a lovely pale spring green—new life, new beginnings. Simple, solid and down to earth. Well, the dwarves had added their own spin to his simple suit.

His trousers now had brown diamonds going down the sides. His weskit had gotten gold thread embroidery and yellow diamond buttons. His green coat had emeralds—buttons on the front and at the cuffs, smaller ones in an elaborate design on the collar. It had gotten some gold thread embroidery too. His plain white shirt had pearl additions—three buttons on the high collar at his throat, and his simple linen choice had been replaced with silk. His cravat was now cloth of gold, and he had a diamond the size of a robin egg surrounded by what he was fairly sure were chips of the Arkenstone on a long pin as a tie tack.

There was a knock at the door. Aunt Donnamira, who was closest, went to answer it.

"Gandalf?"

"Gandalf!" Bilbo repeated in astonishment. He hurried over, and sure enough, the wizard was there in the hall, peering at his round door in astonishment, no less for Aunt Donnamira.

"Donnamira Took? What in Manwe's name are you doing here?"

"It's Boffin now, and I'm here for my nephew's wedding, what else!"

"Gandalf, where have you been? It's been months!"

"You needn't tell me!" the wizard grumped as he ducked inside.

He was happy to note the ceilings were much higher than in Bag End; he did get tired of whacking his head on the chandeliers every few minutes. Speaking of Bag End…He took a long slow look around. He recognized those chairs…and that ottoman…the couch as well. He’d seen the portraits of Belladonna and Bungo over Bilbo's fireplace when last he’d been there, right before they all set off on the quest. There was a small kitchen at one side of the room. Linda Baggins and Mirabella Took were over there washing dishes—Belladonna's Westfarthing china, if he wasn't mistaken. The pots and pans all looked new—dwarven made by the look of it. The whole room was filled with warm sunlight, and there were several potted plants hanging near the line of windows across the way. The rugs underfoot were a strange mix of simple hobbit make and dwarven, and there was a large, ornate harp in the corner. There was another round door that was set below the windows, which opened while he was still looking around, disgorging a whole slew of younger hobbits.

"We got the last of the seedlings and such settled in to the garden. It's a little cooler here than in the Shire, so we layered the beds in some wood chips to help keep the roots warm. It should be beautiful once everything takes root and starts growing, Mr. Bilbo."
"Thank you, Hamfast, thank you everyone. You've been a great help. I've been so busy running every which way, I was half afraid the poor things would wither before I had a chance to see to them!"

"You're all here too? Who's minding the Shire?" Gandalf demanded as the current Thain and his uncles came out of another room.

"Oh, I asked some Rangers to do so. They were going to be in the area, anyway." the Thain explained as he began unpacking plain white cloaks. He kept one himself and gave the others to Linda, Bingo, Donnamira, Mirabella and Bilbo.

"I don't quite understand why we have to go in dressed like this." Bingo complained.

"It's tradition. When a wedding party was traveling from one mountain to another they'd all dress alike so it was hard to tell who the one getting married was. We're all here in the mountain already, so plain white cloaks for all of us until we reach the hall for the ceremony." Bilbo laughed. "We need to be dressed like this while the coronation is going on so no one can see us."

"When the kinging is done with we go in and I say our stuff, then we sign the contract and you drink some wine and exchange beads. I've got all that right?"

"Yes. Normally my father would have done that part."

"That's the part I don't get. You're of age." Bingo complained.

"It's symbolic or something. I'm leaving my house--the Shire in this case--to become part of Thorin's house."

"I'm going to do all my talking in Hobbitish, I decided. If the rest of the ceremony is gonna be in their dwarf language, it seems only fair." Adalgrim said firmly. "I told that fellow Balin as much. I told him you were gonna do your talking in Hobbitish too. He tried to object, saying you were legally becoming a dwarf, so we compromised. Whatever you're supposed to say when you're trading beads or whatnot you'll say in their dwarf language, but not the rest. This whole business is sort of unprecedented, even if what that elf fellow says is true, I won't have our whole culture swept under the rug like it don't matter none. I told him, I don't care if you're legally gonna be a dwarf, you're really gonna be a hobbit regardless. We also wrapped the wedding anvil…and really, a wedding anvil…we wrapped it up in living flowers too."

"That was Hamfast's doing." Linda spoke up, indicating the young gardener, who was blushing under everyone's attention.

"I cultivated some flowering vines in my greenhouse over the winter when I heard you were going to be standing over an anvil, representing Aulë. I thought the Green Lady should be represented too. I brought the whole thing, pot, wire trellis and all. She didn't make us, but she's blessed us, and it seemed rude to do otherwise. That fellow Balin seemed to agree when I explained things to him. He said that Dain fellow said something similar, which was a real relief as I was afraid they was gonna be stubborn about things."

"What are these beads you'll be exchanging?" Uncle Rory wanted to know.

"Hair beads. When Gandalf knocked earlier I assumed it was Dis. She said she had some for me to wear, because exchanging one of them was part of the ceremony."

As if his words had summoned her, there was a knock at the door. It was Dis, who was carrying a small jewelry box.
"Oh, Bilbo, you look marvelous!" she said rather mistily once she caught sight of him. She spent some time inspecting all the details on his outfit. "Beautiful. Dori does masterful work when his heart is in it."

"Dori did all this?"

"Yes. He spent most of the last two weeks on it. The rest contributed to the day as well. Gimli got some lovely wood pieces while visiting the elves on one of his diplomatic jaunts. Bifur and Bofur did the carvings on them. Oin did the stain and polish. Gloin, and Dwalin donated the metals, Bombur the jewel chips. Kili made the castings for them and added them to the wood pieces, I made the box, Ori made the picture on it, and Fili engraved it."

Bilbo ran his hands over the image of Bag End at one corner, with footsteps inching across to end at an image of the Lonely Mountain.

"Balin made the settings inside the box for them. Nori made the lock and did the fine detail finishing on the beads. Kili's not quite a master yet." Dis explained.

She handed Bilbo the small silver key that went with it, then waited as he opened the box to see what was within.

"You all made me wooden beads!" Bilbo said with delight.

"The insides and the clasps are metal, and the carvings are filled with jewel dust, but yes, there's a wooden shell on each one." Dis agreed dryly. "They were too light otherwise and well, we're dwarves. They just didn't seem right without embellishments." she explained.

She had Bilbo sit down on a stool and brushed through all his hair till it gleamed, then separated out strands for two long braids hanging down on either side of his face and attached a bead to the end of each.

"There. When the time comes you take the right bead and put it on Thorin's left. He'll take his left bead and put it on your right. There's no kissing in public in our weddings. Forehead touches are fine. You all remembered to bring a pinch of soil from the Shire?"

"Aye. I've got it right here." Linda held up a small velvet bag.

"None of you ever said what it was needed for." Belba said.

"It will go in the wine Thorin has to drink, and a pinch of stone dust from the mountain will go in Bilbo's. Only a pinch. I don't want my poor brother trying to choke down a cupful of mud. It's considered a bad omen if either of them can't drink it right down." she warned.

She fussed a bit with Bilbo's clothing and smoothed it down.

"We should start for the throne hall. It's nearing dusk, and we need everyone in place before the procession starts. Bilbo, you and your attendants will be going up a different way. You'll be in a different gallery than the others, closest to the door. Make sure you're all covered when your escort gets here."

There was a flurry of activity as all the hobbits, minus those in the procession, ran around, straightened clothing and such. When they all seemed ready, Dis led them out. Gandalf came to a stop before Bilbo and stared at him keenly for a long time before nodding to himself and leaving without a word.
Bilbo frowned at his retreating back.
"I wonder what all that was about?"

"Who can tell with wizards." Mirabella shrugged.

"He never even said what he came here for, did he…unless it was just to let me know he was here? All he did was come in, look around and leave!"

"Eh. If it was important he'll tell you at some point. You've got bigger things to worry about right now." Bingo said.

Just that quickly, Bilbo's stomach filled with butterflies.

"Yes. Yes, I do. Oh goodness. I'm getting married!"

A knock sounded at the door, likely their escort.

"No, don't open it yet. Remember, no one is supposed to be able to tell which one is me. It's considered bad luck or something."

The rest of them grumbled good-naturedly and donned their white cloaks and hoods, then lined up with Bilbo as next to last in line.

"Why here?"

"Well, think about it. If they're so afraid someone's going to try to steal you, of all things, well, safest place is in the middle, so we're not doing that." Linda explained.

"I'll go there." Mirabella offered. "Anyone tries to steal me, I'll pop 'em one right in the nose!"

"Best go for the bollocks, Mira. It'll prolly hurt your hand less." Donnamira giggled.

"Oi!" Bingo and Adalgrim winced.

"Let's hope none of it will be necessary. If it is, well, they've got it coming, don't they?" Linda snorted. The Baggins clan was, above all, practical.

"You have the wine?"

"Yep."

"The soil?"

"Right here."

"That's everything then. Let's go!"

It was Dwalin at the door, he nodded to all of them and led them at a swift pace on a roundabout route normally used by the housekeeping staff, which was set up to be both unobtrusive and off the heavily trafficked areas. As they made their way closer to the door and the gallery in which they'd be seated, they could see the mezzanines were all lined with dwarves, decked out in their very best. King Bard and his family, King Legolas, Lord Elrond, Cirdan, as well as several other elves and men were being shown to a gallery next to where the rest of the hobbits had been stowed. From the
look of it seats had been set up on stepped risers so everyone could see. Down by the throne, on one side stood Dis and Kili, while Fili was slightly in front of them, holding a pillow with the crown on it. On the other side stood Balin, waiting.

Bilbo and his escort were at last led to where they'd be sitting, just a short distance from the doors to the throne room. A decorative stone latticework covered the view. The holes were big enough that they could easily see out, but anyone any distance from them couldn’t easily see in, beyond being able to realize someone was in there. All the bridges and walkways that spanned the hollow center of the mountain were filled with dwarves who were singing, as they had been, in shifts, since the first light of dawn crested the horizon.

When the last of the sunlight faded, and the mountain was lit only with the hundreds of lanterns that graced the inner walls of the mountain, the singing ended, leaving an echoing silence in its wake. The dwarves that had been singing moved off the bridges to join the hundreds that lined the mezzanines on all sides. A deep, throbbing drumbeat began to sound in the depths of the mountain, regular as a heartbeat and slowly growing louder. Another drum joined in, and then another, each of them playing the same repetitive beat.

"Someone's moving down there." Tilda whispered from her spot against the balustrade.

Bain, Estel and Sigrid moved to join her and peered into the depths as well. A great procession of dwarves was making its way from the deeps, two across, torches held aloft in every fist. They took a roundabout path towards the throne, allowing all those gathered to see them as they passed just below.

Finally the procession made it to the wide bridge leading to the throne. The dwarf lords marched until they were at the end of the bridge, then moved to either side and turned to face each other, torches held aloft and making a long archway of fire. A final dwarf lord appeared, dressed in gleaming mail, his beard and hair studded with jewels, and fierce looking tusks stood proudly from the ends of his moustache.

Behind him, last but certainly not least, the king, clad in mithril and fur.

They proceeded beneath the archway made by the other lords and to the throne, and once through, the dwarves turned to face front again, their torches extinguished one after another, until all eyes were drawn to the throne that sat like a sea of gleaming stone above the void, lit from below with golden light. Fili stepped forward with the crown and stood to the side while Thorin knelt at Dain Ironfoot's feet. Dain lifted the crown high and began speaking in dwarvish, prompting shouts of assent in the same language from the gathered crowd, then all grew hushed again, and Thorin began to speak, his deep voice ringing through the mountain as he swore his oaths. Finally the crown was lowered onto his brow and his stood, turning in a slow circle to see the gathered multitude. The shouts of joy that erupted from the crowd set the mountain to ringing far harder than even their earlier multi-hour song did.

Bard looked around at them all and found many weeping and hugging their families, still cheering. Down below, Dain Ironfoot and the other dwarf lords went down on one knee, and soon the rest of those watching followed.

Thorin held up his hands as if in benediction, then called for Fili and spoke again at length, then Fili knelt and spoke an oath.

"What's he doing?" Bain wondered.

"The king is affirming Prince Fili as his heir, and he in turn swore to serve the king, kingdom, etc. to
the best of his ability. As Fili is his nephew, not his son, this extra step is required, even though it is actually perfectly fine for a sister's sons to inherit when there are no sons of the body to do so, dwarven society being as it is. Nonetheless, he must be properly recognized before the lords give their oaths so it is clear to all here exactly who they are swearing to.”

Thorin raised Fili to his feet and pressed their foreheads together briefly, smiling at the boy in pride. Kili was called forth next and was affirmed as prince and next in line should something befall himself or Fili. When this was done he turned to sit himself at last upon the throne to receive the oaths of fealty. The dwarf lords began coming forward in small groups, kneeling and talking loudly and at length, and then moving off when the king bid them rise.

"What are they doing now, da?" Tilda wondered.

"They're swearing fealty to the new king." Elrond answered once more. "The one who crowned the king is Dain Ironfoot, lord of the Iron Hills. He is Thorin's cousin and therefore one of Durin's folk. He swore all of Durin's folk to his keeping. Next to Thorin he is the eldest and highest ranked amongst them. Should anything happen to Thorin or his heirs he would be next in line for the throne of Erebor. The rest are lords of the other clans and settlements. They will each swear allegiance for themselves and their people. Each time it is a group that goes forward, they are all of the same clan. Between them they swear allegiance for all the settlements held by that clan." Elrond explained, having heard Tilda's question.

"Is he king of all the dwarves, not just the ones that live here?"

"Indeed. That is why the loss of Erebor was so grievous to them. It was not simply the loss of a home, nor the gold that dwells within, though those were grievous enough. It was also because when last the dwarf lords swore to the king under the mountain, they swore upon the Arkenstone, which was lost in the mountain to the dragon."

"It has only just occurred to me that things worked out quite fortuitously for all the world. The dragon held the Arkenstone, and was therefore, technically, king of the dwarves. Had Sauron thought to do so he could have forced all the dwarves to his service. They would have had no choice but to join him or be forsworn." Gandalf mused.

"Indeed. We were very lucky that things worked out as they did. Thorin, it seems, has learned from his grandfather's folly, and does not intend to allow them to deny his call a second time as they did when he called for aid to retake the mountain. They are swearing allegiance to him and his heirs, not the stone this time." Saruman agreed.

The oaths of fealty took a while, but at last the oaths were complete and the dwarf lords returned to the gallery to watch the rest of the show. Those who had traveled far to come to swear their oaths had been told the king planned to wed a hobbit. They had seen the fellow in the distance now and again since they'd arrived, but until the sacred anvil was brought out and set before the king, covered in flowers there were many among them that hadn't believed it.

"They just brought out an anvil." Estel said with some confusion.

"The wedding is about to begin." Saruman explained.

"I've never been to a dwarf wedding before." Tilda said cheerfully as they waited for the ceremony to get underway. "They've got an anvil down there…are they supposed to make horseshoes or
something? You'd think the flowers would get in the way."

"It's probably a decoration or something." Bard decided. "The flowers would get in the way."

"The anvil represents Aulë, smith of the Valar, and creator of the dwarves." Sauruman elaborated. "It is not meant to be used except in ceremonies like weddings, and then only as a sign that he is present, not for normal use."

"The flowers, I'm told, were put there by the hobbits in honor of Yavanna Kementari, who seems to be their patron, though I'm told they honor all the Valar. A fitting symbol, truly, as Yavanna is known to be the wife of Aulë." Legolas explained.

"Something seems to be happening." Sigrid noted.

"There's funny Mr. Ironfoot again, this time with a big hammer. And nice Mr. Balin with the fancy scroll." Tilda pointed.

They could all see a fierce dwarf striding down the pathway towards the throne. "Oh, and here comes nice Mr. Dwalin. He gave me cookies once and let me rub his head."

"Tilda, stop rubbing people's heads."

"He's got no hair there! I wanted to see what it felt like. He's got all those tattoos on his head too. He said they didn't hurt but a bit. I think I'd like a tattoo."

"No."

"But da!"

"NO." Bard repeated firmly, elbowing Legolas when it looked like he might laugh.

"Shh. I think it's starting." Estel warned.

Dwalin tapped the long pole arm he was holding on the ground three times so it made a hollow 'boom' when it hit the stone. He then shouted something, which king Thorin answered.

"They're still talking funny. I can't understand what they're saying again." Bain complained.

"Me either!" Tilda concurred.

"They're speaking their own language, Khuzdul. I can translate if you like. Dwalin announced that travelers had come from afar, and that one among them would marry the king if he would accept. Thorin told him to bring the travelers to the hall so that he could make his decision." Elrond explained quietly.

"I thought they'd already agreed?" Sigrid asked worriedly. She liked Bilbo, and didn't want to see him made sport of.

"They have. It's a formality." Elrond assured her. "The fancy scroll Balin is holding is the contract that lays out the framework they've both agreed to abide by."

Dwalin bowed and retreated to the edge of the hall, where he tapped his spear three more times and shouted something else. A line of hobbits in identical white cloaks with the hoods up to obscure their features marched into the hall in a line and stopped halfway to the anvil, then spread out in a line to one side, while one stepped forward to stand in front. Thorin and his family were in the same position on the far side of it.
This time Balin spoke, and then the hobbit in front replied. A stir went through the crowd of dwarves who were up in the gallery with them, watching.

"What did he say?" Bard whispered.

"I'm not actually sure. I don't know the halflings' language. Any time I encountered any they always spoke Westron," Elrond admitted. "How fascinating."

Balin spoke again at length and gestured to the group gathered behind Thorin.

Princess Dis stepped forward to stand opposite Balin on one side of the anvil. A second hobbit moved forward to stand opposite her, next to the first hobbit.

"What did he say?"

"As you come from far away, child of a different people, let us speak again with intermediaries, so none can accuse any here of misunderstanding." Elrond explained. "A nice workaround to honor both cultures and yet allow all those in the audience who understand only one language or neither to follow the proceedings."

This time when Balin spoke, Dis repeated his words in Westron for the benefit of the hobbits and the audience. The second hobbit was obviously there to perform the same function for the first.

"Who comes now to the hall of the Mountain King?"

"Hobbits of the Shire. We bring you our kinsman, Bilbo Baggins, who would wed him."

"You will give your kinsman into our keeping, to be sheltered in the halls of the king?"

"Aye. I am convinced of the honor and respectability of your king. I have inspected the halls made for his keeping and found them good. My kinsman has made his choice. What say you, king under the mountain?"

Thorin stepped forward and spoke, echoed by Dis a moment later.

"I say let him then come forth and speak."

The second to last hobbit in the line broke away and stood opposite Thorin, halfway between his kin and the anvil.

"I have traveled over hill and mountain, over plain and field, from far away to the west in the land of the Shire. In all my travels I have found no other I would have as husband. I come here now to ask of you, king under the mountain--Will you wed me here this day, here in your mountain hall?"

"I will, and gladly, child of the kindly west."

"Glad I am to hear it, o king. Let then the contracts be signed and let us partake of each other's homelands that we should be one hereafter."

Bilbo removed his white cloak and handed it to one of the hobbits with him, who were now arrayed in a half circle behind him. The torchlight caught the jewels on his clothing and sent them sparkling, making him look for a moment like a small, multi-colored star fallen to earth. If the look on his face was anything to go by, king Thorin certainly appreciated the view.

Balin unrolled the bottom of the scroll he held and laid it upon the anvil. Bilbo and Thorin each
signed it and stepped back so their witnesses—Adalgrim and Dis could do so as well.

When the ink was dried and the scroll re-rolled, Balin and Dis and the two hobbits stepped back, and Linda, Mirabella, Fili and Kili stepped forward. Of the two dwarves, one had a golden goblet the other a small box. For the hobbits, one had a small crystal decanter of wine, the other a small velvet bag.

"What's going on now?" Sigrid asked.

"Now they're each going to drink wine with ground stone from the mountain and I'd assume a bit of soil from the Shire." Elrond whispered back.

Bilbo's aunts filled the offered goblet with wine and soil, and then Bilbo offered the goblet to Thorin to drink from. Fili and Kili then filled the goblet with wine and rock dust and Thorin offered it to Bilbo to drink down. Once finished, he gave the goblet back to Thorin and he set it down upon the ground and stamped it once, hard, and smashed it flat.

"Why…?" Sigrid gasped.

"So none can now come between them. I think it's also supposed to avert bad luck? I'm not entirely certain of all the symbolism involved." Elrond admitted.

Balin began speaking again, once more echoed by Dis.

"Two are joined as one. May Mahal, our maker now bless them and let none come between them."

Adalgrim spoke again and echoed his blessing, as Donnamira translated.

"Two are joined as one. May our Green Lady now bless them and let none come between them."

Dain stepped forward and slammed the massive hammer down on the anvil. It rang like a bell, and the sound seemed to fill the whole of the room. The dwarves in the gallery stirred and nodded to themselves. Another stir went through them as the flowers on the vines that had been wrapped around the anvil opened before the last echoes of the anvil's ring had faded.

"What's going on now?" Bard asked.

"Most dwarves do not marry. It is taken as a given that should they meet someone that makes them change their mind, that is, in itself proof that their maker approves and has blessed the union." Galadriel explained. "It is nonetheless taken as a good omen if the anvil strike makes a true and echoing sound like it just did. The fact that the flowers bloomed just then is taken as a sign that Yavanna Kementari has also given her approval."

Bilbo and Thorin both seemed a little stunned at the display, but they continued the ceremony without prompting.

"Take this now, from my hand as a symbol of my care and devotion. I will protect and shelter you for all the days of my life."

"Take this now from my hand as a symbol of my care and devotion. I will make of your halls a home to nourish you all the days of my life."

"He's talking different than he did before."
"Yes. That last part was Khuzdul. He just married a dwarf, so he himself is now legally a dwarf." Elrond explained.

After they finished fastening the beads on one another's hair, Thorin took Bilbo's hand and guided him to stand on the far side of the anvil with Thorin's family, who each greeted him in turn by pressing their foreheads together.

Thorin went last, and their smiles as they pressed their foreheads together were blinding. Bilbo then laughed joyously and threw his arms around Thorin's neck. Thorin responded by lifting him right off his feet and laughing as well. Their families, and the dwarves gathered around to watch, all cheered.

"Alright! Now it's time to party!" Fili, Kili and the hobbits all yelled.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Tying up a few loose ends.

Chapter Notes

Everyone who has been with me so far, thank you. Just a bit further to go. Enjoy!

"Put another log on the fire, would you love? These old bones can't take the chill like they used to."

"Old? Nonsense, beloved. You are the very image of springtime."

"Oh you. Silly old dwarf. You need to get your eyes checked."

Thorin stirred up the fire and came to join his husband of eighty years on the couch.

The years had changed them both greatly. Thorin's once-black hair was now completely silver. His once-shorn beard was now a respectable waist length. He'd taken to braiding it and tucking it into his belt to keep it out of the way.

Bilbo, now nearly one hundred and thirty, an age previously only reached by his grandfather Gerontius, "the Old Took", had grown somewhat frail in the last decade, though he'd threaten to bop anyone who said as much. His mind was still sharp, as was his tongue, but everyone could see he wasn't much longer for this world. His once-copper locks had grown snowy-white, and his skin translucent with age.

Thorin swore daily he was unchanged in his eyes, and his love as strong as ever. Bilbo believed him, as he felt much the same about his 'silly old dwarf'.

"It was good to see the Shire again, though I wish it had been for a happier purpose. I still can't believe Primula and Drogo went and got themselves killed in a boating accident while visiting Buckland Hall."

"Yes. They will be missed. Look at it this way though...had you not given them Bag End and they had stayed living by the river all these years, it might have happened years ago, leaving Frodo without parents while he was still a child."

"That's true. That, or perhaps Frodo would never have been born. That would have been terrible. Bag End was a good place for all of them, and now it will shelter another generation of Bagginses. It's what my parents would have wanted."

"Elanor made a lovely bride, did she not?"

"Indeed she did. Time flies. Three children already." Bilbo laughed then. "The Baggins' of Bag End are just destined to be unrespectable though, aren't they? Mad cousin Bilbo runs off to battle dragons
and marry a dwarf… Frodo goes east to visit and comes home with a halfling bride."

"I am thankful for the fertility of hobbits. I worry what will become of Tauriel when Kili is no longer with us. Hopefully her grandchildren will be enough to keep her from wasting away."

"It may not be enough."

"It may not be enough." Bilbo sighed. "My mother and I are both descendants of Tauriel's aunt. A thousand years ago, and there was enough elf in us that mother faded bit by bit after my father died. She held on long enough to see me come of age and then was gone, just like that."

"It seems a cruel fate. The one you love should never go where you cannot follow."

Bilbo snuggled into his side. "Thorin… we have no idea what awaits us on the other side. Don't waste our remaining days on what-ifs." he chided gently. His smile turned teasing then. "And my, how far you have come, my king! There was a time Dis and I had to run constant interference to keep you from terrifying Tauriel right out of the mountain."

"She grew on me. Besides, I realized at some point that if I succeeded in driving her off, I would only lose Kili as well. He would have no other once he set his sights on her…and how could I really deny him the same happiness I had found myself? Still… it is lucky Fili wed a dwarf. I believe the populace was growing a bit annoyed with our family."

Bilbo giggled "Indeed, and Skadi has been good for him. Their son will be a good king someday. Though speaking of… does anyone know for sure what's going on with Gimli and Legolas?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Gloin still insists they're just good friends."

"He's giving up his throne to follow Gimli to war."

"Not really giving up. Celeborn is going to be regent and rule the Greenwood now that Lady Galadriel and half the elves of Lothlorien are travelling west to the Undying lands."

"So many years of peace and prosperity, and now war comes again. I suppose it was conceited of us to think we'd eradicated evil from the world when we destroyed the ring."

"If nothing else, I am relieved to know Durin's Bane has truly left Khazad Dûm. All these years since we've retaken it I have lived in fear of getting word that the boys and their families had been slain by its reappearance."

"Instead, all these years and he was off north gathering the remaining orcs and dark creatures so he could make his own bid as dark lord. Ruddy thing. I wish I could give the beast what-for!"

"Gimli would never forgive us if he was denied a quest of his own. Leave it to him, Legolas and Estel."

"He goes by Aragorn these days. Or Strider."

"He has too many names. I've known that boy for decades now as Estel, so Estel he will remain."

"Do you think Lord Elrond will allow Arwen to stay and marry him?"

"I think Arwen will not leave him any choice in the matter."

"I think so too."

"Another with a cruel fate. Not so cruel as Tauriel's though. She at least can choose to follow the mortal half of her father's heritage should she wish it."
"That means Estel has to make a bid to retake the throne of Gondor. Lord Elrond made that a condition for his blessing."

"Possibly he hopes he will fail and give Arwen no choice but to come with him and her brothers when they too leave the world."

"I think he'll be disappointed. Estel is no less determined than Arwen is."

"I agree."

They sat in silence for a while, just enjoying the warmth and the company.

"We've had a good run, haven't we?" Bilbo mused. "Eighty years. I can hardly credit it. We've had our ups and downs, but you know, I wouldn't trade a moment of it."

"Nor would I."

In the morning, Thorin's cry of anguish roused the palace. Bilbo had passed that night, peacefully in his sleep, with a smile on his face. Bilbo's funeral was lavish as one could hope. Though his presence had first been deemed strange, after eighty years among them there was none in the mountain that denied he was one of them, and much beloved.

King Thorin went into a decline after Bilbo's death, a fact which surprised no one. It was whispered in corners that he seemed carved of stone these days, as though all the light and joy had fled from him with his husband's death. Everyone began waiting for word to come that he, too, had passed away in his sleep one night.

It wasn't to be. An army of orcs and other fell beasts came to the doors of Erebor and demanded their unconditional surrender to their master "The Flame of Morgoth", known in previous years as Durin's Bane.

King Thorin sent a raven to carry word to his heir, prince Fili, who was currently ruling as Lord of Khazad Dûm, that he would be needed to take up the crown, and then he donned his armor and led a charge out to battle the army that dared besiege them.

King Thorin, already a legend for his many great deeds: retaking Erebor, helping destroy Sauron, helping kill Smaug, retaking Khazad Dûm, and reigning over an unprecedented age of peace, plenty and friendship with other races, added one more legend to his already impressive list. It was said he fought like a man possessed, and that the rest of the army was simply carried in his wake to do battle once more against their ancient foes.

The men of Dale, now led by King Bain, came to their aid, as did the elves of the Greenwood. Even with such numbers of allies, the battle was a long and bloody one.

Aid came in the final hour in the form of Princes Fili and Kili, riding at the head of a band of warriors from Khazad Dûm.

King Thorin died that day, in combat with Bolg, son of Azog the Defiler, ancient enemy of the line of Durin, slaying him after receiving a mortal blow himself.

His nephews, his company, his people, and the men and elves that came to lend aid wept bitter tears at his loss, though it was noted that Thorin, much like Bilbo, died with a smile on his face.
"On fair Valinor, in the Halls of Waiting, Aulë, Smith of the Valar, walked among his sleeping children to inspect those who had just arrived. Row on row of them there were, all the dwarves that ever were, there to await the end times, where they would be called forth to help rebuild the world. One among them, a mighty king, formed beside one who was not at all like the others. He was a hobbit, but one who had chosen a dwarf to love. He too would be there until world's end, sleeping side by side with the one he loved."

"So uncle Bilbo and uncle Thorin are still together then?"

"Of course. Love knows no bounds."

"That's good. I miss them both. I didn't want them to be sad."

Frodo smiled at his youngest and tucked her in to bed, then left quietly, only to find his wife, Elanor—named so by her mother for the golden flowers of Lothlorien which she had become enchanted by during a visit with her husband, Prince Kili of Erebor—waiting outside the door and listening.

Elanor greatly resembled her mother, though she had Kili's dark hair with Tauriel's green eyes. She was a few inches taller than him, but not so much so that living in Bag End with him caused any hardship. Her twin brother Thrain was more dwarfish in looks, though he had Tauriel's hair and Kili's eyes.

She held out her hand for him to take, and they went outside to sit atop Bag End and watch the stars now that all the children were abed.

"Do you really believe that, or were you just trying to make her feel better?" she asked once they were settled.

"I believe it. I have to. The alternative is too cruel."

"Do you think we will be so lucky, if it is true?"

"Yes. You heard what uncle told us. We hobbits started out just like you and your brother. You'll go wherever hobbits go, as will our children."

"That still leaves my poor mother to lose all of us."

"You know, I was thinking about that. Cirdan told uncle that the Sylvan elves have Avari heritage, same as we hobbits do. They turned away from the Valar and were made mortal. It may be that your mother has the same choice available to her that lady Arwen does. If that's so, she may simply follow your father to the halls of waiting."

"Like Bilbo followed Thorin?" she asked wryly, though she sounded hopeful nonetheless.

"Yes, just like that."

"I hope you're right, about both of them."

"You just need to have a little faith."

Elanor smiled and snuggled into his side.

"Oh, there's the evening star." Frodo pointed before waving.
"Why do you always wave at it?"

"Oh, did you never hear the story?"

When Elanor shook her head, Frodo smiled.

"My parents told me that Ori brought all of them back to the Shire after Thorin and Bilbo's wedding. They had left later than they intended and the evening star had risen before they got this far. The evening star is actually a glowing jewel carried by an elf name Earendil the Mariner. He's Lord Elrond's father, apparently. There was a prophecy or something that when the jewel was reunited with two others of its kind that would signal the end times. In order to keep that from happening he's been flying around with it for ages! Ori didn't know this, and wasn't expecting another ship in the air and they nearly crashed. Poor Ori. No one ever let him live it down. He was Ori-Destroyer-of-Worlds for years." he laughed.

"There you are, laddie. Good as new. Wake up now. There's a whole slew of folks waiting to meet you."

Thorin trembled at the sound of that voice. It was one he knew in his very bones, though he'd never heard it before that he could remember.

"Lord Mahal!"

Thorin opened his eyes and then had to wince at the brightness of his Maker: he glowed—he was the fire of the forge in humanoid form. He was also huge—Thorin hadn't felt so tiny and insignificant even next to Beorn!

"None of that now, laddie. You did good. Oh, but the consternation you all caused! HA! I've not laughed so hard in ages! You all had them running in circles all aflutter! What's going on? What are they doing? That wasn't part of the PLAN!"

Thorin could only watched, bemused, as his maker laughed long and loud. For all his…glowyness and grandeur, he reminded him of no one so much as a bizarre cross between Dain, Gloin and a wee bit of Fili and Kili—loud and mischievous.

"HA! I told them this way was much better. Got rid o' that bastard Sauron, kicked that dragon's arse, got yer mountains back. It's all good, I told them. There's still gonna be a big war for men and elves alike to go battlin' in, Gondor will have a king again, blah blah blah. Bunch of fluttering pansies, I tell ya!"

"Lord Mahal… Is B…"

Thorin found himself unable to finish his question. He was too afraid of the answer.

Mahal smiled at him kindly and moved aside. A door at the far end of the massive hall opened.

That's when he saw Her.

She was as dark as Mahal was bright. Her skin was the rich black of fertile earth, her eyes the green
of spring leaves. Her brown hair called to mind the bark of trees. She was adorned with flowers and more grew in her footsteps as she walked.

She could be no other than his Maker's wife, Yavanna: Bilbo's Green Lady.

That was when he saw him.

Yavanna, like her husband, towered above him and seemed to cast everything about her into insignificance. Even so, once his eyes had found him, he could not look away. He was youthful again, looking much as he had years ago at the start of their quest, and his hair, copper once more, was adorned with flowers.

"Bilbo."

It came out as little more than a whisper, but there was a wealth of pain, relief and joy that could be heard contained in it even so. Bilbo Baggins smiled.

"Silly dwarf. Looks like you're not getting rid of me after all."

"Good!" Thorin managed to choke out. "Good."

"Come on. There's lots of folks waiting to greet you. They've been telling me the most interesting stories!"

"Like?"

"A young dwarf prince that ran into the throne room in nothing but suds to complain to his grandfather that baths should be outlawed…"

"Mother. " Thorin groaned.

Bilbo's laughter chimed like bells. Thorin could only smile like a fool at the sound of it. Eighty years hadn't been enough, and now it wouldn't have to be.

"Thank you." he told his Maker sincerely.

"Get on with ye." Mahal told him with a smile. "What can I say? I'm a sucker for a good love story."

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