Hurricanes in Hertford, Hereford, and Hampshire

by 61Below

Summary

Bilbo was banished. That's it, the end. She wants nothing more to do with dwarves. Now all she needs to do is get back home, but there may be some complications along the way.

Notes

Title from My Fair Lady

(This is a WIP. My brain is a non-cooperative little kid running after butterflies. Edit: NOT ANYMORE! And, there's like, some graphic descriptions of uh, the stuff that comes with pregnancy? Just...you've been warned).

And since I think visually, I made some cover art.
Chapter 1

The sun slanted low and gold through the pines. Snow blown from the boughs glittered in the light. Puffs of breath from the oxen and dwarves of the caravan rose with the clank and clatter of wagon wheels and tack. Bilbo walked beside a wagon, clutching her arms tight around her middle, hands shoved up either sleeve, desperate to be warm. Her cheeks were gaunt in a way even their long wandering in Mirkwood hadn't achieved, and her hair hung lank and dull over her eyes.

In contrast with her bedraggled appearance, the dwarrow wagon she walked beside was painted with bright colors over the complex geometric patterns carved into its wooden sides, its canvas covering a deep red. Most of the other wagons were equally garish. Most were empty. The caravan itself was a slapdash conglomerate of Iron Hills soldiers who had made it through the battle mostly unscathed, and more importantly, they were strangers to her. They had found the wagons untouched by dragonfire in one of Erebor's many nooks and crannies, and with Dain's blessing, they left to trade on Erebor's restored name with Erebor's restored gold.

Bilbo neither knew nor cared. She just needed a way out. She was more than a month gone, and she was still searching for a way out.

A rough Khuzdul shout rang out, shredding through her tattered nerves. The old greybeard driving her the wagon tutted at her as he reined in his ox. "Ach, lad, he's jus' tellin' us ta haul in."

Bilbo kept her head down and nodded. She didn't correct the dwarf. She should be glad they had left before they had gotten the chance to learn of her betrayal.

The greybeard hopped off his drivers' seat with a rusty groan. "Be a good lad and fetch us some wood for the cookfire. I'll see to yon Bluebell." The ox flicked its tail.

Bilbo went off without a word. She had joined the caravan with little thought of a plan, and she still had none. These dwarves would soon turn south, following the Anduin to take the Gap of Rohan, then make for the Blue Mountains. As she piled downed wood into her arms, she knew now that she couldn't stay with them that long. Hunger and nausea warred in her belly.

The Arkenstone was not her only theft.

She needed to leave soon.
Once back at the camp, the smoke from the many fires making her eyes redden and water, the old dwarf who'd let her tag along was bent over a pile of kindling, gently stacking twigs in a rough fire pit. When he looked up at her approach, he must have smiled behind his beard, with the way his eyes wrinkled even more, and Bilbo was reminded so fiercely of Bofur that she had to rapidly blink back tears. The dwarf cocked his head, but Bilbo kept her face averted, so he turned his attention back to building the fire.

He said quietly, "Now, I know we asked yeh no questions when we picked yeh up outside Esgaroth-" Bilbo flinched but he continued softly, "And I know yeh've asked no questions of yer own, but I dun think traveling companions should go without knowin' what ta call each other. I'm Eikar. What's your name, lad?"

Bilbo hunched her shoulders, but after a moment she said rustily, "I've had so many names, but I don't think I can own up to any of them anymore."

The greybeard, Eikar, shifted a long stick back into the heart of the fire. "What can I call yeh, then? 'Hey You' and 'Lad' get rather confusing in this lot." He once more smiled behind his beard.

Bilbo twisted the fur lining of her coat sleeves between two fingers and finally decided to give into the curiosity that had been gnawing at her since-- since--" that day. "There's a Khuzdul word-- I know you're not allowed to share it, but since it was addressed to me, I feel like I have the right to know what I've been called--" she glanced up at Eikar and met no censure, so she stumbled over the unfamiliar word, "Mel--Melhekeen?"

Eikar dropped the cookpot he'd been hanging over the fire, sending sparks flying, and Bilbo jumped back with a choked off shriek. He quickly brushed the sparks off his beard and righted the cookpot before it could smother the fire. "Sorry la-- lass, I must have misheard. Did you say 'Melekînh'?” He pronounced the word carefully.

Bilbo stared up at him and replied hesitantly, "—yes?"

Eikar appeared to chew on his mustache before he said, "Well, yeh do have a right to know what yer called, I s'pose. It means Halfling-lass." Bilbo's head snapped up. Eikar continued, "I take it yer not a child of Men?"

She growled, "No I should very well say not. I am a Hobbit, I am not half of anything. Did he really call me Halfling? Oh the very nerve." Her hands clenched into fists. And to think she'd wasted a month-- moping over-- him this.

The sound of galloping hooves broke the winter evening's quiet. The caravan dwarves jumped to their feet, drawing their weapons. A horse and rider burst into the camp, Gandalf! He dismounted and cried, "Bilbo Baggins!"

Said Bilbo's lips compressed into a tight line. "Yes, hello Gandalf, wonderful to see you. Announce my presence to all of Mirkwood why don't you?"

Gandalf sighed and sat down on the frosty grass. "My dear girl, we have been looking for you."

She blanched. "No. I'm doing as he says. I'm going home."

He looked down at her, even from his seat on the ground beside her, and asked gravely, "Without even a goodbye?"

"Like a thief in the night," she snarled.
Gandalf sighed and busied himself with packing his pipe. Eikar looked from the stranger to the lass who’d just shown more life than the last month combined. The difference was striking. When their caravan had trundled past the smoking wreck of Laketown and they’d picked up who they’d thought was a dragon-orphaned man-child, who wouldn’t speak but jumped a foot at any loud noises, Eikar had been too-reminded of his young nephew’s sons. For weeks, the boy had moved like a ghost, but now? Now he was a she-hobbit, fully grown? Everyone looked older when covered in grime and guts. Everyone was still haggard from the battle, but Erebor needed supplies. So off they went, those uninjured soldiers dressed up like merchants. Apparently no one was who they seemed in this caravan.

After that moment of tense silence, Gandalf said softly, "He lives."

Bilbo stiffened.

Gandalf added, "He lives, and he asks for you."

"Bully for him," Bilbo said darkly.

Eikar growled, "If whoever he is is the one who gave her her necklace of bruises, then he'd best bugger off."

Gandalf choked on his smoke and Bilbo cried, "Bless you and your big grey beard, my friend."

Eikar blushed.

Gandalf cleared his throat and clarified, "You mistake me, my dear. I will not take you back to the mountain if you do not wish it. I already did try to tell you not to go back--"

"Save your 'told you so's, Gandalf," Bilbo sighed wearily, her fight spent.

"--I just wish you had not gone off alone," he finished with a dark look.

She gestured around at the merchant camp, whose dwarrow quickly looked away, unwilling to be caught eavesdropping. "As you can see, I have not been alone."

"And for that I am grateful." Gandalf bowed slightly to Eikar.

But Bilbo heaved out a long sigh and buried her face in her palms for a long moment, before she looked back at the wizard. "To tell the truth, though, I'm glad you've come, Gandalf. I can no longer stay with the caravan."

"What! Why?" Eikar cried gruffly.

Bilbo shut her eyes, hurt by the hurt in his voice. "I can't-- that is-- um." She blushed, searching for an excuse, and then declared, "I need to go to Rivendell. The Gap of Rohan will take me too far out of the way."

Gandalf leveled her with a stern look, which Bilbo answered with a slight widening of her eyes. He added slowly, "Yes, indeed, for the books."

Eikar snuffled like an offended cat and growled, "Elves," while he dropped chopped potatoes into the stew pot. "Anything but elves, for yeh lass. I'd'a ruther see yeh off ta Gondor than ta those batty leaf eaters, are ya quite sure?"

"Thank you for the offer, but no," Bilbo said, hiding the small quirk of her lips in the shadows. "My last visit to Rivendell was interrupted. It's high time I went back." But then the smell of cooking food
made her stomach lurch, and she was forced to excuse herself.

Later that night, Bilbo shivered in her Laketown coat and tried not to remember a thing.

"No! What are you doing here? Melekînh, you don't belong here!" His features were twisted in a snarl. "Go home!" His voice cracked.

She curled into herself even tighter.

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It was even harder to leave the caravan than she'd thought. Eikar, upset and trying not to show it, bid her farewell, and she gently pulled him down to (lightly) knock her forehead to his. "Thank you, greybeard. I wouldn't've made it this far without you lot."

Eikar huffed and puffed and told her, "Enjoy yer books, little wandering Not-Half-of-Anything. And if yer ever in the Iron Hills, yeh come find me, yeh hear?"

Bilbo blinked back tears and nodded. Then she pulled away. The caravan turned south. She and Gandalf rode north.

After a morning of silence, when they stopped for lunch, Gandalf huffed and finally asked, "Why did you change your route? That caravan would eventually take you past the Shire."

Bilbo wrapped her arms around her middle and mumbled, "It would take too long."

"My dear hobbit, this way will take just as long, since we will have to wait for the passes to clear."

"Can't wait that long."

"It will be decidedly easier to cross the High Pass in the spring." Gandalf explained exasperatedly.

"No, it really won't."

"Bilbo--"

"Trust me, Gandalf!" Bilbo cried desperately. "I will be unable to take that pass in four months' time."

Then Gandalf looked at her, really looked at her. He stretched out a gnarled hand over her still-flat stomach, and he heaved out a great gusting breath. Shadows gathered around him as he rumbled, "I will string him from the battlements myself--"

But Bilbo hastily added, "N-no! It wasn't like that." She blushed furiously when he looked down at her. "Well, there was a reason I went back after I handed Bard the Arkenstone. I just thought-- I just hoped that-- that I would be enough."

Gandalf looked gravely down at her, and the shadows slowly faded. Then he took her hand in both of his and said, "Very well. Then I will do what I can to get you safely home. Even if that means we need to call for a little aid."

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"Little Bunny!"
Bilbo bit back a sigh and craned her head up and up and up. "Hello Mister Beorn."

"Come in, come in, you're positively skin and bones."

He led her inside while Gandalf saw to his horse and helped her clamber up onto the high bench. One of the sheep brought in a fresh loaf and a pot of honey, and a shaggy shepherd dog brought a jug of milk. Bilbo's empty stomach gave a sharp jolt. For once, though, the smell of food didn't cause it to try to rebel. She broke into the still warm loaf with a whimper and ate without fear for the first time in an age.

Beorn sat with a thud across the table from her and asked, "So when are you due?"

She nearly choked on her bread and had to take a drink of milk before she could stutter, "Wh-what?"

Beorn just looked at her from beneath his dark eyebrows and her shoulders slumped. "I'm not going to ask how you know. To tell the truth, I'm not sure."

He snorted. "Well you can't be too far along. Your dwarf king was pining too much for you when you were last here."

Bilbo spluttered, "I beg your pardon? I-- I thank you not to make assumptions--"

Beorn merely rolled his eyes at her. "Without upsetting your two-legger sensibilities, your lot have forgotten to trust your noses."

Bilbo gaped at him, and he just let out a big laugh. "Eat your fill and take your rest. We can pretend I have manners later. Have you been having any other problems besides your morning sickness?"

She blinked up at him, unsure where to even begin. He watched her, big and gruff and with the capacity to be so very menacing, but there was only good, solid concern for her well being in his old eyes. She bit down on her thoughts, I miss him! I need him! I can't do this on my own! And she shook her head at Beorn. "If I could keep food down, I'd be happier."

He nodded and said, "I can put together a tea blend that will help settle your belly. Gandalf!" He called to the wizard as he entered the room, "are you here for long?"

"No, Master Beorn. We must get across the mountains before winter fully sets in. Bilbo, did you truly mean to go to Rivendell or was than an excuse to part from the caravan?"

Bilbo bit her lip, "I think it would be for the best. I doubt the midwives in the Shire will know what to do with me."

Gandalf looked very grave before he cleared his expression. Then he nodded to Beorn and said, "May we have your assistance crossing the mountains? I'm afraid Bilbo would be unable to make it alone, and she has expressed concerns about being able to make it if we wait til spring."

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Lindir led the dwarves to a courtyard which was to be their camp, but to Bilbo, he led her on into the guest quarters. She could feel Thorin's gaze on her back the farther they got. He had been watching her more closely since the Trollshaws. At her room, Lindir bowed and said, "Someone will come with clean clothes for tonight. Please leave your clothes, they will be washed as well. The ladies' baths are down this hall." Bilbo eyed him sharply, and he nodded. "We remember Belladonna from before. My Lord was very happy to hear she had had a daughter. It is very good to have you here, Miss Baggins."
She sighed and thanked him.

The baths were heavenly.

The dress left for her on her bed was even more so. The heavy velvet felt marvelous on her wind-chapped skin, and the fabric rustled in such a delicious way—she stopped herself from swirling to see how the full skirts would flare—she was nervous revealing herself in front of the Company in such elven finery, since they hadn't appeared to have cottoned on to the fact that she was a lass, but she also felt like she could take on the whole world clad in such as this—this was a fairy tale dress, make no mistake. Silver-threaded stars shimmered on the deep blue velvet, winking as she moved through the evening light. She left her damp hair loose so it would dry more quickly.

She finally stepped out of her room, unsure of where she was supposed to go, so she followed the distant sounds of the dwarves' carousing with a small smile. Hopefully the elves would not get the same treatment she'd been subjected to! She squared her shoulders and padded barefoot down the stone hall.

There, in the courtyard below, tables were set for a feast, and the dwarves were already tucking in (with some complaints—ha! Her pantry was better received!) She spared a smile for herself at her own little viciousness. Then Lord Elrond stood and called, "Ah, Miss Baggins, please join us."

Thorin's head snapped in her direction, and she was gratified to see the utter shock on his face. She couldn't help but duck her head shyly. His throat bobbed as he swallowed hard and then—oh no, she felt her stomach flip. She blinked and headed down the stone steps to the courtyard, and remembered her mother's tales about her own trips to Rivendell.

Later, sitting with Bofur, Ori, and Balin around a makeshift campfire, consciously ignoring Thorin's stares from across the group, Bofur asked her, "Why'd ye keep it secret, lass? Dincha trust us?"

She waved her tankard at her fellows and cried, "Trust you? Of course I trust you. But—I don't trust you to not to try to—to do what's 'best' for me. I don't care that I am not—not who you thought I was, I am still me, and I'm still going with you!"

Ori blinked, confused, "What's that got to do with anything?"

Balin eyed her and asked, "Are hobbits like Men, who try to keep their womenfolk at home?"

Bilbo huffed a groan, "Not quite so much, I mean, I own my own home and I'm in control of my own finances—it's not like— I've seen what lengths those Breelander men try to go to—to—keep their womenfolk tucked away like mathoms in a chinahutch, but I—" she looked off into the distance and waved her tankard like she was waffling her hand, before she explained, "Running off with you lot is not respectable." She rolled her eyes. "But adventures themselves are not respectable, so maybe the real truth is that hobbits, male and female, keep themselves at home." She ran a finger around the rim of her mug, making the glass squeak, and she looked at them nervously. "You're not going to try to send me home now, are you?"

"No la—lass. No we will not," Balin said firmly.

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Bilbo arrived in Rivendell in the middle of a snowstorm, riding on the back of a great bear, in the company of a wizard. Elrond rushed into the courtyard with an extra fur coat and threw it around Bilbo's shoulders as he gently lifted her from Beorn's back.

"Th-thank you, I th-think m-my fingers are f-frozen sh-shut, s-sorry Beorn."
Elrond carried her inside and put her down on a footstool next to a roaring fire in the hearth. He knelt before her, long fingers working at the frozen ties of her jacket. "Let's get these wet things off of you. What possessed you to make that journey now?" He halted when he peeled back the layers and met her mithril mail. His eyes flew to hers.

She tried to give him a smile, but her lips were still trembling. "I m-must beg to impose on your hospitality for a few months, my Lord, s-soon I won't be f-fit to travel."

He gently chaffed her red-raw hands in his own and asked, "Months?" Then he too held a hand over her abdomen. His breath caught, and he let out a long slow sigh. "Be welcome in my home, Belladonna, for as long as you have need. For now, please sit, I'll call for tea, and someone will prepare your rooms." He stood and left the room in a few long strides, robes streaming behind him.

She was left alone, the only sounds the crackling fire and the distant shriek of the wind outside. She clutched the dry coat around herself, hiding the mithril from her own sight. She couldn't think about that mithril now.

His eyes burned into hers through the fine links. His hands lingering on her as he adjusted the shirt to sit correctly over her shoulders. His smile after she showed him the acorn.

The tears in his eyes before he held her over the battlements

She buried her face in her hands and fought back a scream.

There had been no other way. He'd forced her hand by being so-- so pigheaded.

But you took it for yourself before there was no other way, Bilbo.

She leapt to her feet and started pacing before the fire. But she could not outpace her guilt.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Bilbo settles uneasily into Rivendell, but idle hands carry trouble.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rivendell was too big. Her feet never reached the floor when she sat on a chair or a bench. The steps were just that too much too steep. Don't even get her started on how ridiculously high the shelves all were. It all just served to remind her that this was not a home for her.

And it was lonely.

Gandalf had barely seen her settled before he rode off, braving the snows once more, off to another urgent matter again. The elves tried to be welcoming, but they were all eternal, and, well, they'd all already spent their lives together. Oh, they were kind to her, but she wasn't one of them. She sat in their dining hall, alone in a crowd, night after night, and felt hollow.

They provided her with warm dresses, long fur cloaks, underthings so soft and fine they were a pleasure to wear against her skin, even socks...which she set aside with a sigh. She did consent to wear the pair of hard-soled, shearling-lined slippers when the snows fell in the lanes between their outbuildings.

She didn't touch the silver-star dress that hung in her wardrobe.

But after weeks of idleness, Bilbo met with Elrond and pleaded, "Please, I need some occupation. I can't just live off your charity without contributing something to your household."

Elrond, mildly alarmed, said, "Belladonna, with your station, you need not work."

Bilbo cried, "What station? I am in exile, I have no station."

"You are the mother of a prince of Durin's line--"

Her mouth snapped shut. Pale, she croaked, "...Am I having a boy?"

"Balanced probabilities," Elrond backtracked.

Bilbo paused, then batted away the comment and huffed, "How did you know whose-- Was I really that obvious before?"

Elrond blushed delicately. "I could not say, but--" he tapped his chest.

She looked at him confused.

"Your mail," he said, as if that explained anything.

She looked down at her own chest, where the pearls and jewels peeped out above the neckline of her elven gown. "What, does it have a crest somewhere?"
He blinked. "No, it's mithril."

"...So?" She asked, now honestly confused.

"It is a... kingly gift," Elrond said slowly.

She gave up trying to get any sense from the elf and twisted her hands together for a moment. Then she asked again, "Position or no, I cannot sit idle. In the Shire, I had my affairs to tend to-- my tenants to take care of, my cropshares to manage, and my garden and home to keep. I need something with which to occupy my hands. I need to put my mind to some task, before it rips itself apart!"

Elrond looked at the dark circles under her eyes and finally said, "I believe you will be useful in the library. There are a number of Sindarin texts that should be translated into Westron."

She smiled and stood to make her goodbyes, but he held up a hand.

"There is one thing I would know, first. ...Did he know of your condition when he cast you out? I cannot imagine he would send you away if he knew."

She stiffened. "No, he didn't-- he doesn't know. And what difference would it have made? No, that would have only made my-- treachery-- even worse. Oh, I've no doubt they would have kept me, kept me until I gave birth, and then I'd be sent on my way, with- without my child." Her voice broke. "Can't you see? This is my greatest theft, my greatest betrayal. And so they can never know."

"Never? My dear Bella, surely they will guess, since you left the Shire in the company of dwarves, when you return with a half-dwarven babe--"

"Oh I've no doubt the whole Shire will have a guess and an opinion, but none will know. And I'd rather all of Hobbiton consider me a whore than let them take my child from me!"

Elrond watched her for a long moment, then nodded. "Very well. They will not hear it from me."

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The snow shrieked beneath her boots as she ran across the frozen river, and she fell to her knees beside his broken body. Blood splashed bright and horrible on the snow, and when she patted her hands over his chest, they came away tacky with blood.

"No no no, Thorin, don't do this to me, not again, don't you dare--"

Then, blessedly, his eyes opened again, and he coughed out an awful wet sound. He heaved a shuddering breath and gasped, "No! What are you doing here? Melekînh, you don't belong here!" His features were twisted in a snarl. "Go home!" His voice cracked.

Her heart thudded once and stopped. Then a great shadow made her look up, and she dove out of the way of one of the Eagles. It gently lifted Thorin's broken body once more, and Bilbo was left alone in the red-spattered snow.

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One snowy day, she padded along a winter garden, its central marble fountain drained and lined with a few inches of fresh snow, with bright pink rose hips dotting the rigid hedgerows and climbing vines, her fur hood keeping the flakes from her face, when a voice behind her called, "Oh, hello!"
Bilbo turned and saw a figure standing beneath the arbor. She carried a deep bowl in her be-gloved hands and smiled at Bilbo. "Excuse me, for a moment I thought you were one of the children." She walked into the garden and reached up for one of the bird feeders hanging from a tall iron hook. "You must be Belladonna. I'm Gilraen."

Bilbo nodded and asked, "Would you like a hand?"

Gilraen held out the bird feeder. Bilbo opened the lid and Gilraen scooped seeds into the hopper. Once done, she replaced it and reached for the other, handing it down for Bilbo to hold open. Chickadees and juncos flew to the refilled feeder, and after Gilraen replaced the second, she reached into her pocket and scattered dried cherries in the snow. A cardinal flew to land on the snow-covered fountain, a flash of red on white. Gilraen dusted off her hands and said, "Thank you, that was much easier than juggling the covers off again." A small smile lit her grave face, highlighting the fine lines around her eyes. "I'm glad to finally meet you. Would you like to join me for tea? It's about time we warmed up, don't you think?"

It so happened that Gilraen's quarters looked out over the garden. When she threw back her hood and shook the snow from her cloak, Bilbo burst out, "You're a Woman!" and promptly blushed.

Gilraen gave her another small smile. "You're right. I am no elf. It's one of the reasons I wanted to get to know you. It can be...difficult living in an elven city when you are not elven."

Bilbo nodded and offered her her damp cloak. Gilraen hung it from one of the high pegs before showing her into a cozy sitting room. The veranda doors were shuttered against the winter chill, blankets were draped across the arms of the set of plush armchairs and across the back of the sofa set before a cheerful hearthfire, and a child's artworks were hung proudly from a wire on the wall above the hearth.

To her shame, Bilbo sat at a loss for words. She didn't want to ask the obvious questions, What was a Woman doing in Rivendell? Whose pictures hung on the wall? Why was she being so nice to her? Finally she said with an attempt at cheer, "I'm sorry, I seem to have lost the knack for being good company."

Gilraen chuckled as she prepared a kettle. "Good thing I've been looking for you, not just 'good company.'"

"Me, my lady?" Bilbo asked, baffled.

Gilraen shot her a quelling look. "None of that now, we're equals here. And yes, you." She handed Bilbo a delicate biscuit.

Bilbo stuttered and accepted the plate. Gilraen's hair was dark and curly, much like her own mother's had been, but her grey eyes were old and grave for one still in their middle age. And at once, a soft swell of kinship rose up in Bilbo's heart, and some of the cold etched into her bones thawed. She took a bite (oh blessed buttery ginger and cardamom) and then asked "How long have you lived in Rivendell, my-- Gilraen?"

The Woman busied herself preparing the tea service. "I've been here nearly eleven years now."

Bilbo's eyebrows lifted. "That long?"

Gilraen heard the unasked question and nodded. "Lord Elrond's hospitality knows no bounds. He has taken care of us over the years." But her lips pressed together and she looked away. Then the kettle whistled and Gilraen poured the water into a fine glazed teapot.
Bilbo hesitated, then asked, "If I may, where did you come from before? I didn't think Men lived in this city."

Gilraen gave the teapot a slow swirl and place it back on its felted mat. "I was-- I am one of the Dunedain. After my husband fell in battle, Lord Elrond decided it would be safer for me, and then for us, to remain in Imladris, both for our safety and for my son's education."

Bilbo blinked and murmured, "I'm sorry for your loss." She looked down at her twisted hands and added, "How old is your son?"

Gilraen smiled and looked over at the drawings above the hearth. "He just turned ten last month. He's already grown so much." She sighed and looked back at Bilbo. "And you, my dear, when are you due?"

Bilbo blushed and looked away. "Does everyone know of my condition already? I didn't think it would be that obvious yet."

Gilraen gave her a sympathetic look. "No, no, it's not common knowledge. But, well, my lord told me--"

"I'm not sure it was his place to tell," Bilbo grumbled.

"I believe that he thought that of all the residents of Rivendell, I'd be the best suited to lend you an ear," Gilraen said gently.

Bilbo played with the cuff of her gown and decided to let it be. She answered, "I'm not entirely sure when I'm due. I would say in April, but I-- I doubt this will progress like a normal hobbit ripening." She could feel the tips of her ears burning. Oh goodness, it was almost a blessing that her father hadn't lived to see her like this.

Gilraen hummed and poured the tea into fine glazed cups, which were more like small bowls from Bilbo's perspective. Then she said slowly, "I see your sorrow, Belladonna, and I know these fool-elves wouldn't bring it up-- so please know that I only speak from a place of kindness, but-- do you want this pregnancy?" She handed Bilbo a full cup.

Bilbo looked down again and let the warmth of the tea seep into her hands for a long moment. While it pained her to speak of this with a near stranger-- she'd noticed the math, earlier. Gilraen's husband had died while she'd been still expecting, and she'd had to bear her child alone as well. "I know what it is you're trying to say. But-- while it's...spectacularly inconvenient, it's not really the pregnancy that I'm upset about. I was promised one fourteenth of the treasure, after all," she laughed wetly. "I just didn't think it'd be delivered quite so literally."

Gilraen's smiled at Bilbo's attempt at humor and raised her tea cup in salute. "Just know that if you ever need anything, you will have my support. The mothers of future kings should always band together."

Bilbo choked on her tea, and then the front door flew open.

"Mama! Mama! I got my first sword lesson today!" The little boy ran into the room, but his excitement was instantly shut beneath a lid of shyness when he saw that his mother had a guest.

Gilraen smiled down at her son and brushed his long dark hair out of his face. "Estel, please meet my friend, Belladonna Baggins. She's staying with Lord Elrond now, too."

The boy, Estel, gulped and bowed to her. "Well met, my lady."
The hobbit set her cup down and said with faux-sternness, "Well met, indeed, young sir. But I'll have no more of that. My friends call me Bilbo." She glanced up at Gilraen at that, and the Woman beamed.

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Snow fell on snow above Erebor, but beneath the mountain, the forge fires kept the kingdom warm. The king sat before an empty hearth in his sitting room and twisted the edge of his sleeve cuff between two fingers, fretting.

Balin entered the room without knocking. He took one look around, tutting, and lit another lamp. "You were missed at dinner...again."

Thorin grunted a non-reply.

Balin hid a sigh and dropped his stack of papers on Thorin's desk with a soft *thwump*. The king didn't even look at him from across the room, so he tried again, "Laddy--"

"Don't, Balin."

His friend and cousin pursed his lips and shook his head. "No, this has gone on long enough. You can't just-- keep beating yourself up--"

Thorin jumped to his feet so fast his armchair shrieked back against the stone floor. He paced for a while, then said, "No, Balin, not--" he shut his mouth and turned away.

Balin watched his back for a while, then said with a thread of iron in his voice, "Are you done with your dramatics?" Thorin visibly flinched. Balin sighed and ducked back out into the hall to tell the young message runner who haunted the guards' post to go fetch some tea, quickly. Back inside, Balin told Thorin's back, "You do her a disservice, mourning her like she's already passed. We never did find her, that means there's still hope."

Thorin hunched his shoulders. Another missing body. Another set of long years of waning hope. He could only hope she'd be spared his father's fate, and not die alone in torment in their Enemy's halls.

But Balin broke into his thoughts, "She may be on her way to the Shire even now."

Thorin sighed, "Thranduil reported that his scouts did not see a hobbit pass through their border."

His cousin eyed him from beneath arched white brows. "Oh?"

Oh the words he put unspoken into that sound! Thorin rumbled an impatient questioning sound right back.

Balin huffed, "Have yeh already forgotten how well she got past the elves last time? Or did yeh already forget about her ring? Don't take the elves' word for it."

Thorin blinked, and Balin watched, content, as realization and hope dawned on his face. But then Thorin looked away and replied, voice growing more and more haunted, "But just as well, she could have been wearing it during the battle-- she could have fallen wearing it, and we'd only know when we find her...rotting this spring beneath the snows--"

Balin cried, "Now that really is enough! You cannot know that, so put it from your mind. What was it she used to, I mean, would always say? 'Don't borrow trouble.' So the wood elves haven't seen her.
She has her ring and can turn invisible-- she could have just as easily slipped past the Mirkwood border unseen. Knowing our burglar, she's on her way back to the Shire, mad as a wet cat, but alive. Hold to that.

Thorin slumped back into his armchair. "I won't be able to put it from my mind, Balin. Not while she's missing. Not when it's my fault she's missing."

Balin snorted. "Consider it your penance then, and bear it. You are still our King. We need you with us."

Thorin stared at him, then nodded his head. The tea service was brought in. Balin reignited the coals in the hearth, and they sat in their armchairs and drank their tea in silence.

-----

Time passed and the snow continued to fall. The paths became canyons to her, and she rushed as much as she could from Elrond's guest quarters to the library each day, and to and from the midwives' offices in the houses of healing, and to and from Gilraen's quarters. They celebrated the stars on the longest night. Estel and Elrond's young (though nearly a century old) sons, Elladan and Elrohir, were nearly driven mad from excitement as they opened their gifts that night. Candles burned everywhere, filigreed star lanterns were hung from every window, and holly and evergreen boughs were strung across the mantles and balustrades. Bilbo hugged her growing middle and marveled that she was included in Elrond's private family celebration. Then she dodged the wrapped gift that Elrohir tossed across the room to Estel. Gilraen scolded them both, but neither paid much heed. When Elrond pressed a small wrapped box into her hand, she blinked at him stupidly for a few moments. Then she carefully opened the shining paper and pulled out an ornate, gleaming fountain pen. She couldn't blink back her tears fast enough.

"I'm sorry," she wiped her eyes with a handkerchief. "I can't seem to stop crying about everything. It's very distressing." She gave him a wobbly smile, and he patted her hand gently.

"From what I recall of the times my own wife was expecting our children, this is simply a part of it."

And then Bilbo wished she could wipe away the sadness in Elrond's ancient eyes too. They three, widow and widower and forsaken, sat and watched the children play.

The next morning, while the children slept in (they had no lessons that day) she and Gilraen watched the first dawn in quiet peace. Their mingled puffs of breath rose steadily in the golden stillness.

The months passed, and the child in her belly grew and grew, until finally, one day, she was forced to set aside her mithril armor. In the solitude of her own rooms, she allowed herself to curl into a ball and weep for the loss.

_**His eyes burned into hers through the mesh, his face glowing golden in the torch light**—_

She wiped her face and folded the mail neatly, tucking it into the drawer that held the map and her ring. She paused before she shut the drawer, eye caught by the glint of gold against the mithril, before she shut the drawer with a snap. She turned and put her hands on her lower back, trying to ease the growing (ha) strain there. See? She was still funny. Then she finished getting dressed and headed down for breakfast, thoughts already bent on her translations for the day.

She would not leave room for regrets, not now.

And if, in her long nights, unable to lie comfortably, she remembered, well, she wouldn't admit it to anyone. But then one night, she found that she could not recall one of Bofur's jokes. And then she
wept bitterly.
The next morning, she put aside her translations, found a blank journal, and began to set down her own story.

-----

She didn’t understand why Thorin was so upset with her now. She’d thought that she’d proven herself part of the Company in the Trollshaws, and indeed he had thawed to her a little, until-- until Rivendell. Was he that upset that she was on good terms with the elves? Of all the nerve! She looked back at the valley one last time, savoring the memory of being clean, and of the feel of clean clothes, and of the sound of sweet music floating between the halls. Then she put it behind her and turned back to the path. And there! Again! Thorin stared at her with his arms crossed, a disgruntled expression half-hidden behind his beard. Bilbo quickly looked away and started walking.

She kept walking through the storm and through the thunder battle. She kept walking til the path fell away from her and she was left clinging to the rough side of the cliff, skinned knees knocking against the rock, hands cramping and cut by the ledge--

But that hadn’t hurt as much as "She has been lost since she stepped foot out her door! She will never be one of us!"

And then the goblins took them.

(Don't think about the tunnels don't think about the tunnels--)

"Why did you come back?"

Oh for-- no one should be allowed to-- to wield eyes like that.

"Because you don't have a home. It was taken from you. But I will help you get it back, if I can."

And the utter devastation in his face was unbearable. It made her throat tighten. Then he looked back up at her and--

A warg howled.

The attack was both horribly vivid and muddled in her memories. She was no longer sure what had happened when. She was clinging to sappy branches. She was tugging her sword from the stinking chest of a dead warg. Gandalf threw down burning pine cones, which she threw in the wargs' faces. The tree fell. The other tree fell.

Thorin charged.
No no no nonono--
Bilbo charged.
And then she was flying.

And he was alive. And he was apologizing. And he was clutching her to his chest and she was burying her face in the fur on his collar, breathing in sharp gasps, and his smell surrounded her like his arms--

And that night, camped in the woods with few supplies, he'd followed her into the trees as she hunted for firewood.
He asked her haltingly, his voice hoarse, "Why did you do it? Save me, I mean? Why did you risk yourself like that--"

And suddenly she was so, so angry. She flung her sticks to the ground and thrust a finger at his chest (where, beneath his shirts and mail, he was slowly bleeding through his bandages) "Don't do that to me again." Her voice broke. "You stupid dwarf--"

He surged forward. She backed into a tree. "You--" his eyes flicked down to her lips. "You are the most infuriating creature I have ever met."

She stared up at him, throat locked. Her eyes flicked to his lips, too, as he loomed over her. Was he--? He leaned forward, one arm braced on the trunk, beside her head. Was he going to--

"Bilbo?" Kili called from nearby.

Thorin straightened with a pained grunt and quickly took several steps back. She felt like he took all her warmth with him.

Bilbo flinched in her chair as she stared into the fire in the hearth. She looked down at her swollen belly and... there it was again. She placed a palm over her belly and felt her babe kick for the first time.

Chapter End Notes

Casual reminder that this exists in canon:

"All the while I sit and think
of times there were before,
I listen for returning feet
and voices at the door."
-- I Sit Beside the Fire and Think from FOTR

(Edited because canonically, Balin already knew about Bilbo's ring, so I changed that conversation a bit.)
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Even winters have their endings

Chapter Notes

The rating has now gone up. NSFW.

(You'll be able to know why when you get close to it, so if you'd rather avoid that sort of thing, you can skip to the next section).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Winter gave way to spring, reluctantly, grudgingly, and with a few last-ditch tantrums thrown in for good measure. Eventually, green grass grew once more on the slopes of Erebor. Each early nodding flower bloomed in testament to the fact that Smaug no longer skulked beneath the Mountain. Fuzzy baby crows made their debuts in the nests in Ravenhill. Thorin greeted them all by name the day he sent his letter to the Shire.

*Come home. I'm so sorry. Please come home*--

He'd been hard pressed to wait this long, but a letter sent too soon just left the raven to wait, and by all calculations, she wouldn't've been able to make it back before mid-April at the earliest. And so, he'd waited. And now he'd wait again. He watched Roäc's form til he was a speck against the blue sky, and then in vain for a long while after.

She still had not been found.

He kept his beard shorn short in reminder, and he knew his newly returned subjects spoke of her absence. Sometimes he wondered if he had dreamed that she had found him on the ice. He clung to that anyway. If it was real, it meant she'd survived the battle until at least that point. He did hope he'd imagined the heartache on her face, though.

And when the spring wind blew cold across his face, he finally turned his face away from the broad expanse of the sky. There were trade agreements to negotiate, treaties to ratify, guild disputes to mediate. The kingdom needed her king. He squared his shoulders and went back inside.

-----

Bilbo and Gilraen sat in the garden on their first true spring day, Bilbo's swollen feet swinging in the air, as she let the smell of warm, damp earth fill her lungs. Estel and Elladan and Elrohir were running around in the grass, laughing and shouting as they played some incomprehensible game of both keep-away and don't-drop-it with a small ball and long sticks with nets on the ends. Gilraen worked on a lace baby blanket, tiny metal needles flashing in the sunlight, and Bilbo was distracted from her book to watch. Finally, she told her friend, "If I remember right, my first blanket is still in
my mother's glory box--"

*Kili scraping his muddy boots on the edge--*

"--She kept it for me, even after..."

Gilraen did her the favor of not looking up from her knitting, she just made a questioning noise.

Bilbo explained, "I didn't think I'd ever have-- have need of it. I was considered quite the spinster before I ran off into the blue. Fifty and unmarried! It was a thing unheard of." She snorted and shifted on the stone bench. "Hobbits really are ridiculous creatures sometimes."

Gilraen smiled softly at her knitting and said, "My father opposed my match, did I ever tell you?"

Bilbo's eyebrows flew to her hairline. "Really? Did-- did you go and get married anyway?"

She shook her head and paused to count her stitches. "No, he came around eventually. My mother convinced him in the end. But-- I think I would have married Arathorn anyway even if my father hadn't given me his blessing. The argument became a public scandal for a time." She smiled wryly. "Everybody had an opinion, it seemed."

Bilbo huffed, "Stuff and nonsense. It was your business, not any of theirs."

Gilraen eyed her sidelong. "You'd better get used to the idea of being a public spectacle, Bilbo."

The hobbit longed for the stem of her pipe to chomp between her teeth. Suddenly, they heard a hard shriek, and a long pause, and then Estel let out a choked cry. The sight of that little boy's face twisting as he bit down on his tears and held his arm to his chest-- oh it pulled at her heart. Gilraen put down her knitting and held out her arms, and her son went to her unerringly. She wrapped him in a hug and murmured softly to him until he gave out a few heaving, shuddering breaths. Then at last, he relaxed. She asked, "May I see it?" And he held out his hand, a white-red welt already rising across the back of his hand. She sucked in a breath in sympathy. "Can you stretch out your fingers?"

And he did. And she patted the side of his head and said, "My tough little man. Why don't you and the twins go down to the healers and ask for a bit of ice? That'll help make it feel better." He wiped his eyes with his shirt sleeve and nodded, and she kissed him on the brow before he ran off. Gilraen picked up her knitting again.

Bilbo watched in awe, then her shoulders fell and she asked softy, "How am I going to do this, Gilraen? I don't know how to raise a child."

She reached over and brushed Bilbo's hair away from her face. "You have within you a great capacity to love and nurture, you just need to uncover it. Mothers have been mothers for all the generations before us, and you will be able to do this. I know this, because you are worried about whether you can. I know you can. Believe it." She cupped her hand over Bilbo's cheek and patted twice. Then she went back to her knitting and politely ignored the way Bilbo wiped her eyes with a handkerchief.

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*In Mirkwood's dungeons, the damp seeped from the walls, and the roots from the trees wound through the floors, digging into the dwarves' backs almost out of spite. Bilbo found the Company fairly quickly (their collective cacophony could wake the dead) but Thorin wasn't with them. For a few days, she was terrified that he wasn't there at all, that he was still out in the forest, strung up by the spiders, about to be sucked dry-- She stopped that line of thought before it could grow any further. He was here. He had to be. Thranduil was just being a-- a-- prat. And his kingdom deserved*
him, winding and twisting about as nonsensically as it was.

Finally, she took to following the guards with the sourest expressions, and sure enough, that worked like a charm. Only Thorin bloody Oakenshield could inspire that much exasperation in another, surely. His cell was lonely, dark and deep. She watched him through the shadow-filled ring-world, as the dwarf glared steadily at the elf who brought his meager rations. The-- spirit, or something like it, that flared around people in this shadow-world-- loomed huge and implacable about him, unmoved by the apparent unending wind.

The sheer relief that flooded her left her hands numb. As soon as the guard left, she ripped the ring off and ran up to his cell. At first, he stared at her uncomprehendingly, then he lept up from his seat on the floor with a cry. She tried to shhh! him, but he didn't listen. His arms shot out through the bars, his rough hands cradled her cheeks, and he pulled her to him. His chapped lips crashed down onto hers, and she squeaked, poleaxed.

Immediately, he backed away, releasing her as if burned. She lost her grip on his shirt, and he croaked, "Apologies--"

She quickly said, "Thorin-- no, just-- oh goodness you're alive--" she wiped her leaking eyes with the back of her filthy hand. "When I couldn't find you--"

He swallowed hard, clutching the bars of his cell. "No, Thranduil tossed me into this pit. He would not have me harmed. You though, last I saw, you were charging into that nest of spiders, and I had no way to know--"

She chuckled wetly, "Well, I showed those spiders. I'm perfectly fine."

For a moment, he just stared at her, but then he shook himself and asked, "Are the others--?"

She nodded hastily. "Yes, yes, they're all fine, and they're all together, so there's at least that. I will get you out of here, I just-- I may need a few moments to figure out how.

It had taken her a month.

He never did say another word about-- it.

-----

"She was not there," Roäc told the king.

Thorin snapped the pen in his hand.

-----

"I'll vouch for him."

Her voice didn't wobble, but her knees did.

And then he turned and looked at her like that and her knees trembled for wholly different reasons.

And then when they were given a great feast (one which Bilbo uncomfortably thought the people of Laketown could ill-afford) Thorin had her at his side, and he kept her plate and her cup well-filled. And when his hard-muscled leg was pressed right beside hers on the bench, and when his hands brushed hers when he passed her his food, and when that look of utter intensity would not leave his face the entire evening, well, that was it.
Of all the stubborn-- foolhardy-- pigheaded dwarves, she'd managed to fall for the most-- the most of them all.

When they finally stood and escaped the crowded hall for the cool darkness of their hallway, Bilbo threw all propriety out the window. She grabbed him by the lapels of his new fool coat and kissed him hard. (Oh--) He made a soft wounded sound and his back hit the wall with a thud, but then he surged forward and wrapped both arms around her, both shoulders and waist, and she felt her feet leave the floor a bit. Then she wound her arms around his neck, beneath his wild hair, and (oh) she felt his beard scrape and prickle against her skin, and she had the sense to break away enough to gasp, "Come on."

Even in the dim light, he looked like he'd been sucker punched. His hands fist in the back of her coat, then he set her down. Her hands slid down to grasp his lapels again, and she walked them backwards to her door. Her shoulders hit the wood and he pressed a fierce kiss to her lips again, both hands gripping her waist. She fumbled one-handed for the knob, but he reached it first. Then they nearly tumbled through the doorway.

But then he lifted her easily (oh so easily) and she wrapped both legs around his waist and buried her hands in his hair. Distantly, she heard the door slam shut (loudly, too loudly) but then he opened his mouth beneath hers and she deepened the kiss and-- and-- his metal belt and the toggles on his coat were digging in uncomfortably. She shifted in his arms restlessly and-- oh! That-- that! was not! his belt! But before shyness and doubt could set in, his broad hands slid down from her waist to cup her-- her bum, and she moaned into his mouth.

He broke away from the kiss to run his nose up the side of her cheek, breath puffing hot in her ear, "Bilbo--"

She whimpered. Then he pulled away far enough to look her in the eyes, now level, with the way he held her in his arms. The small fire in the hearth cast out a little light, enough to see by, that bathed his features in a soft glow. She licked her stinging lips, and his eyes flickered down at the movement, then back up at her, eyes burning. She finally whispered, "Please--"

He kissed her jaw then, nose brushing her earlobe, and he whispered back, "Please what?"

She shivered and arched in his arms. "Please-- please take me to bed."

And he claimed her lips with a rumbling groan, and then they were falling backwards. Their kiss broke again before her shoulders hit the bed. He braced a hand on the mattress next to her head, pressing her down without crushing her, and she ran her fingers down his jaw, scraping her nails gently through his beard, and he arched into the contact. Feeling bold, she ran her fingers down the corded side of his neck and dipped them below his collar.

He groaned, "Bilbo--" and buried his face in the side of her neck. He untied her tattered neckerchief and let it flutter to the floor, then he pressed a series of sucking kisses along the line of her throat, scraping the tender skin there with his beard, and she arched in turn.

Then the thumb of his hand on her waist brushed her bare skin beneath the hem of her blouse, and she tightened her legs around his waist, trying to pull him closer, but oh that buckle needed to go, now. And her small hands fought with the stiff leather, til he sat up a bit with a broken gasp, and he roughly pulled the belt free. It clunked to the floor next to the bed, and Bilbo dared to worm her hands beneath the bottom hems of his shirts.

She was starting to sweat in her many layers, with the fire in the hearth and her forge of a dwarf above her. Then his big hands were running over her buttons, deftly flicking them open, and she
gasped. Then they were a tangle of limbs stuck in shirtsleeves. Thorin tried to shuck off his pants before taking off his boots, and when one button went flying, she yelped, "Do you know how long it will take to find that and put it back on, now?" But his rumbling chuckle shook her through his chest, and she pulled him back down to shut him up with another kiss. And after another few moments of struggle (which would have gone more smoothly if either could just break the kiss for one solid moment) one rough thumb brushed over her nipple, and she felt heat shoot down-- down there. She bucked, their smallclothes the only barrier now. And damn him, he only arched both brows and lent down and-- and-- Oh!

He kissed her breasts, scraping his cheeks across her skin, and then-- then he took her nipple into his mouth and suckled, and she had to clap both hands over her mouth, and when she felt the bare hint of teeth, she thrashed and keened, but he had her well and fully pinned beneath his weight, and then he had the gall to chuckle again.

He murmured, "You-- you are a dream--" against her skin, and she buried her hands in his hair to drag him back up to kiss and kiss, but now the scrape of his chest hair across her now-stinging nipples was a torment.

Then he ground down on her and their groans mingled in the kiss. When he pulled back to just look at her, his broad arms framed her face on the pillow, and her hair fanned out around her like a crown. She turned and rubbed her bare cheek along the inside of his wrist, and he carded his fingers through her gingery curls. Her eyes flattered shut, then she looked back up at him with a wicked grin, and she rocked against him. He tightened his grip in her hair, and she arched her head back against the pillow. Her pale neck was now flushed and rubbed pink and gleaming with a fine sheen of sweat-- he ran his nose along her bare (her bare) jawline. Then he ran one hand down the line of her throat, and further, skimming his fingers over the side of her breast, down her waist, and he ran the backs of his fingers across her belly, and lower still, over where she wanted him to be more than anywhere else in the world, and she could feel him press his fingertips to her through the last damp scrap of fabric. She let out a bitten off gasp and-- and--

Then he was sliding down in the bed, brushing kisses across her collarbone, her breasts, her belly, lower-- Bilbo shifted, lifting her head to blink down at him where he knelt between her thighs, her feet flat on the mattress on either side of his hips, and with his eyes locked on hers, he pushed aside her smallclothes and lent down--

She threw her head back onto the pillow and arched into his mouth-- his big, rough hands reached beneath her and cupped her rear and-- and-- he encouraged her to rock up into his face. He-- he-- he kissed her deeply down-- there, and Bilbo thought she would fly from her body. She bit down on her knuckles and fisted the sheets in her other hand, and then he-- oh-- he slid one thick finger into her as he lapped at her hood and then he started to move and move and she-- she--broke and shuddered around him, but he kept moving and licking and finally she had to pull him back up to her by his braids. Dazed, she saw his beard gleam in the firelight, and then she tugged his face to hers. She peppered kisses across his cheeks, his nose, his brow as he murmured a steady stream of khuzdul into her ear. Then he claimed her mouth with his again, and she could taste herself on his lips. Then she could feel him shifting again, holding himself up by just one arm, and he reached down and-- oh gracious-- his smallclothes were tossed aside. Then he reached up to where she clutched at his waist, and he covered her hand with his, and skimmed her hand down, wrapped her hand around him beneath his own hand and-- Bilbo couldn't see, but she could feel his hardness, and she gasped into his kiss, because that was-- oh-- oh-- she tossed her head back and then he guided her hand to stroke, long and smooth, from root to uncut head, and he huffed a long sigh into her ear, forehead pressed into the pillow, his hair everywhere. She brushed it back over his shoulder, and one of his braids brushed across her face, and then he pulled her hand away and he
sat back to kneel on his heels, and he ran his rough hands across her thighs and sides, and then he--then he gripped her waist and pressed slowly in.

He was going to tear her apart. She opened her mouth and begged for more. Then he began to move.

Khuzdul fell from his lips, words like, "Ghivashel. Men kurduh. Melekînh--" words that fell like rockslides. His voice was growing wrecked. She dragged her nails down his back and clung to him, unable to speak, unable to think, only knew moremoremore-- Then he bent down again and seared her lips with a burning kiss and rolled them. She let out a small shriek, and she was straddling him and oh-- the angle shifted and he thrust up and she saw stars-- she must have gasped something, maybe his name-- and he replied, voice broken, "That's it. Mine. And I'm yours--" she slammed down when he thrust up, and his strong hands clutched at her waist, pulling her down even harder, and she braced her palms on his broad shoulders and gave herself over to him--

--And she woke, gasping and aching with need. Desperately, she reached down between her legs and plucked and fumbled her way to a release. Then she let her head fall back onto the pillow and muffled a scream with her clean hand. The babe in her belly beat down on her bladder, and, trembling, she made her way to the bathroom.

Later, she sat at the end of her bed and brushed through her sweaty, messy curls, and tried to forget the way he'd braided one of his beads into her hair...after. Goodness knows she will never forget the way several strands had been yanked from her scalp when he'd ripped that bead from her hair, right before he'd dangled her, choking, over the battlements.

No. She brushed her hair away from her now chilled face and pulled it into a loose braid so she could try to sleep without being strangled by her own long hair in the night.

-----

As April waned and her time still did not come, Bilbo grew nervous. She could tell that the midwives were getting nervous too, though they tried not to show it. She was reduced to a slow waddle, and stairs became a terror since she could no longer see her feet. Just as the last of the snow melted away, she was put on bed rest. Gilraen and Elrond called on her often, and the elves she had grown friendly with began to visit with gifts for the coming child, fine clothes, tiny cashmere stockings, soft cloths for diapers and soothing creams, the gentlest soaps, and lengths of finely woven cloth that baffled her until Gilraen showed her how to wrap the long fabric into different slings to carry him. When Elrond sent a cradle, finely carved and polished to a pale shine, Bilbo wept bittersweet tears. The cradle was just so...very elven, and she clamped down hard on the burgeoning what might have been's, if only--

But it wasn't. This was what she had. And she was so, so grateful.

And so, as she lay in her too-big bed one day, eyeing the sunlight that streamed through one of her open windows, she tried to content herself with the scent of the tulips and hyacinth as they were carried in on the spring breeze. Gilraen had left a few moments before, but Bilbo was so terribly restless. Her back hurt and she just could not get comfortable. The babe in her belly seemed to share her mood, and she would need to make another trip to the bathroom soon if he wouldn't stop treating her bladder like a bongo. She stayed in bed for a few minutes more, but to no avail. With a sigh, she got up slowly, groaning, "Oh you are your father's child--" but as she stood, wetness rushed down between her legs. She stared at the mess for a moment, then hollered, "Help!"

-----

Time ceased to hold meaning. She was swallowed by a sea of pain.
Sometimes she thought she heard Gilraen's voice washing over her, "Believe in yourself. Know that you were made for this. Trust your body to birth this baby and your mind to get you through this. You can and you will survive this and come out on the other side, shining and striving--"

And the day turned to night turned to day. The elven midwives surrounded her, and between one of the waves, they wiped damp cloths over her face, her arms, her back, and another helped her drink a few sips of water, the sharp bitter bite of medicinal herbs hitting her nose with a jolt. Then her body was wracked once more--she'd barely had time to pant-- and the ladies helped her back into her squat, supporting her arms as she screamed for her mother, and then someone shouted something-- it echoed oddly distant in her ears-- how could anything exist outside of this pain? And then she felt the distinctive, horrifying pull of her flesh tearing, and then there was chaos between her legs. Someone was shrieking, and it took her a moment to realize it wasn't her. And she felt blood coursing down her legs, and someone pressed her back to lay down on the mat, and then Gilraen pressed her babe-- her babe-- her child into her arms, and with joy in her voice, she said, "Bilbo, this is your daughter."

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah, I wrote a six month 'normal' hobbit term, because they're little (and that's my hundred percent scientific reasoning) but in my opinion, dwarves take a little longer to forge.

Sorry, sorry, I'm done with the analogies.

But... just think about it.

_Surly dwarf babies._

Playlist: The Birth
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

The meanings of names and the definitions of words are important (sometimes).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Two dwarrow workers paused in their hammering, swaying in their harnesses when they saw their king pass below, on his way out of the front gate again. His long shadow stretched behind him as he left the comforting embrace of stone...again. It was most un-dwarven behavior.

"I don't know how he can stand being outside like that, with all that sky overhead? I always felt like I was goin' ta fall right up into it," one declared with a shudder.

"Oh aye, and on so bright a day? That sun's sure to give him a headache," the other replied sympathetically.

"It's a right shame. A dwarf should be properly underground." Both shook their heads sadly, then they went back to work repairing the stone above the gate.

In truth, they weren't entirely wrong. Thorin had developed a most un-dwarven fondness for the feel of the sun on his face and the wind in his hair during those long years of exile. Or perhaps, more accurately, he had finally been taught to properly appreciate it.

_Bare toes carded through the thick grass beneath a bench in Beorn's garden, pipe smoke wafting gently around them, while the warm light soaked into his hair--_

His boots slipped a little in the damp grass. It still felt a little strange, like he should feel a bit guilty, to wander out here without any real purpose or destination. He was so used to _doing_, and the rest of his days were filled with _doing_, but the restlessness in his spirit wasn't eased by activity. If anything, exhaustion only made it worse, made his mind run in ever-tighter circles, louder and louder, til he felt like he could scream from it.

She wasn't there. She wasn't there.

He threw himself into his duties. The kingdom needed her king, but few knew how much their king needed his kingdom. With workers from the Iron Hills, they spent the winter repairing the damaged halls, laying the dead to rest, and clearing out the living spaces. Now, with the arrival of spring, the first families were returning to the Mountain. The halls no longer rang with silence, now they echoed with workers' hammers and children's laughter. He was giving them this. They were remaking this cold tomb into a home.

Unfortunately, with the new hands (more hands) he was finally driven from the forge.

"Out, go on. Really, you are an excellent smith, but we cannot have our king making nails and rebar-.." Naskjald, the old millwright in charge of this section's repairs, told him kindly but implacably.
Thorin tried to argue that he'd be a poor king if he sat back and let his people do all the work for him, but he never got the chance to say any of this, because Naskjald waved him away. "Not a single dwarrow in the mountain doubts your work ethic, but you've got enough on yer hands." He placed his hands on his hips, and in his agitation, his burl came out. "If yeh hammer iron too long, it'll grow brittle. I dunnae ha' ta tell yeh, of all folk, this, an' yeh know it. Or are those dark circles actually black eyes from sparring?"

Thorin just sighed and yielded to the master of this worksite.

And so, he wandered his halls when his duties were done. His empty rooms could not hold him.

Erebor was his home. He was home.

He just didn't remember it being this dark.

And so he walked the slopes of Erebor, when his schedule allowed. He watched rain wash away the ash that covered the ground. He watched the meadows turn from green to pink and purple, and he wondered at the names of the flowers. He watched the clouds float lazily across the broad expanse of the sky, and he marveled at how small he was in the grand scheme of things.

"Why do you sit like this, doing nothing?"

"Nothing?! Don't be absurd. I am being."

"Being...what?"

"No, just BEing. You should try it some time."

But as he felt the warmth of the spring sun soak into his hair, he realized that the long dark of Erebor might not-- would not-- be good for her.

(It might not be good for him anymore, either, but that was too unsettling a thought).

He stared at the round green door set into the hill, the glowing rune shining so out of place, and listened to the raucous laughter as it wafted out the (lace-covered) windows. Lace. Lace! And flowers grew out of every spare space, hanging down from the top of the hill, spilling out of window boxes, overflowing the beds that lined the walk up to the door. He'd never heard of a burglar who moonlighted as a florist.

"I have never been so wrong in my life--"

Oh, he'd even been wrong then.

But, if she needed sunlight and flowers, then he would give her sunlight and flowers.

She will come back. (She has to).

-----

"What will you call her?" Elrond asked as he ran a long finger over the round tip of her ear. She'd been gently bathed and swaddled by the team of midwives, her shock of black hair stark against the white blanket. After her first meal, she'd fallen into a deep sleep. She was impossibly tiny in Elrond's arms.

Bilbo watched him from her bed, arms curiously bereft, and replied, "Hiraeth."
Elrond looked up from the babe in his arms. "That's an interesting choice," he said mildly.

Bilbo quirked a sad smile. "It seemed fitting."

Then Hiraeth yawned and stretched her head, her face scrunched up with such consternation that Elrond laughed. With a smile still paying over his lips, he started telling the story of the friendship of Celembrbor and Narvi.

Bilbo watched, enchanted, and tried to ignore the throbbing pain of her many stitches.

-----

Once more, he stared at the sky long after Roäc had passed from sight and hoped that she had made it to Bag End by now.

-----

"--Mum, I don't know how much Uncle has told you (knowing Uncle, probably nothing) but Roäc has been to the Shire, but he hasn't found her there. Now, I didn't want to say this to Uncle yet, but...after what happened at the gate, I wouldn't be surprised if she's still that mad that she'd avoid Roäc til he went away. And I know that might seem like a stretch, but Mum, she used to tell us that she'd do just that when her less-than-pleasant relatives would stop by. It would truly ease my mind if you could check in person, on your way back to Erebor. You'll pass right through the Shire, it won't be out of your way. Because...as much as I want her to be part of this family, I just want to know that she's okay. Even if she's still mad as hell, even if she never wants to speak to us again, because so long as she's alive, then I can be content--"

Dís put down her son's letter for the third time and sighed. Oh, her Fíli. 'It won't be out of your way--' Oh, but Dís would be the one who had to try to approach a stranger who most likely didn't want to have anything to do with her.

She rubbed her hand over her eyes and looked out over the rolling green hills again. Their caravan rumbled down into... Hobbiton? But judging by the locals' pinched faces, the increased traffic on the East Road hadn't softened the hobbites' views on strangers. Tough. They were going to have to learn to deal with the dwarves coming to and from Ered Luin and Erebor now. Smoke curled undisturbed from the chimneys. Crops and flowers grew in abundance beyond the road fence, and at last, they trundled into the town.

The wagons drove on, headed for the common behind the inn, but Dís and her guards rode to the door. As they dismounted, a hobbit-lad came out to lead their ponies to the stable, eyes big as saucers when he saw their (plain) mail and their (clearly visible) assortment of weapons. Dís smiled at him, but he squeaked and hurried to attend to the ponies. They shouldered their bags and headed inside.

The inn was filled with pipe smoke and laughter, which faltered when the veritable host of dwarves invaded their domain. Dís put on a winning smile and headed up to the innkeeper lass, asking if there were seven rooms available, yes, some of them could double-up, most obliged and indebted, my goodness what is that wonderful smell coming from the kitchens, etc. The innkeeper lass asked how they were going to pay, and Dís pulled out her jangling purse, and then the innkeeper finally smiled indulgently.

Once her people were settled, and once she'd convinced her guards that they did not all have to join her in her walk across town and up one hill, she headed outside and let the evening's cool calm her head. She thought over Fíli's directions, and...ah, there. The burglar's sign still glowed faintly on the round door of the hill. Dís walked out into the gloaming, needing no lantern for this road, not with
the light of the set sun still bright in the west. The mirror-glass pond reflected the first scattered stars.

Dís imagined. She tried to picture what this Bilbo Baggins must look like, how she'd run after the Company, panting and had been offended but still too polite to just kick them all to the curb. She tried to picture the same creature charging a warg to defend her fallen brother. Had he fallen for her then? Did fury blaze in her eyes when she stood between their king and death? Would fury blaze in her eyes still?

She heard the delighted giggles before she rounded the last bend up the hill. A stout hobbit sat on the bench beside the round door, with a wee child in his lap. He held a lit sparkler in one outstretched arm, to the delight of the babe. Dís was positively flummoxed. So focused on the sparkler in one hand and the child wrapped in the other, the hobbit didn't notice Dís til the sparkler fizzled out. Then he stiffened. "Ahem, good evening," he declared, tone implying entirely the opposite.

Dís raised her brows and said with deliberate friendliness, "I'm here for Miss Baggins. Is she in?"

"Mrs. Sackville-Baggins is in, but what can the likes of you be wanting with her?"

Dís said with great patience, "I have a message from friends of hers, who are quite concerned with how well she fares." Oh sweet merciful Mahal, how could this awful hobbit have anything to do with the Bilbo her boys described?

"Friends? My wife is not friends with any of your kind." The hobbit waved her off with the hand holding the spent sparkler. The babe just looked on solemnly.

Dís drew herself up to her full height and looked down her long nose at this pompous little hobbit. "I understand that she might still be upset with them, but--"

"What's going on ou-- Otho?" A sharp voice called and then a hobbit lass opened the door, wiping her hands on a dishcloth, with the sleeves of her frilly dress rolled up past her elbows. When she saw Dís, she thrust a finger at her and shrieked, "No! No more dwarves! I have had it up to here with you lot and your ravens! Now leave us in peace!"

Dís blinked and pleaded, "Bilbo--"

But she just drew herself up and cried, "Bilbo? I am Lobelia! Haven't you heard? Bilbo's dead. Now don't come back here again!"

Dís stared frozen for a moment, then stiffly said, "Forgive me, madam, for taking up so much of your time." She nodded woodenly and walked away.

-----

Gilraen helped Bilbo wrap one of the shimmering bolts of fabric into a sling to wear Hiraeth next to her heart. When Bilbo's hair got caught in the cloth as they wound it over her shoulder, she grit out, "Oh I just need to cut it already--"

Gilraen tutted, "None of that now, your hair is lovely, like spun gold. You just need to braid it back--" but at Bilbo's expression, she corrected, "Or you could pin it back. I have a set of combs, I could show you how."

Bilbo sighed and carefully tucked Hiraeth's sleeping form into the cloth and tightened the knot behind her back. Her daughter snuffled a deep breath, and she leaned down to brush a soft kiss across her soft hair. She told Gilraen, "I would like that, actually. Combs sound much more manageable than hundreds of pins. I kept my hair short for so long, my mother never did show me
how to tame it."

Gilraen smiled and nodded. "Now, are you ready for Hiraeth's first trip outside?"

Bilbo took a shuddering breath at that and took a small step.

Oh! Even walking seemed horribly significant and unreasonably dangerous while her daughter's weight pressed into her chest, her own little forge fire. Then she took another step, and she walked, blinking, into the sunlight.

Her nearly month-long recovery brought her into the beginning of early summer. Lilacs and magnolias bloomed everywhere, and the leaves were still the new-neon green. The maples were covered in their little red flowers, and there was a soft balminess to the breeze. Butterflies and hummingbirds flew past their heads.

Gilraen helped her gingerly sit on a cushion on the bench in the garden. Bilbo's stitches were gone, but she was still healing. She turned her face to the sun and let herself breathe. The overwhelming exhaustion from weeks of interrupted sleep made her limbs feel like lead, but this? Here? Now? This was pleasant.

Hiraeth woke with a snuffling little cry. Bilbo reached to untie her wrap, but Gilraen stopped her. "You can feed her while she's still in there--" and with some help and adjustments, Hiraeth had a good latch and was content. Bilbo smiled her thanks at her friend.

Gilraen let her be for a few moments, then she asked softly, "How did you pick her name? I thought you'd said most hobbit-lasses are named for flowers?"

Bilbo looked down at her daughter, at the tiny fingers pressed against her chest, at the round ear just barely visible, and she said slowly, "Most hobbit-lasses are named for flowers, but, well, she isn't just a hobbit. And it's clear that I won't be able to try to-- to try to pretend that she is. It didn't, it doesn't seem right to deny her that-- that part of her."

"Is it a dwarven name?" She asked tentatively.

"No. Maybe I was being particularly fanciful under all those pain tonics," she quirked her mouth, "but it still fits her perfectly."

Gilraen watched her out of the corner of her eye. "I heard you say that to Lord Elrond when she was born. I guess I'm curious. What did you mean?"

Bilbo hid her sadness by bending her head down to look at her daughter again. "Hiraeth is an old word that means homesickness, of a kind-- particularly for a home you can never return to, or one where you've never been."

She flinched when Gilraen wrapped an arm around her shoulders, but when her friend didn't try to convince her that that name wasn't a good choice, or that she was a fool for dragging her daughter with her into exile, or that she could still try to go back, to beg, to make amends-- when Gilraen said none of those things, Bilbo relaxed into her gentle embrace.

After a few minutes, Gilraen said, "Did you know that Estel is not my son's real name?"

Bilbo twisted to look at her. "Really?"

She pulled her arm back and folded her hands together. "For his safety, my lord decided to give him a new name, but it is not his real name."
Bilbo looked at her and tentatively asked, "So, you didn't name him Estel?" Unspoken, she asked you didn't name your son Hope?

She shook her head, looking a little haunted. "It was not the name I would have chosen. And I have a feeling he will have another name again, one day." She shook her head again and said lightly, "Sometimes names change," and with a wicked grin, she added, "Belladonna."

Bilbo groaned and laughed. "I'll have you know, it got very confusing, being named after my mother. I don't remember when she started calling me 'Bella-bo' but I was too young to say it properly. So I kept introducing myself as Bilbo, and it's stuck ever since!"

She imagined her daughter getting into the same trouble she used to-- torn skirts from climbing trees, muddy knees from catching toads, bloody noses from sticking up to the bully Bolger boys...alright, hopefully not that last one, but she did want her daughter to be able to stick up for herself and her peers, just hopefully only with words, not her little fists... But she realized that she saw her in the Shire, growing up in the rolling hills and little woods, not in this rigid, formal place.

She saw the same sad expression in Gilraen's face. It was difficult, living in an elven city when you were not elven.

-----

Dís returned to the Green Dragon white as a ghost. The guards looked at her with alarm, but she just shook her head and went up to the bar. The innkeeper came up to her and said, "You look like you need a drink."

Dís slid down a coin and asked, "D'ye serve whiskey?"

"On occasion," the innkeeper said, concern lining her whole body. 

Dís added, "Just one, I'm not seeking trouble."

The innkeeper nodded and poured her two fingers.

Before she could attend to her other customers, Dís asked, "I'm sorry, just-- could you tell me what happened to Bilbo Baggins?"

The innkeeper asked, "The Mad Baggins? Oh, she ran off with a troupe of dwarves, more'n a year ago. When she didn't come back, well..." The lass trailed off.

Dís asked a little sharply, "Well? What happened?"

"Well, she'd been gone more'n a year an' a day." She looked at Dís, who looked back blankly, so she explained, "They declared her dead, had a funeral, and her cousins took up Bag End."

Dís blinked. "You mean-- you mean, she's still missing?"

"No, she's dead. She's been gone more'n--" 

"Yes, yes, but I mean, you haven't found a body?"

The innkeeper recoiled, "Well now, there's no need to get vulgar or to go into specifics--"

Dís just threw back her head and let out a laugh, a sharp bark without humor. "No, you don't understand, that means there's still hope." She raised her glass to the barkeep, who only side-eyed her and slid alway. Dís threw back the glass.
Until they had unequivocal proof either way, there was still hope.

Then she had an idea, and she shouted, "Wait! Wait! Flowers have meanings to you hobbits, right?"

Chapter End Notes

Jfc, someone recorded I Sit Beside the Fire and Think ohmygoddid listen to it and cry.

(Edited to correct how long it would actually take Roäc to fly from Erebor to the Shire and back, poor bird.)
Part II

Chapter Summary

In which different forms of hospitality and generosity are discussed.

Chapter Notes

- Part II --

"For still there are so many things
that I have never seen:
in every wood in every spring
there is a different green."
-- JRRT, FOTR

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Estel cooed at Hiraeth, nose to nose with her as she lay on her belly on a blanket on the floor of Gilraen's sitting room. Rain poured down outside (thunder rolling in an awfully familiar tone). Bilbo gratefully sipped her tea and basked in the firelight. She hadn't expected to get caught by the summer storm, so she was happy to let her damp hair dry in Gilraen's cozy space. And when Hiraeth began giggling at Estel, she thought her heart would burst.

But then a bell tolled in the distance, calling Estel back to his afternoon lessons. He smacked a loud kiss on Hiraeth's head and dashed off with a shouted goodbye. Gilraen sighed and picked Hiraeth up to snuggle. She rubbed her nose across her little girl's chubby cheeks, then sniffed hard and cheerfully said, "Op-- I think someone needs a change."

Bilbo quirked a smile and got up-- Oh it was wonderful to be able to do so so freely-- Then, while she was changing her daughter, Hiraeth spat up all over herself. Bilbo reached into her bag for the change of clothes she now knew to always carry. Once clean and snug and dry in her new jumper, Bilbo offered her back to Gilraen, who took her with a happy sigh.

Bilbo sat back in her chair and watched the fire. She knew Gilraen was-- jealous wasn't the right word...wistful? about Hiraeth. She wondered if Gilraen had wanted a large family. The thought made her feel hollow and sad. There weren't enough children in this city. Estel, Elladan, and Elrohir were the only ones she knew by name. There were only a handful of others, and none were as young as Hiraeth.

"Bilbo, you are welcome to make your home here," Elrond told her.

And she saw his earnestness, his conviction, and she knew he meant it. Hiraeth shifted in her sling,
as if sensing her distress. Bilbo sighed and shook her head. "I'm very grateful for your generosity, my lord--"

He held up a hand, "Please, there's no need to stand upon ceremony here."

She ducked her head. "--but it's time for us to go home. I want Hiraeth to know her family-- my side of the family, I mean, at least, um--" She bit down on the truly unkind thought that Thorin would rain hell down upon them all if he ever found out his daughter-- and oh even thinking that hurt-- was raised by the elves.

Elrond tapped his long fingers on his lips and said thoughtfully, "I see the value in letting her grow with other children her age. Perhaps you could come back here once she's school aged; I can provide her with the education befitting her station."

She hid a sigh. She liked and respected Elrond, she really did, but this was Estel all over again. She didn't want her daughter to be-- to become a title before she had the chance to become a child. Slowly, picking her words carefully, she said, "Begging your pardon, but she has no station. She will have the honors accorded to her as my daughter, of course. A Baggins and a Took, good gracious!" She smiled wryly. "But that's it."

Elrond sighed, clearly chewing on a number of arguments, but he nodded. "As you wish. I will see to it that you have a proper escort. We don't want to repeat the incident with the trolls, now, do we?"

-----

"Where do you think she is, Fi?" Kíli's voice floated softly in the darkness.

Fíli opened his eyes and stared up at the stars for a long moment, then said, "Maybe she didn't go back to the Shire. Maybe she went somewhere else."

He heard his brother shift in his bedroll. "What, like she got lost?"

Fíli shifted too, wondering if he should even voice this thought. "No. Like-- I mean, really, once she got over the shock of forgetting her handkerchief, and if you take out all the trolls and orcs and wargs, I think she really did like to travel, you know? She loved to see new things. I mean, did you see her face when we got to Rivendell? I think-- I think she realized that there's so much more to see, so she's off doing that."

Kíli pondered that for a while and asked, "D'you think she went back to Rivendell, Fi?" Hope tinged his quiet voice.

"...I dunno, maybe. Maybe she went down to Gondor, to the biggest library in the world. Maybe she's been in there so long she hasn't realized winter's over."

Kíli chuckled, then sniffed. Fíli burned. Then Kíli added, "I just wish we knew. I hate this not knowing."

Dwalin growled, "If you lot don't shut it, I'll feed you to a troll and then yeh'll never know."

Fíli sighed over Kíli's muffled protests. The only way they were both allowed out on the outer patrols together was with Dwalin in the squad. Kíli chafed at being treated with kid gloves, but Fíli knew that things were just different now.
They weren't just wandering dwarves any more. They were Thorin's heirs, and it was a risk to put them both in danger at the same time. But he knew he'd rather be mollycoddled than let his brother go off without him, so he accepted their mother henning.

Then Kili asked, "What do you think, then, Dwalin?"

For a moment, Fili thought he would ignore them, but then he grunted and said, "I don't."

But since Kili never knew when to leave anything be, he asked sharply, "Really?"

Dwalin grated out, "Listen here, you pup, we put her through enough. If she's alive, she knows where to find us. And if she's not? Then we deserve every ounce of pain we've got."

And they let that sink into the silence for long enough that Fili started to drift off. Then Kili said, "Maybe she's traveling East, past the Sea of Rhûn, to where her favorite spices come from."

Fili sighed over the sound of Dwalin's grinding teeth and rolled deeper into his bedroll.

-----

Roäc found him on the terrace, where he was upending a wheelbarrow load of dirt into one of the beds. Thorin took off his muddy gloves and wiped his brow, gesturing impatiently for the raven to begin.

Roäc shifted from foot to foot on the stone ledge and finally said, "She was not there, my lord."

-----

On Mid-year's Day, a host of elves rode into Hobbiton, flags streaming behind them. Their tack jangled like bells, and their armor gleamed in the sunlight. At the head of the guard, a tiny figure rode on a pony, her hair glowing like a halo in the sunlight, wearing a shimmering wrap the same iridescent blue of a butterfly's wing.

The hobbits were gobsmacked. This was a thing unheard of! Then Hamfast Gamgee squinted and called out, "Bless me, is that Bilbo?"

Bilbo beamed at him from the back of her pony and cried, "Well hello, Hamfast! It's good to see you again." Then they passed and turned up Bag Shot Row. The little wagon at the rear clattered over the cobblestones. The marketgoers burst into chaos. Bilbo fought to hide her giggles.

But smoke was rising from the chimney of Bag End, and a frisson of worry settled into her chest. When they came to a halt before her gate and she saw laundry hanging on the line, she knew something had gone very wrong.

Then her front door opened, and Lobelia poked her head out.

Bilbo gasped, "You!"

Lobelia shrieked, "YOU!"

And then she slammed the door.

Bilbo slid from her pony and marched up the walk (HER walk). Then she heard the deadbolt slide home with a dull thunk, and the sound echoed in her heart. She banged on the door (HER door!) and shouted, "Lobelia Sackville-Baggins, you come out here this instant!"
"I shan't! You're some-- some imposter, or a changeling!"

"You know very well who I am, or you wouldn't be hiding behind my door! So cease this nonsense and get out of my home!"

Then Hiraeth woke and started shrieking, and Bilbo fell back to sit on her bench, mind reeling. And then one of the sherrifs pushed huffily past the elves, his long-feathered cap getting caught and bent on elven belts and sheaths. He marched up the walk, but he blinked hard when he reached Bilbo, who lifted a wailing Hiraeth from her wrap and cradled her in both arms, rocking her a little desperately. She saw the moment the sherrif recognized her, so she was baffled when he stuttered, "Bil-- ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to leave Lobelia's property."

Bilbo glared over the top of her daughter's dark head and growled, "You know very well that Bag End is my property, Enid, so cease your blathering and evict my squatter."

The sherrif shifted uneasily from foot to foot and doffed his hat. "But, ma'am, Bilbo Baggins is dead, so the estate passed to her next of kin."

She opened her mouth to shout, but she'd just gotten Hiraeth to calm down, so she said with forced calmness, "Well, as you can see, I am clearly still alive."

He twisted his hat, pleading, "Yes, but-- by law, Bag End now belongs to Lobelia and Otho-- and I'm here to uphold the law."

She stared at the lad, ice filling her veins. She was tempted to knock his head to get him to see sense. She was tempted to beat the door down and set the guards on her cousins and rub Lobelia's nose in the velvet lining of her silverware cases like a naughty puppy--

Then one of the elves (Finduilas? She couldn't tell from here) cried out, "What folly is this, to deny hospitality and shelter to a young mother!"

The sherrif looked like he wanted to swallow his tongue, but they heard Lobelia's muffled shriek, "No! I will not host a mad, fey thing!"

At that, Bilbo thought dragonfire at her cousin and stood with as much dignity as she could muster. "I will not watch this farce play out any longer. We're going to Tuckborough, and then we will straighten this mess out."

The sherrif bowed his head and hurried to get out of her way.

From inside the smial, she heard a glass shatter.

-----

"Do not rest until it is found!"

Balin bowed, distress etched into his entire frame, and then he left. Bilbo started to follow, but Thorin caught her wrist and shook his head. She looked up at him, confusion plain on her face, and he rumbled, "Your place is with me." And he gently led her back to stand beside his throne.

The cavernous room was dark and cold.

"I am betrayed. The Arkenstone-- One of them has taken it--"

She had. She had taken it.
"One of them is false."

"...You?"

Did he still stand in the middle of his hoard, where Smaug once lived? Or did he sit upon his dark throne and bask in the glow of that cold stone?

Was she doomed to be ever surrounded, ever thwarted, by her kin's avarice and greed?

All spirits and Valar above, spare her daughter from this fate. She clutched Hiraeth to her chest and rocked her and rocked her.

-----

The sun had gone down when they reached the Great Smials in Tuckborough. The stars mingled with the last flush of light in the west, and the frogs sang with the crickets and the last of the robins. Light streamed from the hundreds of windows set in the great hill, her mother's family's ancestral halls, and Bilbo had to blink away a few tears at the sight. She dismounted at the gate and walked up to the front door, the patio lit by a set of lanterns kept burning for late comers, but before she could knock, the door burst open, and her mother's sister, Mirabella, ran out. She caught Bilbo up in a tight hug, crying, "Oh I almost didn't dare believe it when I heard!"

Bilbo cried, "Careful!" and shifted to leave room for Hiraeth, who objected to all this jostling. Mirabella clutched her cheeks and kissed her brow, and gasped, "Oh Bilbo, who's this?"

Bilbo said shyly, turning to let her aunt see down into the wrap, "This is my daughter, Hiraeth."

Then Bilbo's father's cousin, Rosa, who had married Uncle Hildigrim, came tumbling out the door with a cry, and she had to dodge another bear hug, and then it seemed like the entire smial emptied. She finally pulled Hiraeth from her wrap, and Mirabella took her up with a delighted shriek. Then Bilbo was nearly tackled by her cousins. Adalgrim tried to ruffle her hair, but his hand caught on one of Gilraen's combs and she yelped, "Have a care, I only just came back from the dead, or so I heard!"

The Tooks took that for a wild joke and roared with cheer. Then her uncle Isengrim stood in the doorway and called, "Then this calls for a second birthday party! Come, bring in your things--" and he gaped for a moment when he saw the elven guards standing at the edge of the light, and he quickly added, "Your friends are welcome too, of course!"

-----

Thorin didn't know how the people of Laketown-- no-- Dale found out that the King under the Mountain was building a garden for his Queen-to-be, but once word spread, he was showered with gifts of seeds. Grandmothers gave him handkerchiefs filled with tiny seeds the size of pinheads, young girls gave him packets of flat, flakey seeds half the size of his thumbnail, he was handed a pouch of spikey, talon-like seeds by a man who just said, "To keep the rabbits out." Even Bard gave him an envelope with a, "If she will even accept my tomatoes. I've a feeling she has strong feelings about specific cultivars."

It warmed Thorin's heart, even if it completely baffled him. Bard later explained, "Seeds are a hope and a promise for the future. It makes perfect sense that they seek to honor her like this."

Well, he knew that seeds went into the ground and became flowers, so he did just that. He dug a deep hole and poured the whole packet of the flat, flakey seeds into the bottom, covered them back up, and then stomped the dirt flat again. He planted pockets of flowers like this across the whole
terrace, and then he sat back to watch.

Nothing happened.

Nothing happened for days.

In a panic, he told Bard that it didn't work, and the man had the gall to laugh. "It doesn't just happen overnight!" he got out once he was done guffawing. He wiped a tear from one eye.

Thorin rather preferred him grim.

"Seedlings are gentle things. They need patience and care, and growling at them won't make them move any faster."

This all sounded uncomfortably similar to another kind of flower he knew.

"What are you using for a watering can?" Sigrid asked without looking up from her embroidery.

"A...bucket?"

Bard cried, "Oh goodness, no! That'll disturb the soil too much." Then he showed Thorin the fine shower from his prized watering can.

Thorin spent the next week designing a nozzle that would spray a fine mist when pumped with a bellows.

And he met his first seedling with bated breath.

The garden grew, and it was a joy to discover what the seeds grew into. These leaves were broad and round. Those leaves were fine and spikey. Some stayed short, some grew taller than him. But the yellow flowers seemed to be the most prolific. When he proudly showed Bard how they bloomed one day, he almost shouted What now? when the man cried, "Oh no!"

Then he started ripping out the yellow flowers by the roots, and how dare he!

But once they had calmed down (and averted a war) Bard explained, "Dandelions are a weed. If you don't get rid of them, they'll take over your whole garden and nothing else will grow. On the plus side, the leaves are good for you-- but oh goodness, how on earth did you plant these seeds? You need to thin these poor hollyhocks, or they'll choke themselves to death!"

And so they spent an afternoon on their knees with their hands in the dirt, as they tried to help growing things grow.

-----

The field behind the Great Smials was already set for a feast to celebrate the shortest night. Isengrim showed the elves to the rooms set aside for the Big Folk who occasionally came to deal with the Thain, and her aunts showed her to her rooms. A handful of her younger cousins helped carry in her trunks, and when Bilbo pulled out one of her elven gowns, her aunts gasped. Mirabella, still holding Hiraeth, asked, "How did you get such fine things?" with a bit of awe in her voice.

How indeed? Bilbo wanted to ask the same question herself. She hadn't liked to question Elrond's hospitality, but it did seem like too much. Bilbo sighed, "I think it was Elrond's way of thanking me for getting rid of the dragon."

They goggled at her, then Rosa snorted and patted her cheek. "Oh Bilbo, never change."
She could tell they didn't believe her, and she tried to ignore how much that hurt. Bilbo unclipped Sting and rested it beside her bed, and she reached back to untie her wrap. She shook out the shimmering fabric and folded over the back of a chair. Then she unbuttoned her shirt and--

Both aunts gasped again when they saw the mithril, and indeed, the diamonds and pearls set along the neckline glowed in the candlelight.

She quickly stripped down to her underthings and dragged the gown over her head. She took the opportunity to ask, "Can someone please tell me how everyone got it into their heads that I'm dead?"

She got a bit lost inside the dress, but eventually she put her arms through the right holes in time to see her aunts exchange a look.

Finally, Mirabella sighed and said, "Well dear, no one knew where you were going, or when you were coming back--"

And Rosa tightened the laces on her back and groused, "Running off through Hobbiton, yelling about adventures--"

Mirabella cut in, "And you were gone so very long, dear-- Lobelia found some law that said that if people are missing for more than a year and a day, that's it. She brought it before the Magistrate and well--" Mirabella sniffled a little and pressed a kiss to Hiraeth's hair.

Rosa fussed, adjusting the sleeves to hang just right. Their sumptuous draping fall was a sheer delight on her skin, but she still fumed. "The misunderstanding I can, well, understand," Bilbo huffed. "I didn't expect to be gone so long-- if I'd known it would cause this much trouble, I'd've gotten a Ranger to bring you a letter. But for her to try to continue on saying that I'm dead-- to my face? That's just wrong."

Mirabella murmured in agreement, but Rosa said, 'I don't know, it's not that much of a stretch. Have you really seen yourself lately? Can you not realize how much you've changed?' Then she reached up and pulled the combs from her hair--

Gilraen, tears in her eyes, pressing them into her hands, "Keep them, and remember me when you wear them."

--and her hair fell in long curls down her back. Rosa tutted, "My goodness, don't you look like a fairy princess."

They were both confused when Bilbo flinched, but they didn't ask.

Outside, Bilbo glowed under the lamplight. Food overflowed the tables, and she laughed with delight when she saw the elves' expressions at the sight of the feast. Music and ale flowed freely, and the shouts and laughter from the dancers made her smile, but she sat and held her daughter, or sat with the next cousin who wanted to hold her. But then Uncle Isengrim asked her for a dance, and with some prompting, she stood.

She focused on not stumbling and making a fool of herself, but she cut a striking figure. Her dress and her sleeves flared when they spun, her hair flowed like living gold, and her cheeks glowed.

Then Isengrim brought her back to the table, and she gratefully took her daughter into her arms again. After a while, Isengrim asked, "May I hold her?"

She passed her daughter into his wrinkled hands, and he held her up and made a series of faces at her. Hiraeth regarded him with suspicion for a moment, then she burst into giggles and started to babble at him. Isengrim chuckled and tucked her into the crook of one arm and proceeded to tickle
her belly, and she squealed with laughter. Then he turned her so she could sit on his lap and watch the dancers, and she seemed fascinated.

He ran a finger over the round tip of her ear. Then he sighed and asked gently, "What's her last name?"

Bilbo hunched her shoulders. "Baggins, I suppose."

He looked away, then asked, "What of her father, then?"

"That's neither here nor there," Bilbo said with faux-firmness.

After a moment, he said, "Very well, then." But it wasn't, not even close.

-----

Dís watched the sun set on the longest day from the cold heights of the Misty Mountains, and she prayed they would make it over the High Pass without incident.

Chapter End Notes

Thorin, no, that's not how you garden.

From the playlist: Return to the Shire
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Of home and homecomings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Go on, give 'er a go now!" Eikar called as he backed away from the half-buried wheel. When the ox pulled in its harness, the wheel spun and caughed on the cross-bar he'd just attached, and that extra bit of traction was enough to get them a few inches. The wagon limped forward. Mud covered its once-bright sides.

Eikar wiped mud from his face, only to smear it more, and he looked back over the endless lines of refugees.

Tharbad had flooded in the spring rains. Their caravan had come upon its ruins in time to try to help save lives. They were too late to try to save the town.

Once his wagon was back on drier ground, he took the spare plank off the wheel, then called out, "Alright yeh lot, back inside!" And he helped the children pile back into the wagon.

Between coming across illness in the town below Gladden Pass, the crop failures in Rohan, and then the destruction of Tharbad, Eikar wondered if this caravan was cursed. But then he looked at the hollow-eyed children and wiped a few noses with the corner of a dry scrap of a rag, and he knew they were right where they were meant to be.

Rohan had taken what few refugees they could, but they were already in a world of hurt. Eikar sent up a prayer on this Midsummer's Day that Gondor would take in these lost, scattered men, and they drove on.

-----

After the long, quiet stateliness of Rivendell, Bilbo was quite unprepared for life in the Great Smials. She was surrounded by kin, always. Oh, she was happy to see her aunts and uncles and cousins and the other further flung (convoluted) branches of the Took clan, but...she was so ready to go home. She just wanted her armchair. She just wanted her garden. She wanted to plant her acorn and-- and-- She wanted to see Hiraeth in her home, to watch her grow within the walls that had once cradled her. She wanted it so much that she burned with it.

But that was not to be. Bilbo's frustration grew when she found out that she would have to go before the Magistrate to determine whether she was not dead anymore. And, given how many times she had been this close to being snuffed out on the quest, she was decidedly not amused. But when she voiced these frustrations to her aunts and uncles one day, and they realized just how much danger she'd actually been in-- well, they hadn't taken it well.

(Hildigrim fainted, crushing Isembard and Hildibrand, who bumped Donnamira when they fell and knocked the fresh cake out of her hands, which fell frosting-side down onto the rug, while Isengrim
and Isenbold and Mirabella yelled at Bilbo for putting herself in harms way, and over it all, Hiraeth laughed and clapped. Thirteen dwarves were no match for her family, apparently. Rosa Took née Baggins looked upon the chaos from the other side of the table, far, far away from such dramatics.)

Afterlithe was half-over when they finally met with the Magistrate, all the way over in Michel Delving. And then the low-born, conniving, no good rat of a solicitor (Lobelia's brother, Ludo Bracegirdle) pleaded a full fact-finding period. The only thing the Magistrate determined that day was that yes, Lobelia was the defendant, and that yes, the party that claimed to be Bilbo Baggins could, in fact, be addressed as Bilbo Baggins. Then they adjourned.

For the full fact-finding period of forty five days.

Oh, they wanted to find proof that she wasn't who she said she was? Bilbo fought not to crumple the contract in her fist.

-----

Thorin sent Roäc to the Shire again, hoping against hope that this would be the time she'd be back in Bag End. More than a month later, Roäc returned with ruffled feathers. "The hobbit-lady chased after me with a broom. A broom. I hope you understand how much you should appreciate my loyalty, sire." Thorin had to cough to hide a smile, then he sighed as the weight settled back onto his heart.

-----

After the third meeting with the Magistrate, where the early Halimath sun had baked the town hall they'd repurposed as a courtroom, Bilbo growled, "I ought to sue them for obstruction and charge them rent." Lobelia's brother no longer objected to the evidence she'd provided; instead, now he was trying to claim that she'd abandoned her property, and thus forfeited her rights to Bag End. Again, he claimed that they needed the full forty five day period to gather all the appropriate evidence.

In any other circumstance, she might have admired the hobbit's cunning, because, once Halimath was over, the court would shut down for a month for the harvest. Then they'd want to adjourn for the holidays, she could see it. That would give Lobelia enough time to think of another barrier to throw up, while she sat there, snug in Bag End over the winter. It turned her stomach.

Once back at the Great Smials, still burning with frustration, she pressed a kiss to Hiraeth's head while she sat in a high chair, covered in rice porridge. Bilbo asked her young cousin, Persimmon, if she minded watching her for another hour, and of course the girl shook her head and waved her on.

Then she pulled Sting off the wall in her room and stalked back outside.

She realized it felt good to move.

"One-- Two-- Three-- Move your feet, get that high block higher--"

She moved through the practice sets til she felt her limbs loosen up and a fine sheen of sweat covered her skin. Sting felt like a long-lost limb.

She ignored the crowd of onlookers watching from the fence, until her Uncle Isengrim called out, "Fancy a partner?"

She snapped her head in his direction and gaped at the sword in his hand.

Isengrim rolled his eyes and cheerfully told her, "Don't look so shocked, my girl. Bullroarer was my
Bilbo straightened and wiped her brow, then gestured for him to come on in. He hopped over the fence and padded over the lawn to stand a sword length's apart. She eyed him, his curly grey hair ruffled in the breeze and the long straight sword as it pointed to the ground. When she brought Sting up to guard, he met her blade with his.

*Orcrist sang down Sting's edge, and she knew he was only putting a bare minimum of his strength behind the blow, but it still felt like her wrists were going to break*--

And now, here, she noticed that for all her uncle's height and his lean ranginess (yet another tally toward his unhobbitish oddness) and his full years, she still needed to hold back on her own strength, and he tired long before her. Finally, Isengrim backed up and held up his hand and huffed happily, "I yield, I yield!"

And around her, her cousins innumerable cheered wildly.

*They had no idea,* she thought. She had fought orcs and wargs and a battle too terrible to think about, and yet they cheered her and thought her skilled. They had no idea.

She bowed her head to her uncle (to the Thain) and she went to find a bath.

-----

"I miss sitting in the garden with you. I miss our talks and I miss listening to Estel play with Hiraeth. Rivendell may have been too quiet, but I believe that this place might be too loud for me. I cannot get a moment's peace, my relatives are always underfoot or looking for me or knocking on my door...I've taken to taking long walks in the hills in the evening just to catch a bit of quiet. When it's just Hiraeth and me wandering out under the sky, then I can pretend that I'm going somewhere or doing something, rather than be stuck in this wretched limbo for any while longer. I am grateful for my family, I really am, but they're just too much sometimes. ...And to be honest, I'm a little afraid that I will never be satisfied again. I don't want to spend the rest of my life chasing after the feeling of being home only to never get there."

The letter sat on her desk, waiting for the next Ranger patrol that would carry it back to Rivendell.

Bilbo stared at the ring in her hand. She could put it on and slip away, just for a bit-- but Hiraeth slept in the other room, and what if they needed to find her for some reason? She closed her fist. She couldn't hide, not any longer.

-----

"Oh, just look at her tiny feet! Do you think she'll ever be able to learn how to walk?"

Bilbo grit her teeth and smiled stiffly at her aunt's second cousin, Diantha Banks, from over her tea cup. Hiraeth lay on her belly on her laid out wrap on the floor, limbs flailing as she tried to figure out how to crawl. She and Rosa were visiting Belba Bolger (née Baggins) over in Frogmorton, and already Bilbo wanted nothing more than to be gone.

Diantha blithely continued, "Why, there's nary a tuft of down on them!"

Then they all looked to her as if awaiting her reply, but what could she say to that besides tell them to take their faux concerns and stuff it--

She sipped her tea and said, "It's been a pleasure watching her learn how to crawl. If she has
something to push off of, she's gotten to be a fair hand at scooting along." Then she smiled and added, "I should just appreciate this time while I have it, before I'm forever running after her to keep her from getting into everything!"

The ladies in the parlor laughed with too-bright smiles. The room was a riot of soft pastels and lace and ribbons, but (much to Rosa's dismay) Bilbo was back in homespun. She didn't want to call attention to herself by showing up overdressed in some too-fancy togs as if she was giving herself airs, but she'd miscalculated. Now she stuck out for looking too plain. Nothing could disguise the exquisite nature of the wrap, though. This one shimmered a deep iridescent green that hinted at blue, and she knew that some of her more grasping cousins were eyeing it up, hunger warring with the ingrained dislike of anything foreign.

Unfortunately, that view was starting to be applied toward her daughter. Then Hiraeth got frustrated with the floor, so Bilbo swung her up into her arms and bounced her in her lap.

Cousin Gilly took the opportunity to exclaim, "Everytime I see her, I just cannot get over how very blue her eyes are!"

Bilbo tried very hard to hide her flinch, but then Linda Proudfoot (née Baggins) sniped archly, "She certainly doesn't get them from you, dear."

Bilbo cleared her tight throat and looked down at her baby girl to avoid their avid stares. They never stopped fishing and pinching, trying to winkle the identity of the father out of her. As if they needed to know anything more. She seethed. Hiraeth stuffed her fist into her mouth, drooling everywhere, so she reached into her bag for a burp cloth and wiped her daughter's face.

Rosa (bless her) waded into the awkward silence and asked, "Did you hear Rudy Boffin going on and on, bragging about his pumpkins and how he's going to have the biggest this year? He hasn't got a chance, not with the Hornblower's crop the way it's coming along."

And so the conversation ebbed and flowed, no topic truly worth mentioning because nothing of substance was said. The cakes were cakes, the tea was tea, and Bilbo wanted so desperately to be home.

Or wandering beneath old trees.

Or climbing high ridges and seeing the way the earth stretched out around her.

Or--

She cut off that thought.

_the scent of resin and rock sharp in her nose and the buttery light of the evening and the granite and the pine needles beneath her feet, for once taller than--_

Well.

She sipped her tea and made her face show polite interest as her extended family discussed the plans for her second cousin-once-removed's spring wedding.

Finally, once she and Rosa had stated their intent to leave, and their intent to leave was acknowledged, and once all the well wishes were exchanged and everyone's reluctance to go was established, they left.

Belba's smial overlooked Frogmorton proper, its stone buildings and thatched rooftops winding
around and along the East Road, right down to the Water. Grasshoppers sang in the late afternoon sun, and Bilbo was already sweating where Hiraeth slept upon her chest. Workers out in the fields hurried to bring in the crops, for though the days were still hot, there'd almost been a touch of frost the other morning, already. Many of the shops they passed in Frogmorton had signs tacked on their doors: Closed For The Harvest. Hobbits lined the streets, hauling bales, baskets, bins, or crates, someone drove a herd of goats down the road (thankfully going the other way) and then she heard the accent before she saw them:

"Oh aye, an' a pretty penny she got for it, too," followed by raucous laughter.

Her breath caught when she saw the dwarves. A few wagons trundled down the East Road, and she and Rosa stepped out of the way to let them pass. She saw two unfamiliar dwarves sitting in the drivers' seat, the ones she'd heard, and they went on.

"And then I heard tell from my cousin Hallur that they've been going mad with the preparations for the Queen-to-be. All Erebor is in an uproar."

Oh.

The wagons passed (without a second glance from the dwarves, and why would they, they were strangers) and Bilbo still stood there, numb and reeling. Rosa had to shake her arm to get her to react.

With concern leaking into her voice, Rosa asked, "Do you need me to call a cart?"

Bilbo finally shook herself and shook her head. "No, no, I'm fine." But her voice was hollow and her feet felt like lead. It didn't matter. She would be fine.

There was a Queen-to-be, and so that was that.

-----

After so long on the road, after the flooded remnants of Tharbad, its muddy fields stinking with the bloated bodies of dead livestock, and after the barren fields of Rohan and their hollow-cheeked staring, Eikar gazed upon the fields of Pelennor with wonder. Golden fields of wheat waved in the breeze. Corn grew as tall as the wagons. Squash and tomatoes and potatoes and beans and greens filled the fields. Clearly there was no blight in Gondor.

And before them, ever higher, rose the White City, its walls and gate solid enough to make even a dwarf proud. As their caravan and the long streams of refugees reached the gates, one of the guards called down, "Who are you and what happened?"

Eikar looked around at his fellows, but they prompted him to speak, so he called out, "These are the refugees from the city of Tharbad, which was destroyed by flooding this spring."

"What were dwarves doing in Tharbad?"

"We were passing through. Our caravan is from Erebor, but when we got to Tharbad and saw the ruin, we helped bring these men here to find aid."

The guard pressed, "But what are dwarves doing helping men?"

Eikar huffed, "Because we could. We have the wagons and we have our hands. Could yeh ha' stood aside and done nothing?" And he bit his tongue before he could say that he knew the answer to that. Eikar burned. He was an Iron Hills dwarf, so he hadn't lost everything to the dragon, but he knew what his kind had had to face afterwards. Much aid could have come from the men, but it hadn't.
After a moment, the guard called down, "Wait here."

So they sat and they waited and they grumbled and they fretted. Finally, the gates opened and a man in velvet and furs strode out, followed by a gaggle of clerks and guards.

"Speak your business, dwarf," the lord of some sort ordered.

Eikar crossed his arms and looked up at him. He said gruffly, "These men, these women and children need homes. Their city was destroyed by flooding. Someone told yeh this when they called yeh down, am I correct?"

The lord looked down his nose at him, then deflated. "Yes, someone said something about Tharbad flooded."

Eikar nodded and relaxed his posture. "Their dam gave way in the spring break up. It was a bloody mess. The ones we could save are here. Rohan can't take 'em, they're already going to face starvation as it is--"

The man interrupted, "Why, what's happening in Rohan?"

Eikar sighed. "Their crops failed. Their fields are empty. They've got a bloody mess on their hands, too."

The lord's brow creased with worry. Then he asked, "And you, dwarf? Where are you from?"

"We're from the Iron Hills by way of Erebor, which I'm sure yeh'll be glad to know is ours again."

Then the lord's eyebrows shot up and he asked, "What's your name then, master dwarf?"

"I'm Eikar, son of Einar." He bowed.

"And I am Ecthelion, Steward of Gondor. Thank you for providing help to these refugees. We will see to it that they are given homes." And at that, a great cry rose up from the crowd. People hugged each other, weeping, and then the children in Eikar's wagon jumped out and swarmed the Steward to hug his legs.

Ecthelion stared at Eikar, aghast, but the dwarf just laughed and sighed, "Oh, yeh've no idea how good it is to hear that, my lord."

-----

Dís breathed freely once more when the last of the wagons left the roots of the Misty Mountains and crossed the fords of the upper Anduin. They were now camped at the edge of Mirkwood, no, pardon, the Greenwood, while they waited for some of Thranduil's poncy guards to come act as their guides. Apparently, the road was still being rebuilt and the spiders were still being driven off, so as much as it irked her to wait, wait they did.

She would not risk this caravan just to satisfy her fool pride.

After a few days' wait, they finally heard a thin horn call. She nodded to her captain, who responded with their own, deeper blast. Then a company of elves sashayed out of the treeline (alright, fine, she was being petty, but no one could take that from her). They were led by a maid with long red hair, who wielded a wicked looking long bow and twin curved blades. Dís grudgingly gave her a modicum of respect.
Then the elf approached and bowed to her. "I am Tauriel, captain of the guard. We will see to it that you pass through our woods unharmed."

Dís looked up at her appraising lay and declared, "Thank you, Captain. I am Dís, caravan head. This is Máur, captain of my guard. If you need to coordinate rosters with your guards, please make arrangements with him. If you have any other concerns that need to be addressed, bring them to me."

The captain nodded, then blinked. "Excuse me, ma'am, but are you the Lady Dís?"

"Yes, what of it?" Dís eyed the elf with suspicion. She had no time for anyone who tried to leverage a better place with her brother by befriending her, not on the road, and she had little patience for it in the Mountain, either. But then the elf surprised her.

Tauriel bowed and said, "I fought beside your son--" here her voice gave an most unelven wobble, "--s on Ravenhill. I am honored to meet their mother."

Dís stared up at the elf for a long moment, then she said gruffly, "Be grateful they're still alive, then, or this meeting would've gone very differently."

The elf blanched. Odd. She swallowed hard and said, "Believe me, I know." Then she squared her shoulders and asked, "If you are ready, may we be on our way?"

Dís nodded and Máur blew the horn to move out.

-----

The Thain was no fool, no matter what the mayor liked to say. But when your niece rides up at the front of an elven host, bearing a new child, and carrying a fortune (oh he'd seen the two chests she'd had to have four strapping cousins haul in) he knew something was afoot. And when the Rangers patrolled more often and with more numbers, he knew it was something big. But as he sat with his pipe in the sitting room next to the fire while the first snowstorm howled outside, he listened as Bilbo told a crowd of fauntlings about trolls and wizards and men who turned into bears, and he realized that he really had no idea what was happening to-- around-- because of-- her. One thing he did know, she would sometimes look so haunted that he wanted to wrap her in a hug and snarl at the rest of the world.

Then, one day in November, she shut herself in her room and didn't come out. By second breakfast, Rosa had knocked on her door, but she had said she wasn't ill. When Rosa had asked if she needed anything to eat, she had told her she already had what they needed.

Rosa exclaimed at luncheon, "If I didn't believe her, I'd knock the door down! Missing one meal is bad enough, but going without food the whole day? It's unthinkable!"

Then Donnamira said softly, "It's almost like she's mourning."

And they stared at her from around the table. Rosa clapped both hands over her mouth. Isengrim champed his pipe between his teeth. Then Rosa asked quaveringly, "Do you think that's why she never speaks of the father?"

Hildibrand asked, "If she's a widow, though, why not just say so? This being all tight-lipped has done her no favors in the town. No, something else happened."

But none of them knew what.

Bilbo emerged the next morning with puffy eyes, but then she slipped back into her old routine. The
snows grew higher and the weather grew fiercer. Hiraeth grew bigger and popped her first tooth. Bilbo slowly told more and more of her adventures and gained a small army of loyal fauntlings. Isengrim tried to keep an extra eye on her, but she had wrapped herself in armor and painted on a smile.

-----

A year and a day after leaving Erebor, Eikar wasn't even able to see the Lonely Mountain through the driving snow as they made their last push home. He kept his head down and his hands on the reins, until finally, finally they made the gate. Their wagons clattered over the stone as they hurried inside, snow swirling in behind them, and then he looked and looked and looked.

The halls were brightly lit, the silver fountains played like bells, dwarrow filled the streets, and it was warm. Then someone came up to show them where to drive their wagons, and Eikar roughly brushed the snow and ice from his beard before he urged poor disgruntled Bluebell on.

Once they reached the traders' docking bay, he heard someone shouting, "Where are they, I'll kill 'em myself!" and then Viggthrasir stormed in and yelled, "Yeh soggy limpets, I though' yeh were lost!"

Hanur, their navigator, cried, " Eh now, we knew where we were goin' the whole time!"

Viggthrasir threw out his arms, "Not lost yeh peabrain, dead! An' I've never been happier to see yer hairy faces!"

Their wagons were filled with food and supplies from Gondor, so once their cargo was unloaded, their old captain took them out for food and drink and news. Eikar had been on the road so long that the sheer number of dwarrows in the city boggled his mind. The Mountain sang with it. Viggthrasir got them a table and then filled them in on what they'd missed. Eikar listened with half an ear, more intent on his ale and salted pork than on the comings and goings of this lord or that guild master, but then he heard, "Oh aye, it's fair unnatural, a dwarf diggin' is hands into dirt, not to mine, but to plant. But he's still building a home for his Queen-to-be, an' she's a queer thing, make no mistake."

Eikar raised his brows over his tankard. "I didn't know the King had found a bride. Who is she? What clan is she from?"

Viggthrasir slapped his palm on the table and cried, "Oh, she ent even a dam! She's one a them halflings."

Eikar choked on his ale. A dwarf from the next table over warned, "Don' be callin' her that. If one of the Company hears yeh, yeh'll get an earful."

Viggthrasir rolled his eyes, "Beg pardon, not halfling, hobbit. " He grinned as if to share the joke. But Eikar just croaked, "They're not half of anything. ...Oh Mahal, what've I done?"

At his reaction, the dwarf at the next table raised his braided eyebrows.

Chapter End Notes

Timeline, what timeline?

Oh and yes, Gondor also sent food and supplies to Rohan, too. Can't have those
dwarves one-upping the men, now.

Playlist: Outgrowing the Shire and Pining
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

In which many things are said and some decisions are made.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Eikar stepped out of the privy, he jumped when he saw that the stranger with the braided eyebrows waited just outside the door. The dwarf didn't react, he just asked, "How d'ye know why hobbits don't like to be called halflings?"

Eikar huffed, "Nice ta meet yeh, too, Master..."

The dwarf just looked at him, and Eikar gave up. "A hobbit told me."

"Yeh met a hobbit, eh? What was his name?"

"Her name was Bilbo."

Then the dwarf clamped a hand over Eikar's bicep and his spluttering protests and dragged him out into the alley. Eikar couldn't get out of his grip, but if he wanted a fight, he'd get one. The stranger just grumbled, "Don't make such a fuss. When did yeh see this Bilbo?"

"Right after we left, last year. She joined up right outside of Laketown. What--?"

The stranger led him out of the alley and through the streets, asking, "How long did she stay with the caravan? She didn't come back with you lot, did she?"

"What? No, she and the wizard left for Rivendell once we got out of Mirkwood. But now wait a minute-- she-- she wasn't in a good place, when she came to us. She had bruises and-- I don't want to be tellin' yeh anything that'll put her at risk, d'ye hear me?"

The stranger looked at him with... approval? Eikar wasn't sure he could trust his eyes anymore at this point. Then the dwarf asked him, "What do yeh know of the Company?"

Eikar blinked at that. Confused, he said, "Twelve dwarrow followed the king across Middle Earth to take back Erebor?"

His kidnapper (maybe?) pinched the bridge of his nose. "Mahal's beard, yeh did leave right away. Thirteen dwarrow and one hobbit marched on Erebor, but dragon's gold is cursed. Now, she and the king were in azlāf when she found the Arkenstone, but by then, the whole Company'd gone gold-mad. Elves and men tried to meddle-- with their armies, of course, but the king wouldn't listen. So Bilbo snuck out to try to negotiate so they wouldn't start a war, and she gave 'em the Arkenstone so they could try to ransom it for the gold they were wantin'. In that state, well-- the king did lay hands on her and threatened to throw her from the gate. In the end he only banished her. When he came to, and when he realized what he'd done, well. But by then, nobody knew where she had gone."

Eikar looked over the dwarf who pulled him through the crowds. "Yeh're one of the Company,
aren't you?"

The dwarf quirked a half smile in response. "Yer sharp, Master Eikar. But I can tell yeh without a
doubt that the king'll be no further threat to her. Not anymore."

Eikar sighed with relief. Then he asked, "So why're yeh kidnapping me?"

"Kidnapping? Who said anythin' about kidnapping? Nah. I'm takin' yeh to see the king."

"Yeh're what?"

Lord Elrond stared at the letter on his desk. The raven who had delivered it had circled the city for a
long time before it had brought this letter to him. When Elrond had tried to untie the other scroll, the
raven had snapped, "Not yours," and clacked its beak. So Elrond had held up both hands in
surrender and the raven had said, "I await your response." Then it flew out into the snow.

The ravens of Erebor were long held to be harbingers of ill fortune. The letter on his desk was short
and gruff. It caused Elrond a world of problems and for once, split his loyalty from his duties.
Because, after the dutiful greeting and the polite expressions of gratitude (which, while brief, were
still there) the King under the Mountain asked the one question Elrond had hoped he'd never have to
answer.

"Where's Bilbo?"

Loyalty warred with duty. He owed the asker an answer, and it would not do to offend the king of
the dwarves. And so, he gave the circumspect answer.

"She's not here."

Thorin slumped in his chair, face in his hands, disappointment all the more brutal for crashing back
from the heights of burgeoning hope. But Dís paced in his office, re-reading Elrond's letter. Thorin
tried to ignore her.

Finally, Dís slapped the paper and said, "This is a very vague answer to a rather specific question.
Even the contraction hides its true tense. He could be saying 'She is not here' as much as 'She was
not here' and you know those mean two wholly different things. So what is he hiding? No, you write
back and you ask for clarification. These elves are too slippery for their own good by half."

Thorin's voice creaked like old stone, "Is that what you think?"

Dís told him firmly, "Never take a non-answer at face value." Then she hesitated. "If she was there--
if she was there for sanctuary, she probably told Elrond what happened at the gate. He might be
trying to protect her." He flinched, but Dís barreled on. "They would have no way to know that
you'd beaten the gold sickness."

Thorin stared at Dís. "But she has to know. She saw our charge into battle. We spoke. We did. She
has to know--"

Dís stared at her brother. "How would she know? How could she know that? That's leaving a lot up
for interpretation, and need I remind you? You are notoriously difficult to read, brother mine. She
might not know you're fine."

He opened his mouth to reply, but then shut it. Damn and blast, this was going to hurt his pride, but
he was at the end of his tether. He needed to find her. And if he had to grovel and scrape, then so be it.

"As I am sure she's told you some of what happened, you know that I have wronged her in the worst way. You were right when you warned Gandalf all those months ago. I did fall into madness, and in my madness, I risked her life, and I cast her out. As soon as I woke-- and that is how I will describe it, the madness felt like i was both wrapped in the softest slumber and drowning in a sea of gold-- as soon as I awoke and-- resurfaced, I suppose, and once I realized what I had done, what I had nearly done-- words cannot convey my regret and my shame. But we have been unable to find her, so I haven't been able to begin to try to apologize. When we didn't find her after the battle, we were-- I was afraid she was dead. But now, after a year, we've finally had word that she'd left the Mountain for Rivendell. Please, give me news of her. Please, tell me she still lives. I need to beg her forgiveness and to let her know that the gold no longer holds any sway over me."

Elrond pondered his response for a long time, long enough to irritate the raven that awaited his reply. The last letter had worried him. This letter shook him. He paced around his office and ruminated. The Midwinter decorations glowed in every window and the snow clouds covered the stars. Elladan and Elrohir's first clumsily carved star lanterns hung in the windows behind his desk. He sent a runner to go find Gilraen.

When she came, cheeks pink from the cold, she asked, "My lord?"

Elrond handed her the letter, gestured for her to take a seat across from his desk, and explained, "The King under the Mountain now seeks news of Bilbo." Gilraen took the letter with wide eyes, and he added, "Read, I want your opinion on whether we should tell him."

Gilraen murmured, "But my lord, you gave her your word that you'd never tell."

Elrond folded his hands together and replied, "I gave my word that I would not speak of the child or her parentage. But of her whereabouts? Read, then we can discuss more."

So Gilraen read, and soon she held a hand over her mouth. When she put the letter down, she had to blink back tears. "Oh, he thought she was dead. Oh, that is cruel."

"Do you see my dilemma? If I felt that he still posed a threat, I would do everything in my power to protect her and throw up every barrier to keep him from finding out a thing, but now?" He paused. "How is she faring in the Shire?"

Gilraen sighed. "Badly. She herself admits that. It's as if she's grown too big for the Shire to hold her."

Elrond shook his head. "I feared as much."

She hesitantly said, "I think that if-- if the reason she left has been resolved, and if there is a chance that they could be reconciled, that they deserve that chance."

"She needs to hear these words, but she left Rivendell and went back to the Shire."

Thorin threw the letter across his desk. He'd waited a month for his reply, and it gave him no news. Roäc was still chased from Bag End, so if she was back in the Shire, then why was she not at Bag End? Why didn't they forward the letter to her?

With a growl, he wrote another response to Elrond, and then a new letter to this Lobelia Sackville-Baggins, who had been so rude to Dís, because somebody somewhere wasn't getting the message.
Bilbo shivered in the drafty town hall. No building not dug into a hillside could ever be as warm and snug as a smial, but this March wind seemed to cut through the wooden walls like a knife through butter. Ludo Bracegirdle gave a long winded speech about the merits of the Magistrate in his closing arguments regarding the matter of her supposed abandonment.

Finally, the Thain's solicitor ceded the floor to her. She kept it brief. "I did not abandon Bag End. I was under a contract with the dwarves, and then, due to complications with my pregnancy, I had to stay in Rivendell longer than I planned. If I had known this little, rarely used, old bylaw still existed, I would have troubled a Ranger to send a letter to the Thain. As it was, I sought not to inconvenience anyone, since I was on my way home as soon as Hiraeth and I were healthy enough to travel."

The Magistrate hemmed and hawed and they broke for lunch. Isengrim was in attendance today, so they went to visit his cousin Florilize Hornblower (née Chubb) for a hot meal. The elderly hobbit tutted over Bilbo's deplorable skinniness. Bilbo bit her tongue and ate her scalloped potatoes. She knew she was too skinny, but her appetite seemed to have been lost out in the wilds.

Then they bundled up in hats and scarves and their shearling slippers and they headed back out into the snow. She sat back down in the town hall and shrugged her shawl tighter around her shoulders. The solicitor beside her kept compulsively straightening his papers and pens. Finally the Magistrate took up his gavel and declared, "With regards to the matter of whether Belladonna Baggins abandoned Bag End, I rule that extenuating circumstances prevented her from returning as soon as her contract was closed. Belladonna did not abandon Bag End as established in property code 40-dash-6349-dot-"

A flood of relief rushed through her, enough to make her hands tingle and she heard Lobelia huff.

The Magistrate concluded, "--are there any further objections?"

But then Ludo's chair scraped as he stood and said, "There's one more matter that the court should consider before reaching a determination on the rightful ownership of Bag End, your Honor." Bilbo clenched her jaw when the weasel looked over at her, his slimy eyes running up and down her body. He drew up a concerned face and said, "There's the matter of Bilbo's misconduct, which resulted in the illegitimate child."

The Thain's solicitor jumped up, crying, "Objection!"

"Overruled." The Magistrate looked back at Ludo.

"We maintain that the reason Bilbo has not named the father is because she does not know who the father is--"

The Thain's solicitor grated out, "Objection, your Honor, that is conjecture."

"Sustained. You don't know that, Ludo." Then the Magistrate turned to Bilbo, whose hands were clenched so hard her nails were cutting into her palms. "What is the name of Hiraeth's father?"

For a long moment, Bilbo could not speak. When she did, her voice quivered with rage. "That is none of the business of this court, nor Lobelia Sackville-Baggins, nor any of the entire blessed Shire."

The solicitor tried to motion her to stop talking. The Magistrate looked like he'd sucked on a lemon and said, "It is a matter of the court if it is to determine grounds for misconduct."
Bilbo rose to her full height, knees quaking, and declared, "No matter what some people say, the reason I have not named him is because it is not safe to name him. He has powerful enemies; it's for Hiraeth's safety that they never know he has a child."

Lobelia cried, "Ha! So he's a criminal!"

Bilbo snarled, "Not in the slightest!"

The Magistrate banged the gavel and barked, "Order!"

The Thain's solicitor pleaded, "Your Honor, please grant us the full fact-finding period so we can obtain the proper evidence."

The Magistrate pursed his lips and said, "Granted, but I will hold you in contempt if you fail to cooperate with this, miss."

Bilbo just stared at him, lips white.

*Azog, face shimmering through the heat rising from the fires. Azog, dead on the ice beside his broken body. The warg's mouth opened wide. The orcs and wargs that stalked the Shire in the Fell Winter. The warg that killed her father, blood so red in the snow. The feel of Sting cutting through flesh and fur. His hands around her throat--*

"--Bilbo." Isengrim gripped her by the shoulder.

She blinked and stared at her uncle.

"Bilbo, lass, just tell them.

She shook her head and hugged her middle. "I can't. This is bigger than just us. The entire Shire would be at risk if word got out."

He leveled her with a stern look.

She cried, "I'm not exaggerating! We were hunted-- he was hunted across all of Arda on our quest. They brought an army to his door-- no, I will not risk the Shire facing a hundred shades worse than the Fell Winter."

Isengrim chewed on his cheek. "Is that why they've increased the Ranger patrols?" She looked up at him in surprise and he groused, "Give me some credit, gal. I am tasked with the protection of the Shire. So who else knows?"

Her nose twitched and she reluctantly said, "Gandalf. The Dowager Chieftain of the Dunedain. Lord Elrond. Oh, and Beorn." He arched his brows and she muttered, "Too many already."

"So just tell the Magistrate privately."

"Nothing is private. There will still be records.

Isengrim looked at her hunted, wild eyes and sighed. "Then we will have to try to convince the Magistrate to accept that you have good cause for not naming him while still proving you know who the father is."

Bilbo scowled.

-----
Spring was just beginning to flirt with the mountain when Roäc returned. He only had a letter from Elrond. "She returned to the Shire on Mid-year's Day. I believe she must have missed the Lady Dís by a few weeks. It is my understanding that she has been facing some legal battles regarding the ownership of Bag End, which might explain the lack of response from that end. If you have any further questions, you may be able to receive a response if they're addressed to the Thain."

Thorin leapt to his feet and called to Balin, "I'm done dealing through letters. Make ready. I'm going myself."

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For forty-five days, Bilbo still refused to say his name. On the day of the hearing, she placed Hiraeth in Rosa's arms (the fauntling proceeded to squirm until she was let down, then she toddled away) and then Bilbo, Isengrim, and the poor disgruntled solicitor walked over to Michel Delving. Bilbo carried a bag over her shoulder and thumped her walking stick with a little too much menace. Her hand kept roaming to her hip, as if she was seeking the reassurance of her sword.

Isengrim sighed. Of all the times for her Baggins side to dig its heels in. They should be busy planning Hiraeth's birthday party, not this. And behind Bilbo's-- aggressive determination, she looked terrified. It made Isengrim twist up inside.

Outside the town hall, they met Gorbadoc and Mirabella, who'd come down from Buckland. Bilbo blinked and Gorbadoc laughed at her. "You're claiming good cause for the safety of the Shire, right? Well, who better than to help decide that than the Thain and the Master of Buckland? We're the ones charged with maintaining the defense of the Shire, so this Magistrate better well and listen." He chomped on his pipe and nodded at Bilbo's stunned expression.

Mirabella pulled Bilbo into a tight hug, and Bilbo finally let out a shuddering breath. Then she straightened and squared her shoulders and strode inside.

"If it's so dangerous, if the risk is so high just by her being here, then why is she allowed to remain?" Ludo asked self-sanctimoniously.

Isengrim growled from the stand, "Are you suggesting that I banish my own niece and grand-niece?"

Then Ludo smirked. "But that's just it; isn't it? She's your own niece, and Hiraeth is your own grand-niece, just as you said. Your judgement is inherently flawed in this case."

Isengrim could not argue against that.

The Magistrate sniffed and called them to adjourn for tea.

Bilbo and her aunt and uncles went down the street to a tea shop. No one said much. Bilbo didn't have the appetite for more than one crumpet. Mirabella fretted even more.

Then they reconvened and the Magistrate said, "The good cause request is overruled. Speak up, Belladonna."

Bilbo took a deep breath and reached into her bag. Then she stood and unfolded the mithril armor. It glittered in the light that streamed in through the windows. "If I may address the underlying issue behind this attempt to claim that my daughter is the result of misconduct. But first, I want it on the record that I object to this even being a matter that the court feels it can butt in on. Write that down, so that no one else has to go through this ridiculous pageantry. My business is my own, and it should
have nothing to do with my own property." She glared, breathing hard. "Be that as it may. To address the claims against me, yes, I do know who my daughter's father is. He gave me this." She shook the mithril for emphasis. "He gave this to me as a token that I am-- that I was under his protection. The circumstances behind the why and the who of that dissolution are not up for discussion. I still maintain that his identity is not the subject that's truly up for consideration. I know who he is. You need not know more than that."

The Magistrate eyed the armor, its diamonds winking in the sunlight, and grudgingly said, "I will review the laws. Do you have any further testimony?"

"I do not." He glared at her. She tacked on slowly, "your Honor."

Isengrim covered his eyes with one hand. Then they were dismissed.

Chapter End Notes

Do I tell you that this chapter was originally twice as long as the others, and that I've split this chapter in half, so that you at least know that the next one will come soon?

(Yes.)

The next chapter should be up tomorrow or the day after.

Playlist: The Battle for Bag End
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Climb, and strive, and overcome.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gorbadoc and Mirabella accompanied them back to the Great Smials. "The rest went on ahead while we were in court. Bilbo, you've no idea how excited Prim was to see Hiraeth," Mirabella chatted, trying to draw Bilbo out of her own head. Bluebells covered the forest floor, new buds covered the trees like a fine green veil, and the birds were returning in full clamorous force.

When they reached the Tuckborough market, Bilbo said, "Go on ahead, I need to calm down before I go back."

Mirabella tucked an arm through hers. "I'll keep you company."

Gorbadoc and Isengrim continued on to the Great Smials. They passed through the village and headed up through the glen. Neither spoke. They drank in the silence and the spring sunshine while they could.

And... there. "Uncle! Uncle!" One of the older fauntlings came running down the path, panting. "There's an army of dwarves coming!"

Isengrim and Gorbadoc looked at each other, then they hurried back to Tuckborough to get Mirabella and Bilbo back to the Smials.

Bilbo and Mirabella were strolling up the lane, looking at the market stalls. Mirabella had a pack of pansy seedlings in one hand. Bilbo had some vague idea that she should get some ribbons for Hiraeth, but then she heard the general market chatter swell into an uproar, and she looked up as Thorin dismounted from a pony.

She froze, unable to believe the sight. His long hair still fell untamed past his shoulders, and his beard was still short, and his thrice-cursed steel-capped boots still clomped like before. He was as simply clad as if they were still on the quest, almost as if no time had passed but for the livid scar that bisected his brow and raked down his temple, far, far too close to his eye. He bore no crown or gold or any trappings that proclaimed him a king-- just his own presence. But before she could decide if she was going to stay or hide, he saw her.

He breathed out, "Bilbo--"

And what was that, what was that-- he had no right to look at her like that, to look that incandescently happy, or to say her name like she was the sun, and why was he rushing up to her? And why was he reaching out for her?

She backed away, saying, "No-- you--" but no, his expression should never fall like that, and she rushed on, "You-- what? No, you have your Queen-to-be, what are you doing here?"
And his dark brows furrowed with confusion. "Bilbo, Melhekînh--"

"DON'T!" And then she ripped her arm from her aunt's and shoved a finger in his face, "Don't you dare call me 'halfling,' not now. I am not--"

Then Isengrim and Gorbadoc came running up the road, but they froze when they saw them.

"I did not!" Thorin cut in. "My heart, I did not-- that would have been 'melekînh,' which you will never again hear from my lips--"

She blinked, "But what--?"

"Queen. My queen." And then he tried again to pull her into his arms.

But she pushed him back and shouted, "But--! You! You told me to go home! You cast me out, and you told me to go home!"

"Home?" Thorin sounded so pained, what? Why? His voice creaked, "The Mountain is home. I was lifting the banishment! What were you doing on the battlefield, Bilbo? You could have been killed! You-- we were in azlâf! I needed you safe!"

Tears were streaming down her face. "How could I have known that? You cast me out. I couldn't call Erebor home after that--"

He clenched and unclenched his hands at his sides, clearly trying not to reach out, and he choked out, "And I am so sorry."

She let out a sob and threw her arms around his neck. "And-- I'm sorry," she cried through her tears. "I'm so sorry for taking the stone in the first place, and--"

He pulled her in tight and cupped the back of her head with one big hand. His voice rumbled through her chest, "And I forgive you. I am sorry for failing to protect you, even from myself--"

Then he pressed his face into her hair.

What she said back was muffled by the fur mantle draped across his shoulders. Isengrim stared, stunned at the display. This-- and oh it was like looking at a future image of Hiraeth, there was no doubt-- this was the father? And he had called her queen-- was he a king?

Then Bilbo hiccuped, "I hate your stupid armor."

He chuckled and said, "I hope you still have yours."

She nodded, face still pressed to the fur on his chest.

Then he lifted her chin with one hand and said, "Melhekînh, please come home."

She closed her eyes and shivered. Then she said, "First, there's someone you need to meet."

His brows furrowed when she pulled away. She grabbed his hand and pulled him down the street. Of course everyone was staring. Then she noticed Isengrim and Gorbadoc standing with Mirabella and paused. "Um. Uncle, this is Thorin Oakenshield. Thorin, this is Isengrim Took, and Gorbadoc and Mirabella Brandybuck."

Thorin bowed, but Isengrim stuck out a hand. After a pause, Thorin shook it. Isengrim leveled Thorin a look and put some steel in his tone. "I heard most of that. King, eh?" He leveled the same look at Bilbo and said, "You played that close to the chest." Bilbo blushed.
Then Gorbadoc said, "While you're an impressive sight and all, I don't think you quite count as an army."

"What? --Oh. No, I left the guards camped outside of Bree. I didn't want to cause any alarm in the Shire." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I was on my way to speak with the Thain--"

But something in the dwarf's expression made Isengrim quirk a mischievous grin, and he clapped a hand on Thorin's shoulder. "Well, lad?"

Thorin just blinked down at the old hobbit.

Isengrim barked out a laugh. "Now's your chance, master dwarf."

Thorin stared for a moment, then asked Bilbo, "Your uncle is the Thain?" But then he shook his head, passing the thought aside, and he continued, "I was trying to find someone who could tell me how to find you. The rest of the Company are at Bag End, paying a certain someone a visit."

Bilbo choked on a laugh, "They didn't."

He only smiled wolfishly down at her.

-----

Lobelia was just pulling a roast out of the oven when the bell rang. Otho had his nose in the evening paper, so she dusted off her hands and went to answer the door. When two dusty dwarves stood on her stoop, she was momentarily gobsmacked. In that moment, they bowed in unison and piped, "Fili-" "and Kili" "--at your service." Then they were dumping weapons into her arms and pushing past her into the house, tracking in mud on their dirty old boots! Then the blonde one cried, "Mm! Dinner smells delicious, are we still in time?" And they stormed the kitchen.

Lobelia squeaked and dumped the armload of swords and knives and other unmentionables onto the bench and started to run after them. But then the bell rang again, and this time her heart was impugned by three dwarves, one very healthily round, one with a ridiculous hat, and one-- with-- an axe head in his head! And then they were bowing and pushing inside, and there was a great cheer from the kitchen. Lobelia ran in and found Otho backed into a corner, holding Lotho, who clapped and cheered when the dwarves threw-- threw! the good china around the table. Lobelia took a deep breath to shriek, but then the bell rang again! and she stomped to answer the door, ready to give the next one a piece of her mind, but-- oh.

The dwarf in her doorway was big and mean and covered in tattoos, and his arms, as they were folded across his chest, looked more like hams than arms. She froze and he growled, "Are the others in? I hope I'm not too late." Then he pushed inside without so much as a by-your-leave. Lobelia mutely followed him back to the kitchen, where he was greeted with a roar, and then he shouted, "Is tha' et? Tha's not gonna be enough!" And with another cheer, the dwarves invaded her pantry. She ran after them, trying to shout at them to get out, to put that back, to don't you even think it, no no not that one, no don't open that one--! And then the bell rang again, twice before she could reach it, and she was very red in the face when she opened the door to seven-- seven dwarves, and one of them was vaguely familiar. Six of them just rushed right past her, but the last, the one with the black hair and beard, stood there in the evening light and looked down his nose at her, like she was scum on his hideous old boot. Lobelia drew herself up and shrieked, "I demand that you leave this instant. I will call the sherrifs, I'll call the Bounders! You-- you are all tresspassing!"

But then the dark dwarf just smirked and said, "So are you."
And all the color left Lobelia's face. Then she realized this one was so familiar because this one had already been here the year before. Those blue eyes pinned her in place, and then the dwarf stepped inside.

"Dís! You're just in time for dinner," the dwarf-giant shouted from the kitchen. "But Bilbo's food was better!" Lobelia stiffened. The dark haired dwarf smirked at her again over his shoulder. Lobelia stomped her foot and ran after them.

Her kitchen was in complete disarray. They'd dragged in extra card tables and mismatched chairs, and then the blonde one said with his mouth full, "Wait til you have Bilbo's seedcake, Mother."

And it took Lobelia a moment to realize that that wasn't some awful dwarven name, that this was that dwarf's mother. She and Otho huddled in the corner, but the dwarf lady just waved a hand (holding a knife) and called, "Don't let us keep you from dinner, take a seat!" Otho put Lotho in the high chair between them, trying to screen their son from view as much as possible. And then it was a free for all. The dwarves threw their food instead of passing it, chewed with their mouths open, shouted across the table with their mouths full, belched and quaffed and slurped and Lobelia wanted to just scream!

Then that dratted raven landed in the window, and the dwarves finally quieted down. Dís cried, "Roäc! What news?" like some simpleton, as if the bird could--

"The Queen-to-be has been found--" the raven said, and the dwarves let out a cheer that shook dust from the rafters. "The King wants you all at the Great Smials now."

Dís shouted over the cheers, "You heard the boss!" And then the dwarves stood and started clearing the table, singing.

"Chip the glasses and crack the plates!
Blunt the knives and bend the forks!
That's what Miss Lobelia hates!
Dump the crocks in a boiling bowl;
Pound them up with a thumping pole;
And when you've finished, if any are whole,
Send them down the hall to roll!
That's what Miss Lobelia hates!
So, carefully! carefully with the plates!"

Then they were gone. Lobelia and Otho stared around the empty, spotless smial, and Otho fainted.

-----

After Thorin sent Roäc off to Bag End, they headed up to the Great Smials. Thorin explained, "I've been sending letters to Bag End since last spring. They all went unanswered, and so Dís stopped by when that awful hobbit tried to say you were dead--"

Bilbo ground out, "I will gut her."

He squeezed her hand. "Shh, ghivashel, we didn't listen to her. No matter how thin the thread, we dwarrow hold out hope until we can know for sure either way." She stared up at him, a little teary-eyed, and he was very nearly distracted. Then he shook himself and continued, "It wasn't until November, when a caravan we'd thought lost finally returned--"
"Eikar? Oh how is the old rascal?" she asked gleefully.

He tucked a curl behind her ear and continued as if she hadn't interrupted "--when he told us you'd gone to Rivendell instead. Then Elrond was tight-lipped about your whereabouts, and so, here I am."

Bilbo looked up at him, still a bit dazed. "And here you are."

Then Isengrim asked, "There was a word you said, earlier-- 'az-laugh.' You said it like it meant something important. What does that mean?"

Thorin hesitated, clearly (to Bilbo) torn between keeping his language secret and being open with her family. Then he said, "Betrothed."

Bilbo yelped, "What? When did that happen?"

Thorin blushed, his round ears turning pink, and he just said, "Laketown."

Bilbo pressed, "But-- you never asked-- that!"

Thorin looked confused. "But I couldn't ask that, you're a dam-- a lass, I mean. Female. Um."

She stopped and stared at him as Gorbadoc barked out a laugh, "Was that ever in doubt?"

And Thorin said a little grumpily, "Well how was I to tell the difference between hobbits? She had short hair and ran after us in trousers and the wizard introduced her to us as a Master Burglar, how was I to know that was a title for prowess, not pleasantries?"

Gorbadoc started to grouse, "Burglar--?"

But Bilbo, who'd stood there blinking through all this as this revelation sank in, cried, "Wait-- is that why you were such a bear after Rivendell?"

He muttered into his beard, blushing, "I'd just worked up the resolve to approach you, and then you come out in the gown of Durin V's wife--"

And Bilbo just squawked, "In what?"

"And so then I realized I'd have to wait til you approached me--"

Isengrim shook his head and chuckled, "You two need to learn how to talk, Holy Mother." Then Bilbo laughed a little hysterically and tugged on Thorin's hand again.

Mirabella, the meddler, clapped her hands together and asked, "So what was it that made you want to approach her in the first place?"

Thorin smiled fondly. "She snuck an apple to her pony."

Mirabella laughed and asked, "What, really? That was it?"

Thorin shrugged. "She didn't even like the pony, and she knew our rations were tight, yet she did it anyway, as an act of kindness. And, of course, then shortly after that, she saved our lives with her quick wit, where all our arms and might had failed. She is kind, and cunning, and brave. I could ask for little else." He rubbed his thumb over her knuckles and she tried to clear the lump out of her throat without drawing attention to herself.

Then they were to the gates, and Bilbo started fretting, "Um, maybe we'd better call for some tea."

Uncle, will you fetch a tea service?"

"No," Isengrim said simply. "They'll be in the back garden, I bet. Let's go."

Bilbo stared at him, pleading with her eyes for a few moments alone, but the evil old bat just laughed and waved her on.

Thorin asked cautiously, "--Bilbo?"

Isengrim chuckled around his pipe, which he packed as they walked around the wide hill the Smials were built into. "No, my girl, I will not be missing this for the world. Your mother would be fit to be tied and'd string me up by my neckerchief if I went to go get tea now." Mirabella snorted and Gorbadoc rolled his eyes.

The sound of fauntlings playing grew louder as they rounded the back of the hill. They opened the gate to the back garden, and then Hiraeth saw Bilbo. She shrieked, "Mama!" and squirmed out of Primula's arms and ran as fast as her little off-balance toddler legs would carry her. Bilbo reached down and swooped her up into her arms, her black curls bouncing like a dark halo around her head, and then Thorin sat down hard in the grass.

Bilbo looked down and asked, "Thorin? Thorin?" Then she sank to her knees beside him, Hiraeth clutching the collar of her shirt.

He stared into Durin Blue eyes. The world fell apart beneath his feet and was remade in the same breath.

Then Bilbo patted his cheek, and he stared at her in wonder, unable to speak. Then she beamed at him through happy tears and put their daughter in his arms.

For a moment, Hiraeth stared up at him, not sure what to make of this stranger, but then she reached out and tugged on one of his braids. He laughed through his tears, and he ever-so-gently pressed his forehead to hers.

Then he straightened and turned and pulled Bilbo down by her shirt collar into a fierce kiss. After a moment he pressed his forehead to hers and breathed, "Bilbo. What's his name?"

Bilbo blinked. "Her name is Hiraeth."

Thorin choked on a breath. And for a long moment, he could not speak. He just looked at his daughter and ran gentle fingertips over her round ears, her button nose, and the peachfuzz on her cheeks. She still hadn't let go of his braid, and now she was chewing on the end. Bilbo ran a hand down his hair and gently pulled the braid from Hiraeth's mouth. Finally, he regained control of his breathing and said softly, wonder and awe trembling in his voice, "I am blessed beyond measure. But... How?"

Incredulous, she asked, "My goodness, do you really need to be told how?"

He choked on a laugh, "No, I mean, clearly she's mine, but how? It's been scarcely a year and a half, and clearly she's not-- new."

"Dearest, she's turning a year old in four days."

"What?"

"What do you mean 'what?' I went a month overdue-- I nearly died giving birth to her!"
"--What?!

He clutched her hand.

Bilbo smoothed his hair back from his forehead. "I'm fine. The elves kept me from coming to too much harm, so just remember that you owe Elrond for that."

Thorin still looked poleaxed. "--But, Bilbo, it takes a dam two years to--"

She yelped, "Two years? Two mortal years of pregnancy? Oh sweet Mother-- Thorin, hobbits carry for six months."

For a moment they just stared at each other. Then he cupped her cheek and asked, "Are you sure you're alright?"

She leaned into the contact and nodded. Then she sighed. Embarrassment colored her tone when she said, "I suppose she's going to need a different name now."

Thorin rumbled, "What? Why? It's a beautiful name."

Bilbo's mouth twisted. "I-- was a little-- alright fine, I was upset when I named her. Her name means 'homesickness--'" Thorin's broken expression pulled at her heart, so she quickly added, "and now that we're going to be going home-- it won't fit."

Thorin bounced his daughter on his knee and she giggled madly. He said thoughtfully, "Hiraeth, Hiraeth--" she watched him intently. "Raeth, Raetha. What do you think of that, my nâtha?"

Bilbo stifled a laugh and Thorin asked her why with a look. "Thorin, Raetha means 'to climb' in... Sindarin."

He pursed his lips and looked back at his daughter (his daughter) and eventually he shrugged. "I can thank the elves that the both of you are here for me to find. And to climb-- to strive and to overcome, those are respectable dwarrow qualities. Raetha fits, as well."

Then Hiraeth-- Raetha sneezed full in Thorin's face. He froze. Bilbo laughed and pulled out a handkerchief and said, "Oh love, you have no idea what you're getting into, now."

He accepted the handkerchief but resisted her attempts to take her out of his arms. "Yes I do. I know Fíli and Kíli are grown now, but it wasn't that long ago that they were bairns, too." He also wiped Raetha's nose and tucked her into the crook of his arm.

While Bilbo stared in horror at the thought of those two as toddlers, Mirabella's laughter pulled them out of their own little world. She told them, "As lovely as this is, you'll have time to get reacquainted later. There's still a party to plan for. Bilbo, lass, you better go on to the kitchens to talk to Gladiola about the plans."

Bilbo got up with a sigh. "Will you be alright on your own?"

Thorin nodded and Hir-- Raetha snuggled into his chest. Then Isengrim waved him over to a table set out on the lawn, and he carefully got his feet under him. It was a little difficult standing with one arm around Raetha, but she seemed to think the acrobatics were a fun game. Isengrim patted the wooden bench next to him, so he sat.

With a pipe in one hand, Isengrim indicated the others at the table. "This is Isumbras, Hildigrim, Rosa, Hildibrand, Donnamira, and Isenbold."

Then Mirabella came hurrying back with a tray and an, "Alright, she's well and distracted, who's got
the shovel?"

Thorin clammed up like a turtle, and this only seemed to amuse the Tooks even more. They kept peppering him with questions, and he kept getting wound tighter and tighter, til even Raetha noticed his discomfort. She let out a wail and glowered at them all. Then she patted Thorin's chest and ordered, "Mine."

Rosa and Mirabella and Donnamira lost it.

Isengrim finally got hold of his chuckles and apologized. "We don't mean any harm, lad. If we did, ya wouldn't be sitting here."

Thorin sighed and rumbled, "I'd deserve it."

Isengrim leveled him with a stern look. "And don't you forget it. You won't be getting another chance like this." Thorin nodded and Isengrim nodded. "Besides, we're just looking out for our favorite niece."

Thorin nodded again, then froze. "Wait-- are you all siblings??"

Then one of the tweens came running down the path and huffed, "There's a troupe of dwarves here to see the Thain, sir."

Isengrim slapped the tabletop and cried, "Well bring em around, Falco. And then run and tell Gladiola to be ready for company, there's a lad."

Thorin hitched Raetha up higher in his arms, heart in his throat, and she took hold of one of his braids again. Then his Company rounded the hill. Dwalin led the charge, yelling, "Where is she! Where's our Burglar? I'mna kill 'er!" But when he saw Thorin stand, and when he saw who was in his arms, Dwalin shut his mouth with a snap and pressed both hands to his mouth with a muffled "Ooph!"

Then one of the fauntlings yelped indignantly, "Kill her? You can't kill Miss Bilbo! Get 'im!" And then an army of fauntlings swarmed Dwalin's legs, yelling.

Dwalin almost toppled, but he planted his feet wide and roared with faux-agony, "Aghh, yeh've got me-- I yield, I yield!" And the fauntlings all cheered.

But before he could disentangle himself, Dís pushed past him and froze. "It cannot be--"

Fili and Kíli came bounding up behind her, and they yelped. Bofur and Bifur came running when they heard the commotion, and then Ori, and then the rest of the Company. Bofur doffed his hat, and Dori had both hands clapped over his mouth. Dwalin waded up, tears streaming down his cheeks, and he slowly approached with his arms hesitantly outstretched.

Thorin boosted her up higher in his arms again, feeling her grip on his braid. He could feel his cheeks hurting from the smile he just could not stop and said, "My kin, my friends, this is my daughter, Raetha."

Chapter End Notes
"Master Baggins!" Thorin barked when the burglar just walked away from his pony. They had stopped to make camp for the night, but they'd barely made it past the Downs. It chafed him that they hadn't made it nearly far enough for his liking that day. And the burglar rode so poorly his jaw hurt just from watching. And then he went and-- neglected the creature. And so, all this irritation boiled over into that rough call.

The burglar flinched but then squared his shoulders. He turned and, oh the insolence, said, "Yes?" with his brows arched with delicate grace.

Thorin stared daggers at him. "See to your pony. I'll not let you mistreat--"

Then the halfling paled, blinking rapidly, and choked, "Mistreat-- what? What did I do?"

Thorin ground out, "What didn't you do?"

He gasped, "No, nonono, tell me-- I couldn't have known, I've never ridden a pony-- what've I done to Myrtle?"

Thorin blinked, a little surprised at how upset the halfling was. He explained gruffly, "You didn't take off her tack or brush her down. Other than your dismal riding skills, you haven't done anything to harm her. But not grooming her--"

The halfling interrupted. "How then? How do I groom her?"

Thorin blinked again. He'd thought the halfling, with his airs and graces, with his round middle and soft hands, would try to say this was beneath him, but-- here he was, practically pleading to be taught. Thorin realized he was staring and cleared his throat. Then he stepped close to show him the straps and buckles that needed to be undone, how to properly store the tack, and how to run the brush down the pony's flanks.

When they were done, the halfling insisted he help brush 'Minty' down as well. "I'm sure I'll get the hang of it eventually, but I need all the practice I can get, and it's only fair that I help you when you helped me."

Thorin stared and tried to unstick the lump in his throat.
Bilbo ran a gentle hand down the pony's nose and asked quietly, "What'm I doing wrong riding? I'll admit, I'll take any pointers on how to make it more comfortable. After today I'm a bit surprised I can walk at all, to be honest."

The pause dragged out a little too long and his face started to fall. Thorin had to clear his throat and hastily added, "You hold yourself too stiffly. And don't let there be any space between your saddle and your seat." Then the halfling blinked rapidly and flushed deeply pink and, unbidden, the memory of his trousers pulled taught over his round backside flashed before his eyes, and he ducked his head. He cleared his throat. "As with all things, you can get better with practice." He tried to say it firmly, but no-- no that didn't help. So he nodded stiffly and stalked off.

The halfling didn't belong out here, anyway. He was too polished, too refined, from the tips of his fussily tied neckerchief to his shining brass buttons. He was made for his plush armchair and his warm hearth and his well-stocked pantry, not this rocky bed and a biscuit of cram. Thorin grit his teeth and tried to put him from his mind.

The next day though, when Thorin was riding guard at the back of the line, that damned halfling finally relaxed into his saddle. Instead of fighting to hold himself stiffly upright, he opened his hips and started to move with the motions. Thorin couldn't tear his gaze away, not from the way his hips rocked-- would he rock forward like that, thrusting deep? He could feel a blush creep up his ears, but he couldn't-- would the burglar straddle him, hips splayed wide across his broader thighs, and bounce in his lap?

"Am I doing better?"

Thorin started and tried to cover his shock at being caught staring, but Bilbo-- Master Baggins just looked over his shoulder at him expectantly. So Thorin nodded with as much dignity as he could muster and said roughly, "Much improvement."

The halfling nodded and quickly turned forward again, but not fast enough to hide his blush. Thorin bit his cheek and fought to turn his mind back to the road.

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Before Bilbo went inside, she caught sight of Thorin and His Raetha sitting with her assembled aunts and uncles, and her heart skipped a beat. This was real, this was happening. She took a deep, shakey breath and pushed the round door open into the cool back mudroom. Dozens of fauntlings' raincoats hung from pegs along the wall, and she thumped her walking stick into the umbrella rack in the corner. She started to hang her bag from a peg, but stopped. She had an idea, but she needed to swing by her room first.

The kitchens were the heart of the Great Smials, and they were run by the clever, fastidious Gladiola Took, a third cousin of some sort, whose knarled old hands still kneaded the best dough in the Shire. When Bilbo slunk into the kitchens, trying to stay out of the way of the small army's last assaults on dinner. The smell of roasting meat welcomed her, but there was so much bustle, surely she should come back another time--

But Gladiola saw her from behind her cutting board and cried, "Bilbo, dear, sit, sit! Let me get you a cup of tea, or do you want a small brandy? my goodness your cheeks are positively flushed-- Eh! What'd I just tell you, now? Sit!" She wiped her hands on the dish towel slung over her shoulder. Flour dusted one round cheek. A few grey curls peeped out from under her starched white mob cap. And she was absolutely not going to take any other answer, so Bilbo took a seat in the nook by the fire. Gladiola smiled fondly down at her and set a tea set down in front of her. She also reached for a dusty glass bottle, but Bilbo waved her off. She sipped her tea thankfully.
Duty discharged, Gladiola returned to her chopping block. She called to Bilbo, "So how can I help you, dear?"

Bilbo called back, "Mirabella said to go over some more of the plans for Hir-- for the birthday party."

"What, now? My goodness, what was Mirabella thinking, right before dinner?" Bilbo flushed and tried to hide her face in her teacup. Gladiola noticed and waved her hand, "Tosh, you're fine. Well, while you're here, do you know if she prefers strawberry or huckleberry jam?"

Then Falco came running in, "Missus Gladiola, Missus Gladiola, there's dwarves here for dinner!"

Bilbo dribbled tea out of her lips and scrambled to blot the mess out of her lap with a napkin. Gladiola wrang her hands, looking around the kitchen, and cried, "Oh, how many?"

Bilbo peeped, "Thirteen."

Gladiola's eyes widened.

Falco said, "No, fourteen."

Bilbo cried, "Fourteen?"

Gladiola threw her hands in the air and bustled off into the cold pantry, fretting loudly about not having time to prepare a proper meal for an extra fourteen. Then she called over her shoulder, "Bilbo, be a dear, these dwarves must be thirsty if they just got here, bring them some tea to tide them over till dinner."

Bilbo started loading one of the larger trays with more cups and a family sized tea pot. She picked out her favorite Shire blend and set that brewing while she piled on a selection of biscuits and tartlets and crumpets from the glass cabinets that were kept stocked for this purpose. Then she hefted the tray with practiced ease, and Falco held the door for her.

Her heart was in her throat when she stepped back outside and saw them all. What if they were mad at her? What if they still blamed her for--?

"Mister Boggins!" Kíli cried, and then they saw her.

She was barely able to cry, "Let me set this down first!" when Fíli expertly swiped the tray from her hands, and then she was beset by a pile of yelling, back slapping, hugging, forehead-knocking dwarves. She gave back as good as she got, swatting the bouncing flaps of Bofur's hat, patting Dwalin's cheek, and hugging Balin tight when she saw the tears in his old eyes; then Kíli elbowed them all away and wrapped both arms around her tight, and he buried his face on her shoulder. Then his shoulders were shaking, and she could hear his muffled refrain, "I thought we'd lost you, thought you didn't make it, we're sorry-- we're sorry--"

And so she ran her hand down the back of his unruly hair and she shushed him, "Oh, my boy, oh my lad, it's alright, I'm alright, shh now."

Through the crowd of dwarves, she saw Thorin watching her with his heart on his face, and oh how could she have ever thought him cold and stern? But next to him, a familiar stranger held Raetha in his broad arms, and Raetha had one hand wrapped around a braid in his black beard.

Then Kíli snuffled and straightened. Bilbo cupped the back of his head, pressed his forehead to hers, and said, "Now, don't you ever scare me again like Ravenhill, my lads, do you hear me?" She squeezed his head once and let him go. Then Fíli hugged her too.
Kíli mumbled, "Yes, Auntie." And then she had to blink back tears.

Fíli grinned down at her and nodded. Then he tucked his arm through hers and said, "Come on, you need to meet Amad."

Together, they pulled her to the new dwarf, and Bilbo realized that those features were familiar. Then Thorin shooed the boys away, wrapped an arm around her waist, and rumbled, "Bilbo, this is my sister, Dís."

Dís smiled a little and said, "So, this is the hobbit."

Bilbo stared. One giggle escaped, and then she had to turn and hide her face in Thorin's arm as the reality of it all hit her.

Dís blinked, confused, and then Raetha reached out and asked, "Mama, hold me?"

"Of course, darling." Bilbo sniffled and got hold of her giggles as she took her daughter back into her arms. A little breathlessly, she told Dís, "I'm sorry, it's just-- oh you are such siblings." Then Bilbo hid her face by nuzzling Raetha's hair.

Thorin explained, "I said the same thing when we first met, too, that's all." Dís arched her brows in understanding.

Bilbo glanced back at the picnic table, where the Company were happily fighting for the almond cookies, and she said, "Please, come have some tea while you still can." To Thorin, she warned, "They're not to strip the pantry bare this time."

He nodded gravely and ran his thumb up and down her side.

Dís noticed and rolled her eyes. "Mahal preserve us--"

Thorin grinned and crooned, "Turnabout is fair play, dear sister."

Dís just grinned wolfishly back and plucked Raetha back into her arms. "Yes it is. Now I'm the aunt." She playfully tapped Raetha's nose and the fauntling giggled. Then Dís cackled at Thorin's expression and walked over to the table.

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After dinner, after supper, after stories and songs were shared by the fire, Raetha started nodding off in Thorin's arms. Bilbo stood and reached for her, but his hands tightened ever so slightly, so she hid her smile and bade him to stand and follow her. The rest of the Company quietly said goodnight.

Bilbo led him through the tunnels, the light from her candle cradling them, his be-stockinged feet padding soundlessly over the rugs. Then she opened her door, lit her lamps, and Thorin carried Raetha inside.

Her guest quarters were small; a small hearth with two armchairs beside it and a bookshelf that separated the small sitting room space from her bed. For a moment, he froze, because they were finally alone, and the moment seemed to be both too much and not nearly enough, not at all, and then she went through a side door. She paused and looked back at him, where he stood in the doorway just trying to breathe.

She smiled softly, so softly, and quietly said, "Come here, let's get her to bed."

And he went to her, to a small room fit with a wooden crib, a changing table and a rocking chair, lit
by the soft light of the candle and the fading light of the evening. Bilbo reached into a drawer for a tiny nightgown. She asked, "Does she need to be changed again?"

He shook his head, cradling Raetha's sleeping warmth. Again, she tried to reach for her, but he shook his head again and pleaded, "Let me?"

Then Bilbo had to blink back tears, because, oh, he wanted, he wanted to be a father, and then she felt buffeted by a wave of guilt. It was all her fault; he had missed so much, so many of her firsts, but this was his first. He didn't see her turmoil. She watched his big, gentle hands deftly handle Raetha's tiny, tiny clothing, without waking her, which was a feat. She watched as he ran a gentle hand down his daughter's cheek, how he checked that the latches on the crib were secure, and then they quietly tiptoed out, and quietly, quietly shut the door.

For a moment, they stared at each other, listening, then they sighed with deep relief when she didn't wake. Bilbo set the candle on the dresser and folded her shawl over the back of a chair. Then he kept staring, at the way the oil lamps made her glow, at the curve of her neck as it disappeared beneath her collar, at the way her curls framed her face and tumbled over her shoulders. He reached over and tucked one curl behind her ear, fingers ghosting over the point, and he felt her shiver. Then he trailed the backs of his fingers down her neck, and she tilted her head, dazed. She felt a dim echo of the memory of fear, but it was out of place here. When she licked her lips, he bent down and kissed her softly. She tucked her hands beneath his coat and wrapped her arms around his waist, but his mail was hard beneath her fingers, and it was just not fair-- her breath hitched, and when he brushed his tongue against her lips, she opened her mouth to his. He cradled the back of her head with one big palm and held her waist with the other, the heat from his hand soaking through her clothes to her skin, and then she broke away to whisper, "Stay. Please, stay."

He kissed her ear, her jaw, the scrape of his beard thrilling through her, and replied just as quietly, "My bag's in the guest rooms--"

She gave a small whine as he sucked a little on her earlobe, "Then go, hurry, but come back."

A groan rumbled softly in his chest. He stole one last kiss and clearly wanted to say something, but she lifted her brows. He sighed and pulled away, trailing lingering fingers over her sides, and she bit back a sigh, because-- because if he didn't go now-- she wouldn't let him. So she pushed at his shoulders and repeated, "hurry."

And he was out the door. She started to pace. Should she change into her nightgown? No. Oh for-- he'd forgotten the candle. Oh, but wait, that didn't matter, he didn't need one. Should she put the kettle on? No. She went back to the bed and turned the covers down. Was she being too forward--?

Then her door opened and he slipped back inside, pack slung over one broad shoulder, and he shut the door behind him with care. He set his bag down gently on the floor next to her dresser, and she was wringing her hands. Then he stepped into her space and pulled her into a steady, warm embrace. For a moment, she just stood there, a little confused, because he hadn't picked right up where they'd left off, but then she wrapped her arms around his waist again. She took a deep, shuddering breath, and there it was, the very smell of him filled her nose, surrounding her, and maybe they'd saved each other's lives so many times, but this, this was safety. She snuggled her face into his shoulder.

He ran a hand down her hair and said quietly, "What you said earlier--" he paused and she pulled back just far enough to look up at him, but he blinked and hid his gaze from her. Before she could prompt him for more, he added, "About not-- not knowing we're in azlâf-- I won't hold you to it if you don't--"

Bilbo pressed a finger to his lips. "--There's no one else for me, Thorin." He kissed her fingertip and
her eyes fluttered shut. She took her hand back so she'd be able to think. "I want-- I'd be honored to spend my-- my life at your side. I just-- I would never have had the nerve to ask for that if I'd known--"

He brushed his thumb over the top of her ear, and she tilted her head back into his cradling hand, already tingling in her skin. He asked curiously, "Why wouldn't you have had the nerve? I was being almost-- shamelessly forward."

She blinked a few times and asked, "Forward?"

He blushed to the tips of his round ears and his he ducked his head. "I do apologize for my behavior in Thranduil's dungeons."

"But, why would you need to apo-- oh! Dearest--" she cupped his cheek. "The same reason you felt you couldn't approach me because I'm a-- dam? Is that your term? No, for the same reason. Hobbit lasses are courted, we don't ever pursue. I was being most appallingly forward in Laketown-- but I will not apologize for it." His arm around her waist tightened, and she huffed a quiet laugh. "My goodness, how long would we have danced around each other, otherwise?" She ran her fingers down one of the braids that framed his face.

He smiled down at her like she was his world; good gracious he should not be allowed to look at her like that, even now. She had to duck her head to hide her blush, but he lifted her chin with his calloused fingertips, and he asked, "Is that how it's done among Hobbits?" She licked her lips and nodded slightly. His voice was like gravel, low and rough, when he said, "Then I will honor your ways. Bilbo-- sanzeuh, will you marry me?"

Unable to speak, she nodded, and he lifted her into his arms to kiss her and kiss her and kiss her. She clung to his neck, hands buried in his untamed hair. He broke away to gasp, "After all this, I don't want a life without you in it." And she kissed that thought right off his lips.

Her heart was too full. She had too much to say and no way to say it. So all she said, all she could say, was his name against his lips, again and again, "Thorin--"

Her window was still open from the warm day, and the sounds of crickets and frogs and the robins filled the room along with their quiet gasps and rustling clothes. Finally, she whispered in his ear, "Will you make me be forward again?"

He bit back a choked groan and whispered back, "What if I like to hear you ask?"

She grinned up at him, eyes glimmering in the lamplight. "Would you have me beg?"

But he shook his head. "You need only ever ask and I will provide." Then he brushed a series of light kisses over her bare jaw. She moaned, and yet he still did not move. He said with a smile, "But you do need to ask."

Bilbo arched against him, "Thorin, please."

He only chuckled darkly.

She tossed her head. "Oh, you would have me beg."

He rumbled low in her ear, "You need never beg, I will never deny you-- but 'please' what? No, I want to hear your words. Where's your quicksilver tongue now, my Burglar?" His hands holding her hips tightened, thumbs stroking hot even through her skirts, and he kissed her neck, nosing right beneath her collar, beard scraping roughly over her skin.
She groaned and arched her head back to give him more room to kiss, words lodged in her throat. It was too much, he was too much—and then she felt the barest hint of teeth. Her toes curled and she pleaded, "Please, please take me! Take me to our bed. Claim me and keep me--"

And her back was on the mattress, her head not quite on the pillow, but he was pressing her down into the sheets with the force of his kiss. She opened to him and revealed his weight, his overwhelming solidity, at being pinned beneath him. His hair fell around her like a sheet, cocooning her in a space wholly occupied by him. Her hands scrabbled across his shoulders, but his mail was still on, and she groaned in frustration, "Too many clothes--"

A low sound rumbled through his chest, almost a growl, and he stood once more, shedding coat and armor, and she sat up to untie the laces at her back with hands made clumsy with haste. Then he flung his belt toward the pile by the dresser, buckle clunking too loudly, and he kicked off his pants. Then his hands were back on her, pressing her to lie back, sliding her skirts up and around her waist, callouses catching on her skin as he ran his hands up her thighs. He guided her to wrap her legs around his waist, and oh she could feel him pressing against her, hard and hot and then he pressed her down with a searing kiss.

Then he ran a hand down her neck, and she shivered and arched into his touch. He deftly slipped her first button open, then the next, and then he saw the glittering neckline of the mithril armor against her skin. He froze, then tore his gaze away, back up to meet her eyes, half-hooded and burning as she watched him. His hair fanned out across the sheets, gleaming like copper in the lamplight, and he crushed his lips to hers with such desperate sweetness. Then she arched her hips up to meet his and she cried again, "Thorin, please--!"

And he scrambled to undo the rest of her buttons, to untuck her blouse, to slide it down her arms, but he didn't move to pull the mithril off her. His hands gripped her waist, hot through the fine links. She arched her back and tried to beg him to have off with all of it, so she could feel his chest against hers, but no. Her skirts were rucked up around her hips, and he just grinned at her when he slipped her petticoats and smallclothes down her thighs and off first one foot, then the other. Then he shifted in the bed to pull his off, too. She threw her head back against the sheets and clapped her hands over her mouth to keep quiet. Then he wrapped one rough palm around her ankle, thumb stroking into that little hollow, and she could barely muffle her keening whine. He stroked up her calf, up the inside of her thigh, and she spread her legs even wider. He surged forward, pulling both her hands from her mouth and pinning them to the sheets above her head, and pressed her down with searing kisses. Then she felt him, hot and blunt between her thighs, and she wrapped both legs around his waist. His breath caught in his throat, and then he began to push in.

She arched her back, caught between trying to get away—it was too much, it was overwhelming—and trying to push for more, faster. Her mouth opened wide but she wouldn't let a sound out.

Thorin dipped his head to her ear, panting breath hot and wet, and he told her, "I want to hear you."

And he was still slowly, slowly sinking into her.

She tossed her head side to side. "Quiet-- have to be quiet--" she whispered brokenly.

"Then soon—soon--" he rumbled, and he snapped his hips, finally seated deep, and his stones slapped against her bottom, ever so, and she choked back a wail. He grunted and went on, "When I have you in my bed, when I can hear your voice echo off the stones--" he pulled back and surged forward again, and she gasped when she felt him brush against that spot inside.

She tugged to get her hands free, to run her nails down his back, to pull his hair, to clutch at his arms, anything; but he held her down and it thrilled her. He moved within her slowly, as inexorable as the tide; and she gave herself over to him. Then he reached down and lifted one of her legs even higher,
her knee hooked over his elbow, and then he was driving in even deeper, and she let out a wet gasp and tossed her head.

A fine blush covered his cheeks when he pleaded, "Like this? Do you like it like this?"

She choked out, "Yes, oh yes-- Thorin, please!"

He rumbled in her ear, his chest vibrating against hers, "Please what, Burglar? What have I told you?"

Bilbo wailed, "Please, more! Like this, but more. I need--"

He kept his pace, his voice deep and rough in her ear, "What do you need? More what? Be clear, Melhekînh, I haven't driven words from you yet."

"Harder!" She whispered into his hair. "Faster!" She pleaded against his lips, and he kissed her fiercely as he obeyed.

But then she gasped in a wholly different way, "Wait!"

He stopped at once. "What?" he asked, concern lining his voice.

"I'm not-- on anything--"

"What?" Now he was genuinely confused.

She freed her hands and brushed his hair back from his face. "Thorin, once was enough to-- to catch, but it's too soon for me for-- for another child--"

"--Oh!"

Oh goodness, he seemed absolutely floored by the possibility, and Bilbo knew. She lifted her hips up to meet his again and she asked, "Oh, did you want to fill me again?" He shuddered and his hips snapped forward again. She moaned and added, "Did you want to come in me? Fill me up til I'm swollen with your seed?" He choked on a gasp and clutched her hips with both hands. She reached up to bury her fingers in his hair, keening, "Oh heavens I want that too, but not today, not yet-- but someday, I want you to--" And he crushed his lips to hers, pulled out and thrust into his fist a few times, and came, spurting white streaks across the mithril covering her belly.

He rested his forehead against hers, panting. "You are wicked."

She snickered but shifted her hips, blood still flowing hot in her veins. But he dragged one finger through the mess on her mail and looked a question at her. She nodded vaguely at the other door off her room, and he shakily stood and tottered over. She took the opportunity to scoot up the bed and pile her pillows under her shoulders. He opened the door to find a small water closet, washed his hands carefully, and ran one of the hand towels under the tap. He used the damp cloth to wipe away most of the mess. Then grinned down at her, all mischief, and asked, "Where were we?" before kissing her silly.

He reached between her legs, one big finger slipped in, and his thumb rubbed over-- over-- that place, and she clutched at his arms. Then he slid down the bed, pressing kisses to her neck and collar, to her breasts through the mail, and then he nudged her legs over his shoulders and-- and kissed her where his thumb had been. She choked on his name. He looked up at her from between her thighs, licked his lips, and asked quietly, "Like this?" She nodded, breathing hard. He quirked his finger inside her, curling right around some place that made her toss her head back with a moan, but
he grated out, "Tell me--"

She groaned, "Yes, yes, like that--" and his fingertip pulled at that spot again so she gasped, "There, right there. And your mouth, please--"

He grated out, "Yes--" then he licked and suckled and moved his hands, one inside her, the other reaching up to cup her breasts through the mithril, pinching and plucking her nipples into hardness through the fine mail, and Bilbo writhed, caught between the warring sensations. Then he slid another finger into her, and the stretch wasn't nearly enough, but he was pressing into that spot inside, and then his little finger brushed against her other-- oh!

"There!" she gasped, shocked at how good that felt, and she heard him grunt. When he just kept stroking, she begged, "Please!"

Oh, she burned when he looked up at her, his face still buried between her thighs, and she cried, "Please don't make me say it-- but, please-- there!"

But he knelt up and crawled up in bed, pinning her with his chest, and by all the graces, his beard was gleaming in the lamplight, and he rumbled in her ear, "Say it."

She shook her head, cheeks flaming.

He pressed wet, sucking kisses beneath her jaw, beard scraping across her tender skin, and he pleaded again, "Say it, and I'll do as you ask."

She hid her face, though he wasn't looking. He pressed a little firmer, brushing against her with every thrust of his other two fingers, and her good graces warred with her need for more until-- until-- She cried out, "Thorin, ah--!" Her back arched and she came with a wordless shout. He muffled her cries with a kiss. Panting, heart pounding, she dimly registered that she could taste herself on his lips, a foreign, delightful torment. Then he broke the kiss with a long sigh. He gently pulled his hand back and folded his arms under the pillow, snuggling down on top of her. She lazily brushed his hair back over his shoulder. He ran his fingers through her sweaty curls.

For a long moment, neither spoke, just let their hearts return to their normal pace and their breathing slow. Finally, he said rustily, "I don't have the bead I gave you before. It shouldn't bother me as much as it does... Of all the things I regret about my actions on that day, that barely even warrants mentioning, but I am sorry just the same." She pressed a kiss to his temple but didn't interrupt him. "Will you let me braid my bead into your hair once more?"

She nodded and let him.

Chapter End Notes

Ten thousand thanks to the Dwarrow Scholar!

(Edited to clear up some mixed tenses and typos)
A thump and a wail broke the early morning quiet. Thorin jerked awake, startling Bilbo awake, too. Then he heard a muffled, "Mama?" from the other room. Bilbo didn't quite whine, but she did bury her face in the pillow and let out a long sigh.

It took Thorin a moment to process where he was-- that Bilbo was indeed beside him, and that was his daughter who-- he heard more thumps, was she banging on the wall? The sky was barely pink. He threw off his blankets, taking care to keep Bilbo wrapped up, and he went searching to track down his clothes.

Bilbo sat up and yawned, "Gimme a mo' 'n I can get her."

He shrugged on his quilted undershirt and grunted, "Just the same, so can I." He picked up the mithril shirt from where it had pooled on the floor and folded it over the edge of the hamper. Then he stepped into his pants.

Bilbo swung her feet to the floor, stretched and tied her hair back into a loose braid, wincing when she accidentally caught on her azlâf braid. "She's still breastfeeding, you stub--"

He pressed a kiss to her sleep-soft lips and replied, "Then I can get her ready for breakfast." He pulled back to look more closely at her. "Why are you fighting me on this? I thought most parents wanted as much help as they could get."

Her eyes blazed, but she quickly hid the expression. He cupped her jaw and tilted her head up. She looked away, shoulders slumped, and she mumbled, "'M not used to sharing her."

Thorin ran a thumb across her cheek and bent down to press his forehead to hers. Then Raetha thumped on the wall again and let out a piteous wail. Bilbo patted his cheek and told him, "I know I'm being silly. Go to your daughter, Thorin."

He pulled back, tapped her nose and corrected, "Our daughter."

Bilbo blinked hard, and he pressed another kiss to her quivering lips. Then Raetha cried again, "Mama, up!" Bilbo flapped her hands at him and he went.

He poked his head into Raetha's room. She stood in her crib, reaching for the wall again, and she froze when she saw him. Her hair stuck out around her head like a curly black cloud. She blinked big blue eyes at him and peeped, "Mama?"

He smiled at her and slowly approached her crib, saying softly, "Adad, my nâtha. Are you ready to get up and play?"
She clutched the bars of her crib, watching him cautiously. Then she hid her face and wailed, "Nnno! Mama!"

Thorin blinked and tried not to be hurt, because he was still a relative stranger, but that did hurt. He kept his voice light and asked, "Would you like to go get Mama?"

Raetha just kept her face hidden and whined.

Thorin looked around helplessly. He saw a stuffed rabbit on top of a bin filled with toys, and he picked it up and asked, "Would you like to help Mr. Rabbit get your mama?"

Raetha just laid back down in her crib and wailed, "No! Mama!"

Then Bilbo hustled into the room, still reaching behind her back to tie the laces of her bodice, saying, "She's a little clingy in the mornings, don't worry."

Raetha popped back up and reached for her, crying loudly with tears running down her chubby cheeks. Thorin brushed Bilbo's hands and murmured over their daughter's noise, "I've got it, get her." He quickly tightened up and tied off her laces while Bilbo picked Raetha up from her crib.

"Ohh, such crocodile tears, you little faker," she crooned while she rocked Raetha. Thorin blinked at her, a little shocked, but after a few more hiccups, Raetha quieted down. Bilbo told her, "There's my lass. Your adad is here for you, too, now. Do you want to go to him now?" But Raetha just threw her arms around Bilbo's neck and whined into her chest. Bilbo sighed, "Fine, let's get you changed and fed and then you'll be in a better mood."

Thorin stayed out of Bilbo's way, but noted where she kept the clean diaper cloths and supplies. When she told him, "Pick out a dress from the dresser," he pulled out a tiny white, frilly affair, but she shook her head. "That's for her birthday party, pick something she can play in." He put that dress back and picked a tiny light brown one instead. He held it out so she could see, and she stuck out one hand for it while she kept a squirming Raetha from wriggling right off the changing table.

Once she was dry and dressed, Bilbo took her over to the rocking chair and opened her blouse. She cradled Raetha to her chest and sat back. Thorin watched, heart in his throat. Bilbo watched him as she ran a hand up and down their daughter's back. After a long moment, he croaked, "Is there anything I can do for you?"

She smiled softly and shook her head. "This'll take no more than fifteen minutes. How about you take a comb to your hair?"

His lips twisted sheepishly as he reached up to try to flatten his wild mane. She grinned fully back at him and he went to dig his combs from his bag.

He was just finishing off his last braid when Raetha came running out of her room and crawled into his lap. She fisted a hand in his shirt and looked up at the bead in his hand, asking, "What'at?"

He held out the mithril aglet and said gravely, "This is a Durin bead, our family bead." She tried to grab it, but he closed his fist. "Ah-ah, this is not for playing. Once we're back in Erebor, I'll make you your own." He slipped his braid through the bead and made sure it was secure. Then he ran his fingers through Raetha's flyaway halo, trying to feel for any tangles without fraying any of the curls. He would take no comb to her dry hair if he could help it. Then he tilted his head, studying her. He reached back for one of his clasps and used it to clip her hair into a small pony tail that stuck up straight from the top of her head. A deep swelling pride surged in his chest to see his clasp in her hair. Then Bilbo came out of Raetha's room, her now-mousey brown hair twisted into a low bun
with his braid clearly visible above her ear, and this-- this was too much. This was more than he could have ever asked for. His heart was too full.

Something of this must have shown on his face, because Bilbo smiled and shook her head at him. "Come on, let's go eat."

-----

Breakfast was served in one of the dining halls in the Great Smials, its long tables large enough to easily host the Company and her immediate aunts, uncles, and cousins. The permanent family quarters in the Smials each contained their own kitchens and dining rooms, but the Thain kept such communal halls of varying sizes for larger family events. Gladiola kept them well fed with a piping hot fry up: juicy sausages, tomatoes, platters of scrambled eggs, crispy hashbrowns, oatcakes, porridge with chopped apples and raisins, piles of buttered toast, jams of all sorts, fresh maple syrup, sliced cucumbers, berries, yogurt, carafes of fresh milk and coffee and tea. Bilbo tried to hide her smile at Dís' reaction to the spread, even after dinner and supper last night. She pulled out Raetha's high chair so Thorin could put her feet through the right holes. She spooned a bit of porridge into a bowl and handed it to Thorin. He looked baffled by the small portion and she looked pointedly at Raetha. Then she set about filling their plates. She knew he was particularly fond of oatcakes drenched in more syrup than was good for him, so she made a point of giving him extra fruit and vegetables to make up for it. She set down their plates and turned back to the sideboard, nonchalantly pouring a cup of tea from a teapot covered with a profusion of painted flowers in a hundred colors.

But Rosa saw and quipped, "Remember that takes a full cycle to take effect, lass." A few of Bilbo's age-mates let out hoots and whistles.

She turned beet red as she took a seat beside Thorin, knee bumping his beneath the table. He lifted his brows in question, and she just gave him a weighted look, and then he blushed to the tips of his round ears. He pressed his knee back against hers and offered Raetha a small spoonful of porridge.

The dwarves who were awake piled their plates excitedly, but thankfully they didn't seem to notice the commotion, and they refrained from throwing around any crockery.

Then breakfast was interrupted by a messenger from Michel Delving. "The Magistrate wants to reconvene after elevensies."

Bilbo nodded, a little shocked since she was so used to everything about this case being drug out to the last possible minute. She handed a coin to the lad absentmindedly and then he was gone.

Isengrim scraped honey over his toast and said, "Well my girl, now you can tell the Magistrate and get that over with."

Bilbo put down her tea cup with a clack. "No, I will not."

Isengrim huffed, "And why not?"

Thorin looked blankly between the two, but Raetha cried, "Mine!" when he held her spoon still for too long. He blinked and quickly gave her her mouthful. She promptly spat it out and whined, "No raisin." He looked at her sternly from under his heavy brows but she just giggled. He spent the rest of breakfast picking raisins out of her porridge.

Meanwhile, Bilbo explained, "I don't want this to happen to anyone else. If the court sets a precedent here, it'd be all the harder to change. Plus, I still don't want word to get out, since we still have to get back to Erebor, and I'd like to not have wargs on our tail the entire way--"
There was a loud clatter when Thorin dropped Raetha's spoon, splattering porridge all down his front. The fauntling clapped and cried, "Ta da!" He huffed a small chuckle at her reaction and wiped down his shirt, but then he stared back at Bilbo and grated, "What do you mean?"

Bilbo huffed and explained, "I kept Raetha's paternity secret, since I didn't fancy spending the rest of my life dodging potshots from every jumped up goblin who thought he'd try to wipe out the Line of Durin, too."

Thorin blanched. Isengrim rolled his eyes, "That cat's out of the bag, lass, you weren't exactly discreet in the middle of the street yesterday."

Bilbo plunked her face into her palms and heaved a frustrated groan.

Thorin croaked out, "Dwalin--" Dwalin leaned forward in his chair to see around Bombur and grunted. Thorin rapped out, "Speak to the guard. How quickly can we get more soldiers from Ered Luin? Think of a way to get them here secretly--"

The Thain countered, "Not secretly, give them a different reason. You'll need more guards to protect a trade caravan from the Shire, yes?"

Thorin and Dwalin exchanged a look, Thorin nodding slightly. Dwalin nodded back. How those two were able to have a complete conversation with just their eyebrows had long been a source of fascinated frustration to Bilbo. Then Thorin said to the Thain with deep-seated dignity, "Thank you."

Isengrim waved a hand at him. "It's come to even my sheltered ears that Erebor is looking to trade for food. I think we'll be able to come to a suitable agreement."

Bilbo huffed, "Back to the point, I still don't want the courts to think that it's acceptable to use a-- a lass' 'indiscretions' to take away her property." She flailed her hands to illustrate her point. "I mean, look at Isembold; they haven't disinherited him, despite his 'many descendants' without hint of a wife. Don't open that can of worms, Uncle. It's a double standard, and I'm not going to stand for it!" She stabbed her sausage vehemently.

Thorin placed his hand on hers, on top of the table, not to stop her or hold her back, but to show his support.

Isengrim sighed. "It's not me you have to convince, my girl."

She sighed too and deflated. "I know."

-----

Thorin had suffered the sight of Bilbo rushing off into Mirkwood, Sting raised, to attack the spiders so they would have time to escape. He'd seen her terror when she clung to the cliff, when the trolls had her by the limbs, when she entered the Secret Door to sneak past the dragon, when she'd found him on the ice on Ravenhill. He knew, he knew this petty court was nothing in the grand scheme of the things she had faced, but he still burned to see her up there, forced to defend her honor from that- that faithless cousin. Worse, she didn't want him to come to her aid, so he sat quietly in the audience, chewing the inside of his cheek, with the Thain and the sundry rubbernecking neighbors. He ignored their stares. The special session seemed to have captured the hobbits' interest, because the seats were full. He clenched his fists and watched his One, who stood and blazed before the Magistrate.

"This isn't a matter of 'impugning' the family's honor. This isn't a matter of Lobelia writing me out of her will. If that was the case, if she wanted to do so, that would be her right to share her estate with
who she sees fit. But that's not the case here. She wants to circumvent my mother's will, because I've acted in a manner she disapproves of. Her opinion has no bearing on whether I can keep Bag End. Are we to take the property from every lass who has a child out of wedlock? Are we to kick out every widow who has a child later on? Are we to check the hair and eye color of every fauntling born to be sure they're not from the wrong side of the sheets? My business is my own. Unless the misconduct she accuses me of involved me taking my partner against his will, there is no reason she should even have an opinion!

The Magistrate tapped his quill against his notes. "And you are not willing to name the father?"

Bilbo thumped her fist on the table. "No, I will not, your Honor-- for the sheer principle of the thing."

The Magistrate stared at her, glanced at Thorin sitting behind her, then asked, "Mr. Bracegirdle, do you or your client have any further arguments?"

They both shook their heads. Bright spots of color rode high on Lobelia's cheeks, and her lips were pressed into thin white lines.

Then the Magistrate rapped his gavel and declared, "The alleged misconduct does not meet the criteria for grounds for dissolution of Bilbo's rights to Bag End as defined in inheritance code 16-FP47.002, and since Lobelia is not the bequeathing party, she cannot claim preference under 16-FC53.017. Are there any further objections?"

Bilbo glared at Lobelia, who would not meet her eye. After a long moment of silence, the Magistrate droned, "Bilbo Baggins remains the rightful owner of Bag End. Lobelia and Otho will have 30 days to vacate the premises." He banged the gavel again.

Bilbo bit back a whoop and let the Thain's solicitor clap her on the back. Isengrim leaned over the bar to hug her and Thorin reached out to take her hand.

Bilbo noticed Lobelia trying to slink away, so she called, "Oh, Cousin Lobelia! Come here for a moment, if you please. There's someone you need to meet."

Lobelia stared, but good graces dictated that she could not ignore a direct address. She moved stiffly over to Bilbo's table, chin held high. "Yes, Cousin Bilbo?" she asked with faux cheer.

Bilbo tucked her arm into her dwarf's. "Please meet my betrothed, Thorin Oakenshield."

Thorin smiled sweetly down at Bilbo, then turned a stern look at Lobelia. "Charmed, I'm sure," he rumbled with a hint of menace. "I believe you have already met my sister."

Bilbo squeezed his arm warningly and told Lobelia brightly, "You simply must come to Raetha's birthday party, then. The whole Company will be there."

Lobelia blanched, mumbled her excuses, and bustled off. Bilbo and Thorin met each other's eye, and she started giggling. The Thain huffed at both of them, "Oh honestly." But Thorin could not wipe the big grin off his face.

-----

With the trial no longer hanging over her head, Bilbo threw herself into the preparations for the party. Thorin, Balin, and the Thain were hashing out the trade negotiations, but Bilbo felt she should stay out of that due to conflicting interests. She 'helped' Raetha make her first gifts the day before the party. Raetha stood on a high-walled stool built for faunts to help in the kitchen, long wooden spoon
in hand, while Bilbo poured melted butter over a large bowl of pecans. Then she held a pinch bowl of salt out to Raetha and asked, "Are you ready?"

Raetha waved her spoon like a sword, and (with Bilbo's steadying help to be sure it went in the right direction) dumped the whole bowl of salt over the pecans.

"Good job, now stir!" Raetha poked at the pecans with her spoon, so Bilbo started stirring with her own spoon.

Raetha wailed, "Nnno! Me! Me!"

Bilbo held her hands up and Raetha poked at the bowl again.

"You've got to mix it up well or it won't taste good," Bilbo warned, but Raetha still wouldn't let her help. So she tried, "Pretend you're digging for worms, and I know you were digging for worms last week, when you came home like a mud pie."

Raetha looked at her, caught out, and then she dug her spoon into the pecans, slopping a few over the sides of the bowl. Bilbo pulled the cookie trays closer and said, "Alright, can I see?" Raetha nodded and pushed the big bowl at her. Bilbo gave it a few quick stirs and then said to her daughter, "Alright, hold the cookie sheet steady..." And she poured the pecans onto the sheets.

The smell of the nuts roasting made her stomach rumble, so she pulled out a crumpet and offered a bite to Raetha, who took it only to pick at it. After a moment, she asked, "After this, would you like to go pick flowers for your crown?"

Raetha's head snapped up and she nodded enthusiastically, whispering "Yah!" fervently.

-----

The sun was gilding the hills when the first guests started arriving at the Smials. Party lights and ribbons were strung from tree to tree, and the tables were creaking from the sheer amount of food piled there. Bofur and Bifur carried up kegs of ale two at a time over their broad shoulders, to the slightly stunned stares of the local lads who were helping too.

Thorin held Raetha while Bilbo tied off the last finishing touches on a crown of lilacs, lily of the valley, and oak leaves tied with deep Durin blue ribbon. Raetha's snowy white dress already had a grass stain down the front from an earlier bid to get to the table of cookies and tarts. When Bilbo lifted the crown to her head, the heady scents filled Thorin's nose. Bilbo used a few pins to secure the crown to Raetha's curls, and the beads in her braids gleamed beside her round ears. He was still not used to the swelling pride that filled his chest when he saw her. And Bilbo was radiant, the silver stars of his house glimmering across the neckline of her deep blue gown, his bead shining in her hair beneath her crown of impatiens and hyacinth. He couldn't help reaching out to stroke the backs of his fingers down her bare cheek. She blushed fiercely.

Mirabella rushed past them, a tray full of sandwiches in her arms, and she called, "Go greet your guests, dancing won't start til after cake!"

Bilbo ducked her head, beet red, but then she held up another flower crown, made of hyacinth, violets, and oak leaves. She peeked up at him from beneath her lashes. "Will you wear it?"

He reached out to tilt her chin up. "Flowers have meanings to you, right? What does this crown mean?"

Oh, the blush on her face was enchanting. She twisted her lips and said, "Hyacinth for-- for-- well,
fertility, because we're her parents." He nodded and ducked his head. She reached up and placed the crown upon his brow, adding, "Violets for loyalty, and oak for-- well, strength and-- you." She ran a hand down his braids, making sure they still neatly framed his face.

He told her gravely, "A finer crown, I've never worn."

She blinked rapidly and told him sternly, "You are not allowed to make me cry tonight, do you hear me?"

He picked up her hand and kissed it. Then he tucked her arm through his, hitched Raetha up higher on his hip, and they went to the head of the gift table. Before they greeted the first guest, Thorin nodded at Dwalin, who stood and blew a long, deep note on a horn, and as the sounds echoed back off the hills, he shouted something rough in Khuzdul. The Company and Dís all shouted and clapped or banged on tables or stomped their feet. The hobbits all shifted and looked around in alarm. When their cheers died down, Dwalin called out in Westron, "Hail Raetha, daughter of Thorin, daughter of Bilbo! Our axes are yours!" The Company cheered again, and Thorin lifted a fist and yelled right back. Raetha looked up at him, startled, but then she lifted her fist and shouted too. The Company roared back.

This was the scene that greeted Lobelia when she entered the yard. She huffed, "Well, I never!" and Otho harrumphed grumpily beside her. He kept a tight hold on Lotho's hand when he tried to run ahead.

Bilbo quickly nodded to the band, and they started up a merry jig over the last shouts of the dwarves. She quietly asked Thorin, "I thought Khuzdul wasn't spoken in front of outsiders?"

He murmured back, "The first oath is too important. It's her first birthday, it's tradition."

"Every dwarf gets an oath when they turn one?"

He tilted his head, confused. "No? They swear their first oaths of fealty to the princess."

That thought crashed into her like a rock into a pond. She stared at him and he squeezed her arm to mimic a hug on her arm. Then she nodded firmly and turned to their first guest, who was, surprisingly, her cousin Drogo. She pulled him into a tight hug and pressed a bag of pecans into his hands. He cheerfully chucked Raetha's chin, calling, "Happy birthday!" and he nodded nervously at Thorin.

Then the line kept coming.

For all their oddities, the Tooks were still one of the premiere families in the Shire, and perhaps because of Bilbo's infamy, Raetha's party was considered the biggest event of the spring. Far-flung family and friends flocked to the Smials to wish her happy birthday (or to be seen to wish her happy birthday). Raetha didn't seem much bothered by the opinions of her neighbors; she kept trying to make a break for the dessert table.

Hobbits tucked into the feast with gusto, talking and laughing over the merry sounds of the band, and the ale flowed freely. There were no speeches, but hobbits would call out toasts to her health, her happiness, her thick soles. The dwarves quickly caught on and began to toast to her future beard, her mighty axe, her successful studies. Then Fíli stood, raised his tankard, and cried, "All glory and honor to our princess!" The Company all shouted, "Hail!" and as one, quaffed back their entire tankards.

Again, the hobbits looked about shiftily. Bilbo fought not to bury her face in her hands. Thorin
reached over and rubbed a hand up and down her back.

Lobelia, from her seat at her table (not near enough to the head table for first cousins, what was the world coming to), groused audibly, "'Princess?' Fah! Stuff and nonsense."

The Thain paused as he passed with his fresh ale and leaned down to tell her, "Why, it's not nonsense at all. Didn't you know? That dwarf father of hers is the King of Erebor."

She looked like she was about to swallow her tongue.

The Thain hid his chuckle and walked away. To poke at the bear a bit, he called out, "Cake!" The cry was taken up across the yard, "Cake! Cake!" Then the lads carried out the giant confection, covered in chocolate frosting, whipped cream, and strawberries.

Raetha shrieked with delight and clapped wildly. Bilbo and Thorin stood to hold her up so she could blow out the single burning candle. It took her a few wet tries, but then she did it. The crowd cheered and she cheered back. Then Bilbo cut a small piece, put it on a plate, and passed it to Thorin. He carried that and Raetha back to their table, and she promptly grabbed a handful and shoved it into her mouth. Bilbo came back with plates for Thorin and herself, and she burst into laughter when she saw Raetha's chocolatey face. Raetha beamed up at her, teeth full of cake and frosting, and she bent down to press a loud kiss to her forehead.

Fireflies were dancing between the lanterns, and the stars were fully out when Bilbo stood and scooped Raetha into her arms. "Bedtime, my nâtha."

Raetha tried to shriek, "No!" But Thorin stood, too, and the guests all shouted their good nights. The band, smartarsed Tooks that they were, plucked out a lullaby. Raetha waved a sad goodbye to them all and buried her (now clean) face in Bilbo's shoulder.

Thorin held open the Smials' back door, pausing a moment to appreciate the sight of the glowing party lights, the field of stars above, and the last fading glow in the west. Raetha squirmed in Bilbo's arms as they stepped inside, but she was blinking heavily and seemed more and more content to snuggle. Then he shut the door behind them, and they were enveloped by the quiet.

Chapter End Notes

Flower meanings taken from the Farmer's Almanac:

Lilac - joy of youth
Lily of the Valley - sweetness
Impatiens - motherly love
Hyacinth- constancy of love, fertility
Violet - loyalty, devotion
Oak leaves - strength

(What really got me was the fact that acorns mean immortality. Nope, nope, nope.)

((And what was with that flower-covered teapot? That was Bilbo starting a round of contraceptive laserwort tea. And she wasn't catching flack for taking it, no. She was beet...)}
red because she didn't want to call attention to the giant sky letters above the smial all 'I just had sex!')

Now with a photoset/mood board for Raetha
Part III

Chapter Summary

"We hobbits ought to stick together, and we will." --Pippin, FOTR

Chapter Notes

- Part III -

"Now far ahead the Road has gone, 
And I must follow, if I can, 
Pursuing it with eager feet, 
Until it joins some larger way."

-- JRRT, FOTR

[NSFW, dear readers]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Mirkwood was dim and foreboding. Dís wrinkled her nose against the pervasive damp smell of leaf rot that clung to the back of her throat. The tree roots made for horribly rough rides in the wagons. She grit her teeth as her tailbone was rattled once again, but she kept her oxen heading on regardless of the clatter. Three weeks, three mortal weeks of this thrice-cursed Forest, and she'd never be happier to leave it.

But then a high shriek rent the stale air, and a reedy elven horn called the alarm. She leapt out of the wagon's driver seat, pulling her axe from its shieth on her back, and then spiders dropped from the trees above, swinging from their vile webs. Dís swung her axe, slicing two legs from one of the vermin. It reared back on its hind legs and tried to shoot web at her, but she dodged and swung her axe into its bulging, stinking underbelly. It shrilled and writhed, and she jerked her blade back to face another spider. Red hair and bright steel flashed in the gloom, and the elven captain dispatched the spider before Dís could swing her axe. Their eyes met, and the dwarf nodded up at the elf, whose expression didn't change one bit. She just whirled off after another quarry.

Dís scanned the caravan, but the rest seemed to have themselves well in hand, so she kept guard on her section. She heard a few of the bairns and dwarflings nearby crying over the last dying shrieks of the spiders, but then it was done. Shouts of 'all clear' rang up and down the line, and she relaxed.

The elf captain doubled back to tell her, "My scouts tell me the way is now clear, my Lady."

"Are there any injured?" Dís ran a handkerchief over her blackened axe head.

"One bitten, can heal in a wagon," the elf said matter of factly.

Dís nodded and called over to Máur, "Move out!"
Bilbo stared at the leggy gardens of Bag End. Dandelions grew beneath her windowsills. The verge needed trimming. She watched, a bit dazed, as movers carted furniture and boxes out of her round green door. She looked anywhere but at Lobelia as she tried to process what she'd just heard.

("Where are my things, Lobelia?")

("Oh, we auctioned all that off a year ago.")

Lobelia sipped her tea blandly.

Bilbo gathered her wits enough to ask, "But-- my father's armchair? My great-aunt's doilies? My-- my mother's glory box?"

Lobelia shrugged blithely. "It's been so long, dear, I couldn't possibly remember who bought what."

Bilbo couldn't stay after that, not if she was to remain polite. As it was, she was gulping deep breaths and clenching her fists as she stormed past the Gamgee's gate when she heard a quiet, "Miss Bilbo!"

She stopped and shut her eyes for a moment before she consciously relaxed the stiff set of her shoulders and turned to greet Hamfast.

Her former gardener nervously leaned over the fence and hesitantly piped, "I-- I couldn't help but overhear--" she waved a hand to dispel his adherence to the appearance of good manners. He blinked owlishly and hemmed. "Is she really not going to lift a finger to get your things back?"

Bilbo sighed and looked away from the lad who had been her stalwart gardener for the past decade. Hamfast burst out, "There must be something you can do, she ent got the right to've profited of the sale of your stuff! Er, beggin' your pardon, ma'am."

At least someone else was upset, she thought, and she took some satisfaction from knowing she wasn't the only one who thought Lobelia was in the wrong. She told him, "I'm sure I could get reparations...in another year if I pursued that track, but I'll be gone in a few days, and I really couldn't care less about the-- about getting paid back what my things were worth. But my things--" she cleared her suddenly-thick throat and tried to blink away tears. "I had wanted to bring some of Bag End back with me. Erebor is so-- very dwarfish." She huffed a sigh and lifted her chin once more. "I'll try to make enquiries with the auctioneer, see if I can't get anywhere from that end. Good day to you, Hamfast."

Hamfast wrang his hat and nodded quickly back. "To you too, Miss Bilbo," he said, misery written on his face.

Her stop at the auctioneers was equally frustrating. Mr. Smallburrow regretfully told her that he had just culled the old records, since he didn't have the space to keep more than a year's worth of paperwork. He deeply regretted that he was unable to help, though (of course) he made no mention of repaying the commission he'd earned in the illegitimate auction.

Bilbo waved off his obeisance and left before she kicked him in his balding shins.

Hobbiton's streets were bustling, so she couldn't even take the satisfaction of kicking his door. She dodged a cart filled with squawking crates of chickens and called back a few greetings with cheer she didn't feel. She hitched her shawl tighter around her shoulders and seethed.
Then she heard a cry from behind her, "Bilbo!"

She turned and saw Drogo hurrying up the street to meet her. She cried, "Well Drogo, what are you doing all the way over in Hobbiton? Is everything alright?"

He turned beet red and she lifted her brows. Drogo ducked his head and said, "I was in my way back to the Smials, just so you know."

Bilbo pressed, "Oh? Back again so soon?" tone laden with meaning.

He rubbed the back of his neck and grinned sheepishly. "I was hoping to see a bit more of Miss Brandybuck before they went back over to Buckland."

Bilbo smiled widely and asked, "What, Prim?"

He ducked his head again and nodded. Bagginses, now really. She fought the urge to straighten his shoulders for him, but she clapped and cried, "Oh! I wish you all the luck, Drogo. The pair of you are well suited."

He smiled shyly. "Thank you. It means a lot to me, coming from you."

Together, they had walked out of Hobbiton and were now alone on the country lane, so thankfully no one was around to hear Bilbo's undignified snort and squawk of, "What, me? Good gracious, lad, one wouldn't think my opinion on courting or suitable partners would hold any weight." She chuckled at the thought.

But Drogo frowned and argued, "You're not the most conventional, that's for certain, but only a fool could miss how happy your dwarf makes you, and that's a far cry more than what most folks can say."

Bilbo smiled and fought not to pinch his cheek like she had when he was a faunt. He'd turned 33 while she was away, so she'd missed his coming-of-age party, and now she'd likely miss Prim's next fall, too. She hid a sigh.

Then Drogo asked, "And what were you doing all the way over in Hobbiton, too, then?"

She twisted her lips. "Trying to deal with Lobelia."

Drogo frowned darkly. "It's a great shame, what she's tried doing-- what she did do to you. She's no true Baggins, make no mistake."

"No indeed," she said darkly, thinking of Otho's silence.

Drogo shrugged and said cheerfully, "Well, you got the better of her in the end at least."

Bilbo fought back a grimace. "Yes, I've regained Bag End, just as I prepare to take leave of it. That's a real win, there."

Drogo stopped, shocked.

Bilbo turned and planted her hands on her hips and cried, "What, did you think Thorin would try to rule Erebor from the Shire?"

Drogo shook his head, stuttering, "Th-- the dwarves weren't, um, telling tall tales?"

Bilbo rolled her eyes and turned back up the road.
Drogo quickly caught up with her, babbling, "You mean--? Are you-- is he--?"

Bilbo tried to not let the titles go to his head. "Yes, he's the king. It's a terrible responsibility, and quite frankly, I'm scared witless of how busy we are going to be when we get back. His cousin has been regent in the meantime, but he's had the Iron Hills to rule, too, and there's only so much one person can do in a day, you know?"

Drogo, a bit dazed, nodded like he didn't have the faintest idea. But then he said, "Well, if you must leave, then you can at least rest assured that Lobelia doesn't have Bag End. Small victories and all."

Bilbo huffed, "Oh, small victories indeed. And so too will she, small, petty victories." She took a steadying breath, but nope, it would have out. She burst out, "Is it too much to ask to bring a small piece of my home with me?"

Drogo, confused, made a questioning noise.

"My things are scattered to the winds, and neither she nor her auctioneer can tell me who to contact to get my things back. They only hastened to wash their hands of the deal."

Drogo cried, "What, wasn't that written into the court case?"

"It would have been if I had known of it," Bilbo growled. "Frankly, I'd imagined her rolling about on my things like a dragon in its hoard. It never occurred to me that she'd have them sold."

Drogo scowled. "But that-- not giving your things back-- that's not right!"

Bilbo deflated. "I know. I know. And if it were anything else, well, things are replaceable. But-- my father's books and my mother's maps? His armchair, her glory box, their portraits-- those can't be replaced."

Drogo shook his head, looking thunderous. The late spring day was pleasant for walking, though, and before long, they were through Tuckborough. But when they reached the Great Smials, Drogo stopped in his tracks. From the top of their rolling hill, they looked out over the field, now packed with white tents. Dwarrow from the Blue Mountains streamed into the Shire daily, while the caravan was packed by merchants and grocers from across the four farthings. Drogo gaped until she tugged on his arm. He shook off his daze and asked, "When do you leave?"

She smiled a little wistfully, a little sadly, and said softly, "Three days."

Drogo wrapped her in a brief hug, and then they walked through the gate.

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The days passed in a blur of preparations. She met with many of the dwarves from the Blue Mountains, but she could tell they couldn't quite decide what to make of her. Raetha wanted to have a hand in everything, but she was more often than not a distraction. Bilbo felt like her heart was constantly in her throat, and at times she felt like she was being torn in two. She stared hungrily at the rolling green hills, but she also longed for the mountains and the pines and the high, endless blue sky above the wild peak of the Lonely Mountain. But, as she told Thorin, words whispered in the dark while they curled up in a tangle of limbs, on the verge of sleep, "I think I miss the memory of the Shire more than the Shire itself. I mean, I'm still in the Shire, and I still miss it."

He stroked a warm palm over her hair and pressed a kiss to her shoulder. "The Erebor of my youth is still lost. I will never be able to reclaim it." She rolled over and tucked her head beneath his chin. He added, "What I'm trying to say is, I know what you mean, though I wish I could have spared you
that feeling. If I was a less selfish creature, I would regret taking you from your home in the first place."

Her brows furrowed and she sat up to stare down at him. "Take me? Take me-- now just you hold up there, mister. Do I need to remind you that I ran after you? Don't you dare beat yourself up over this." She leaned down to brush a kiss on the corner of his frown. "I've been missing the Shire since my parents died, dearest. You had nothing to do with it."

He reached up to pull her back, and she allowed herself to be folded into his arms. For a long while, she listened to the steady thump of his heart and his slow, quiet breaths, until she gathered her nerve to ask, "Will the rest of the dwarves be upset that I'm not-- that we're-- not dwarves?"

Thorin shifted in the dark. "You are my One. We-- most dwarves believe that our Maker crafts our souls and cleaves them in two. So, dwarf or not, He made you to be mine, as much as He made me to be yours. Either way, by our laws, the One of a dwarf is also a dwarf."

Bilbo curled tighter into his embrace and pondered that thought.-----

And then it was time to leave. Her traveling cloak sat heavy on her shoulders, and her mail was cool against her skin. Sting hung, familiar and heavy, from her belt, and her little trinket was tucked secure in the pocket of her waistcoat. Farewells had already been said, but Bilbo hugged her aunt Rosa for a long moment, one last time, while the wagons creaked and clattered down the lane. Then Rosa cupped her cheeks and told her sternly, "Now, you are a Baggins, and you will always be a Baggins. Keep your head on your shoulders and keep these fine folk from running themselves into ruin." She pressed her trembling lips into a tight line and added thickly, "Your father would be so proud of you, my dear."

Bilbo screwed up her face to hold back tears and pressed her face into Rosa's shoulder once more. Then she straightened and nodded fiercely, but in that moment, she couldn't speak.

"Hey Bilbo!" Drogo called from behind her. She turned and gaped as he drove a wagon up the road. He pulled over onto the grass beside Thorin and their waiting ponies.

She gaped. "...What? What is this, Drogo?"

He beamed down at her. "Well, you're going to need people with sense for this sort of mission. Someone's got to save the land from this... What was the word? Desolation?" She nodded dumbly and he continued cheerfully, "Desolation, yep. And who better to work the land than hobbits? We're coming with you."

She blinked, still not quite believing him, then one word seemed to register. "We? Wh-what 'we' wait wait wait, we?"

Then Hamfast and Bell Gamgee drove a wagon past, and Hamfast called, "Out of the way, ya great lug!" And Drogo laughed.

Bilbo cried, "Drogo! What--who?"

Adalgrim clapped a hand on her shoulder, and Rorimac, too, stood with a traveling cloak and a grin as wide as the Brandywine. Drogo called, "About three dozen, all told. Some are coming just to get the land settled. Some?" He waved at himself and Adalgrim and Rorimac, "We've got promises of
new homes. And you need to take a look in the back."

Bilbo looked from her cousin back to Thorin, who just hid a satisfied grin behind his beard, and she walked behind Drogo's wagon and boosted herself up to... her father's armchair. She choked on a gasp and Drogo looked back from the driver's seat, a sharp grin on his face.

He saw her expression and explained, "We made some inquiries. It's amazing what people will remember when they're given enough incentive."

Bilbo chuckled wetly and ran trembling fingers along the top of her mother's glory box. Then Bilbo heard Primula cry, "Come on Rory!"

Bilbo nearly tripped as she scrambled out the back of Drogo's wagon, just in time to see Menegilda driving their own wagon by. Rorimac chuckled and swung up to sit next to his wife, while Prim dangled off the back, waving her straw hat and beaming like a loon. Behind them, Adalgrim's tweens Paladin and Esmerelda drove another wagon. Bilbo gaped and stuttered, and Prim called out, "Don't look so shocked, Bilbo!"

Adalgrim told her "You've got a lot of people who care for you, and a lot who feel they're doing the Green Lady's good work, helping to fix the land." He ruffled her hair and called, "Now let's get going, this Erebor isn't going to come to us!"

Bilbo nodded and laughed and wiped her tears off her cheeks, and she turned to mount her new pony. Thorin was already in his saddle, and Raetha's head peeped out from the shimmering, deep blue wrap on his back. She was chewing on one of his braids with an enormous grin on her face, eyes fixed on the countless wagons as they passed. Roäc stood on Thorin's outstretched forearm, listening to the orders for the guards still stationed in Bree. The raven flew off with a gust of wind.

He asked her softly, "Are you ready?" Bilbo nodded. He looked at her, grave and quiet and soft, and then he nudged his pony into a trot. Her pony followed suit, and she turned in her saddle to wave one last goodbye.

Then they rode over a hill, and they were gone.

But Bilbo was still there, still trying to reacquaint her stiff hips with the saddle, still trying to wrap her head around the privations ahead, of making this unfathomably long journey again, and Thorin let her ride quietly for the first few hours.

Their caravan was something of a spectacle when they drove through Frogmorton, with their dozens upon dozens of wagons, herds of livestock, and mounted, armored dwarves. And as she started to come out from her head, Bilbo's arms felt empty. Raetha seemed to view the view from Thorin's back as the height of adventure.

She wrapped the long, shimmering cloth over her back and shoulders, ready for Thorin to tuck Raetha into the fabric, but their daughter clutched his braid and peeped, "Adad?" Thorin froze, so Raetha tugged his braid again and asked, "Adad hold me?"

Thorin nuzzled her cheek with his long nose and told her, "I can carry you, my nātha, if that's what you really want."

And Raetha nodded so enthusiastically that her curls bounced.

So Thorin took Orcrist and his bow from his back and hung them from his bridle. Bilbo wrapped the bolt of elven fabric around his waist and back and shoulders, over his tunic and mail, and then carefully tucked Raetha into the wrap. She moved to stand in front of him to show him how to tighten
the cloth, and then she tied the ends off in an efficient knot. He reached up to cup her hands to his chest and leaned down to press a soft kiss to her lips. She jumped when Dwalin let out a shrill whistle and cried, "Are we gonna stand here all day, then?"

Thorin straightened with a faux-scowl and shouted, "What, mutiny? So soon?" Dwalin just cackled (making the hair on her arms stand on end) and Thorin called, "Sound the call to move out!"

Dwalin blew a long note on his horn, and the wagons began to clatter into motion.

They stopped for lunch just before the Brandywine Bridge. Bilbo took Raetha from the wrap and sat down in the grass beside the river. Raetha snuggled into her shoulder as Bilbo opened her shirt and undid the clasps of the quarter-collar on her mail. "You've had a busy morning, yeah?" She asked her daughter, who ignored her in favor of her exposed breast. Thorin sat next to them with a heavy thump, and he handed Bilbo a brick of cram and some cheese. Her mouth twisted at the fare, and he arched his brows with a wry smile, as if to say what can you do? They ate quietly for a while, listening to the gently flowing water, still audible over the sounds of the caravan behind them. Then Raetha finished and popped up, scrambled off her lap, and ran away giggling. Thorin had to jump up to run after her, to keep her from going too close to the river. The fauntling shrieked with laughter, and they made a merry chase of it. While she buttoned up her mail and shirt, she hid a wide grin at the sight of the shimmering blue wrap streaming behind Thorin's shoulders as he ran.

Giving Raetha the chance to stretch her legs for a bit, Bilbo stood and went in search of Balin. There hadn't been time that morning, with them surprising her like that, and with her own mind preoccupied with her own conflicted thoughts, but here, at the border of the Shire, she needed to meet with those who had hitched their wagons to her cause. Balin and Fíli agreed to bring the hobbits to her.

As she saw them coming, in family groups and by the dozens, she looked around for a-- there. She stepped onto the lowest rung of the fence that flanked the lane just before the bridge, and she had to bite her lip to keep from going teary-eyed. In addition to Adalgrim, Rorimac, Drogo, and Hamfast, there were some of the Banks clan, the Cottons, Underhills and Bolgers and Clayhangers; not just relatives, but some of the grown sons and daughters of her tenants, some of the Millers, some of the merchants she had employed for her trade-- these were people who had looked to her for their livelihoods, and they trusted her enough to join her in this adventure.

She saw Thorin standing on the riverbank, holding Raetha to his chest, watching her. Heart pounding, she turned to the hobbits, her people, and called, "My kin!" Adalgrim and Rorimac let out a cheer, elbowing Hamfast, and soon all thirty-something of them were roaring. Bilbo blushed and cried again, "MY KIN! I will never be able to express my gratitude to you, you brave, brave hobbits. But I swear to you, I will do everything in my power to come to your aid, if you ever come to me in need. And here, on the border of the Shire, I promise you, you will find new homes in the hills of Erebor."

The hobbits cheered again, and then one of the dwarves called out, "To the queen!" And the call was taken up, all up and down the line, even by the hobbits, and from the riverbank, she saw Thorin smiling softly at her.

She waved and stepped down from the fence, hands numb with adrenaline. Adalgrim and Rorimac slapped her shoulder as she passed, and Thompson Banks shook her hand eagerly, and then Raetha came running up to her. She swooped down to scoop her little fauntling up into her arms with a whoop and a shriek. She chuckled and asked her, "Would you like to ride with me or your adad this afternoon?"

Raetha cried, "Adad!"
Bilbo hid her grin. "Alright then. Let's get you changed and we can be on our way."

"No!" Raetha flopped backwards, barely held up by Bilbo's firm grip on her waist.

Bilbo mimicked, "Yes!" and carried her to the back of their supply wagon.

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They pitched camp beyond the Downs, working by the last light of the evening, far later than he would have liked, but the hobbits had been uncharacteristically adamant that they cross the Downs first. Soon the smells of hot food filled the field, and Fili and Kili whisked Raetha off for a game of tag to burn off some of her antsy energy. Then Thorin murmured in her ear, "Come, let's take our chance while we can."

And she looked up in surprise, meeting his eyes gone dark, and the banked fire beneath her skin caught light. He took her hand and pulled her into the trees. Once they were mostly out of earshot, he pressed her up against an old trunk and crashed his lips down to hers.

She let out a small sound from the back of her throat and threw her hands around his neck. Then his big hands were on her bum, lifting her, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. He quickly deepened the kiss, til she had to break away to breathe. He pressed wet kisses down the line of her throat, his beard scraping just so along her tender skin, and she gasped, "Oh! --You! Eager, are you?"

He hummed and then he rumbled hotly in her ear, "Mm, do you have any idea? I've had to watch you ride all day--" he kissed her neck again.

She tilted her head to give him more room, then gasped, "Oh! You-- you were-- ogling my bum, weren't you!"

His low chuckle rumbled in his chest and he pressed another kiss to her lips. She could feel him, pressing hard through the fabric of their trousers, and she arched against him, seeking that friction. He groaned and gripped her bum harder.

Her small hands wormed between them, and she reached to untie his breeches. His rough palms untucked her blouse and skimmed over the skin of her waist. A low whine escaped her lips, swallowed down by his own, and then he pulled away to roughly push his trousers down to his hips, and she hurriedly stepped out of her own. He lifted her again, and again she threw her arms around his shoulders and her legs around his waist, and then he was pressing in-- in-- in.

He paused, panting, once he was fully seated, and she desperately kissed his neck where his beard met his jaw, and she pleaded, "Please, please move, oh!"

His big hands wrapped around her waist, and he snapped his hips. A sharp wail burst out of her lips, and he groaned. Bilbo threw her head back and winced as she made contact with the tree. She felt almost weightless, pressed between the trunk and his chest, the angle allowing him to thrust in deep, and deep, and deep.

She could feel the thick drag of him inside, and the way she ground down against him drove her higher. She could hear and feel him panting in her ear, and then he bit a sucking kiss on her neck, and she gasped. She fisted her hand in the back of his hair, and he groaned. She smiled sharply and asked, "Do you like that?"

He let out a low whine and nodded, so she gripped a little tighter. He groaned and crushed a fierce kiss to her lips, hips snapping even harder, their skin slapping. His hands clenched around her waist.
and *oh!* she felt his fingers press against the same bruises from the night before, and she moaned into his lips. His hips stuttered and he gasped desperately, "Are you close?"

Then his angle changed and *oh!* he slammed against that spot inside, and she cried, "There! Like that-- and yes!"

He let out a high groan and begged, "Hurry, I'm close--" and he kept that angle, thrust harder and harder and she stiffened with a helpless shriek and came around him.

He cried out and pulled out and clamped his fingers in a tight ring around the base of his cock, panting into her neck. Then she let out a long, shuddering sigh and loosened her legs from around his waist, and he allowed her to slip back onto her feet. She kissed him sweetly, tenderly, and then sank to her knees. Thorin choked out a whispered, "Bilbo?"

She said softly, "Shh, let me do this for you," as she brushed his hand away from his cock. And when she stretched her lips over him, her taste and his taste strong on her tongue, he gasped like the breath had been punched out of him.

There was still enough light for him to see her looking at him from between his thighs, and his arms shot out to steady himself against the tree trunk. She bobbed her head, only able to take in barely half his length, but she wrapped her soft hand over the rest, and he choked out, "Bilbo--!

She hummed around him, and he pounded a fist against the bark. What would have been a smile crinkled around her eyes, and she pulled back to ask blithely, "Like this?"

That startled a huff of laughter out of him, and he reached down to brush her hair away from her sweaty brow. She arched into the touch, then took him into her mouth again, hollowing her cheeks and working her fist in time. Soon his legs were trembling, and he dug his fingers into her hair. Dry voice cracking, he ground out, "Bilbo-- I'm--" She just arched her brows at him, and he tugged on her hair. "I'm going to--"

She made a noise deep in her throat and ignored the hand trying to tug her away, wet mouth bobbing even deeper, and he couldn't hold back anymore. His hips stuttered forward, and she choked a little, spit drooling over her pink lips, and he buried his fist in her hair and came and came and came.

She wasn't able to swallow it down fast enough, and some trickled down her chin, and that sight alone triggered a few more weak pulses, and then he was panting, half-clinging to the tree trunk, and she-- she grinned up at him and primly wiped the corner of her mouth. And that was it. He sank to his knees and kissed her desperately.

He murmured, "Ghivashel, azyungal, melhekinh, amrâlimê--" with a broken voice.

Bilbo cupped his cheeks and kissed him back. "I love you, too, dearest."

They stayed there til the sweat cooled on their skin, and then they shakily put their clothes back in order and tidied their mussed hair as best they could. They were still met with sly looks and a few ribbing jibes when they got back into camp. But they laid out their bedrolls next to each other, Raetha snuggled down between them, and as they drifted off into sleep, they looked up at the stars.

Chapter End Notes
I THOUGHT I WAS DONE. But NO, my brain decided that a quick, painless happy ending was not allowed. So, uhh, on with the show.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Of armies and allies and inns

Chapter Notes

NSFW again, folks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next evening, they broke through the trees to see Bree across the fields, and Bilbo stared at the rows upon rows of immaculate white tents pitched outside the walls. She whipped her head over to Thorin, who looked back at her with raised brows. She asked, "Guard? Guard? How many are in this guard?"

He looked confused at her reaction. "Well, it's the Third Company, so a hundred fighters and a dozen support staff."

"A hundred!" Bilbo cried, aghast. "Why'd you ask for more, then? Surely a hundred is more than enough."

He scowled, "I'd be better satisfied with my whole army."

She blinked and shook her head, but then Raetha woke from her nap in her sling across her chest, blinking owlishly up at her. Bilbo crooned, "Shh, it's okay dearest, you can sleep some more, we're not there yet."

But Raetha yawned and stretched and sat upright, looking around with wide eyes. Bilbo watched the farmers in the fields react to the long line of wagons, and she ran a hand down her baby's back. Then she looked at Thorin and said, "Do you think it'd be safer to not-- well, announce that she's ours? She'd easily pass as just a faunt to these Breelanders--"

Thorin chewed his cheek and watched the curious farmers. He nodded reluctantly and they urged their ponies to the side of the road. Bofur called from a driver's seat as he passed, "Y' alright there?" Thorin nodded and Bofur kept driving. Guards and wagons passed, curiously eyeing them, but then Drogo's wagon trundled up, with Primula next to him.

Bilbo dismounted and called out, "Hey Prim, a word?" Her cousin patted Drogo's knee, leapt down from the wagon in a flutter of skirts and dark curls, and trotted over.

Bilbo held Raetha one handedly and reached behind her to untie the wrap's knot, asking, "While we're in Bree, will you mind Raetha? She can pass as your own; I don't want to exactly announce her presence here."

Prim reached out to properly untie the stubborn knot, insisting, "Of course! Here--" and Bilbo held
Raetha while her cousin unwound the wrap.

Bilbo told Raetha, "You're going to your Auntie Prim for now, love." Her daughter buried her face in Bilbo's shoulder and whined. "No, none of that, you'll get to ride in the wagon with her." A big blue eye peered up at her, so she added, "Really really."

Prim finished wrapping the fabric into a front sling, so Bilbo tucked Raetha in, and Prim tied off the knot. "Ready to climb on the wagon, my lass?" Prim asked Raetha sweetly, and she hurried to catch back up with Drogo. He slowed his ox as much as he dared without disturbing the whole line, and Prim gracefully swung back into the driver's seat.

Bilbo got back into her saddle, chest now uncomfortably cool without her daughter's warm weight, and Thorin reached over to run a hand up and down her back. Together, they rode back to the front of the column. Raetha waved madly from the wagon as they passed.

The light was slanting buttery soft as the caravan trundled to a stop next to the Third Company's camp. A salt-and-pepper dwarf with a thick red captain's braid slung over his shoulder stepped out from the camp to meet them. He bowed when Thorin dismounted, but his brows furrowed when Thorin stretched out a hand to help Bilbo down from her pony. Thorin tucked her arm through his, and she looked askance at his unusual gallantry, but he just smiled and patted the back of her hand on his forearm, and she realized with a small "oh!" he was showing her off, already cementing her place at his side to the dwarrow from Erebor. She squared her shoulders, and then they were flanked by Dwalin, Fíli, and Kíli.

Thorin declared in a voice that carried, "Sanzeuh, this is Halthur, captain of the Third Company. Captain Halthur, this is Bilbo Baggins, my intended." The captain bowed to Bilbo, and Thorin added, "Have your guards help get the wagons settled and coordinate with the dwarrow who've come from the Blue Mountains."

At that moment, some of the hobbits climbed out of their wagons, and Halthur stared at them in confusion. "Wh-- Sire? What is this?" He gestured at the hobbits. Bilbo bristled at his tone. To be sure, none of them wore mail, and their feet were bare, and Thorin was reminded that to an unpracticed eye, they did appear rather soft and useless.

Thorin said firmly, "Some of her kin are joining us in Erebor."

Halthur stiffened and wiped his face of all expression. Bilbo's hackles rose, but then a boy came running over from the town gate, panting, "Th' headman wants t' see ya, if yer Thorin Oakenshield."

Halthur started to growl at the boy to respect his betters, but Thorin held up a hand to silence him. He told the boy, who was even now nearly of a height, "I am he. Where is your headman, lad?"

"I'm t' take ya to 'im," the lad mumbled.

Thorin asked Bilbo, "Will you come, or do you want to stay here to get settled?"

Bilbo glanced across to Prim and Raetha, and to Fíli and Kíli, who nodded at her slightly, and she said, "I'll come."

The lad led them into Bree, and Bilbo wrinkled her nose as they had to dodge through crowds of Big Folk who didn't feel the need to look down to watch where they were going. The townsfolk who did notice them stared brazenly. The rudeness set her teeth on edge, and she'd lived amongst dwarves for a year. Then they were brought into a dim office in the town hall, and a raspy old voice called out, "You've got a lot of nerve, Oakenshield, camping an army at my gate--" Bilbo wracked her brain for
the headman's name—Everard. Everard Oleson. He stood with his back to them, his long white hair hanging lank down his back as he looked out the grimy window at the rows of tents. "—and going to the Shire as if the Bounders won't run you off—" he finally turned, as if to great dramatic effect, but his words died in his throat when he saw Bilbo. He bobbed a slight bow and said, "Excuse me, Miss Baggins."

From the corner of her eye, she could see Thorin look out of the corner of his eye at her, and she said coolly, "Thank you for your concern, Master Oleson, but my uncle has been treating with my betrothed, as you can see by the caravan also camped at your gate." The headman gaped and made an insultingly obvious double take between them, which she chose to ignore for the moment, adding, "I do thank you for the concern you're clearly trying to show him. Now, since the Third Company are well set up with their own supplies, I trust there were no further complications that require our attention?"

"Thank you for the warning, Master Oleson," Bilbo said primly. "But nothing stranger than us, I trust?"

A stranger let out a low chuckle from the corner behind them. Thorin whipped around to face another man, who sat smoking a pipe, as cool as a cucumber.

Everard said faintly, "This is Tracker, one of the Rangers. He said—"

But Tracker stood and stepped out of the shadows. Thorin stiffened and shifted minutely, but the man said simply, "My lady sends her greetings." Then he bowed to Bilbo. "If you wish it, we would join the caravan guard."

She clapped a hand to her mouth and whispered, "Oh Gilraen!" Then she patted her own cheek and said more firmly, "Thank you for your offer, we accept your service."

Thorin met her eye a bit wildly, but she nodded minutely. After a moment, he placed a warm palm on the small of her back and declared, "You have our gratitude, Master Tracker." He turned back to the headman, "Did you have any further need of us?"

Everard shook his head, hand pressed weakly over his heart.

Thorin told Tracker, "If you would, allow me to introduce you and your company to my captains." Tracker nodded and they took leave of the headman.

They followed the Ranger out through the streets, now slipping through the crowd with ease, and Thorin took the chance to ask, eyes sparkling, "What was that in there?"

Bilbo sniffed. "That was a small-minded, puffed up merchant realizing he'd best not offend one of the most affluent traders in the region, not at the risk of a spate of lean years if I was feeling particularly spiteful. I haven't quite ruled it out yet."

Tracker chuckled grimly, but Thorin looked askance at her.

Bilbo, still holding her chin up stiffly, looked at him from the corner of her eye and huffed, "Your lobbed accusation of 'grocer' wasn't, in fact, far off the mark. But in addition to the usual foodstuffs, I happen to control the majority of the production of Old Toby. I don't hold a monopoly on the market, but if I were to withhold my business, it would most certainly be felt."
Thorin stared at her, and she demanded, "What?" Then he let out a great bark of a laugh and shook his head. Bilbo groused, "Fool dwarf, that'd teach you to underestimate me. I ought to play conkers on your thick skull."

Thorin smiled widely at her and he brought her hand up to kiss her knuckles. "Woe betide any who underestimate you, my heart. You know where to hit where it hurts."

Bilbo snorted and grinned up at him, but then she jumped. At least a dozen other men had joined them, and she hadn't noticed. Several already led their horses. They were, to a fault, grim and dour. Several nodded to her when they met her gaze, but then they went back to scanning the crowds for trouble.

By the time they returned to the camp, nearly three dozen Rangers had joined them. Dwalin and Halthur bristled, but Adalgrim cheerfully called, "Hello Tracker!" from where he was cooking over a small campfire. The man nodded back with a little smile, blithely ignoring the hostile looks from the dwarves.

Thorin leveled them with a look and said, "Tracker, these are my captains, Dwalin and Halthur." Addressing his dwarrow, he called, "The Rangers have also offered their services for the protection of this caravan."

Halthur looked like he was chewing on his cheek, and Dwalin grated out, "Mighty kind o' yeh."

Tracker smiled blandly and explained, "Our lady desires that we protect your ladies, Master Dwarf. Our swords are theirs."

Dwalin peeped, "Oh!" and instantly relaxed.

But Halthur, spitting mad, hissed, "Sire! This is unheard of-- first halflings, now Men? Are we dwarrow not enough?"

Thorin's pleased expression shuttered and he said quietly, "This is not a reflection of my opinion of my fighters, not at all. But after the battles I've seen, no, I will not turn down an alliance when one is offered in good will, Master Halthur. Do not be so bullheaded as to refuse aid that's freely given."

Halthur snapped back just as quietly, "But there's no need for--"

But he was cut off by the cries of "Mama! Mama!" as a tot ran past into-- the queen-to-be's arms. Halthur stared, gaping.

Thorin leaned into Halthur's space and growled, "Do you see now? I'll not take any arguments. How you and Tracker want to work it out is up to you, but you will make it work."

Halthur nodded, poleaxed.

Thorin turned from him to watch Bilbo introduce Raetha to the Rangers. He tried to hide his grin when Tracker bowed to his daughter with a hand over his heart.

Those who sought rooms for the night were able to find lodgings at the Prancing Pony. Prim continued to act as Raetha's mother, decidedly accompanied by Menegilda and Rorimac (and not Drogo) but once they were pointed down the hallway to their rooms, she handed Raetha back to Bilbo. The fauntling immediately snuggled her snotty face into Bilbo's neck. She hid a flinch and dug for a handkerchief.
Prim told Bilbo with a grin, "I know my brother's trying to keep me away from Drogo for now, but I swear, this little'un is enough incentive for me! Fauntlings are great and all, but I'm happy to be able to hand them back when it's time to sleep through the night."

Bilbo snickered and pinched Prim's cheek. "Let's keep it that way for a while, yeah?"

Prim cheerfully batted her hands away and slipped off to her room.

Thorin stuck his head out their door and raised his brows at her. Bilbo just shook her head at him. He shrugged and held the door open for them and Bilbo walked inside. They had been placed in one of the man-sized rooms, but at least they would both fit in the too-large bed. Bilbo eyed the room with her brows raised. As Thorin set down their packs, he told her, "There will soon be time enough for rocks in our sleeping rolls, let me give you this for the night, while I can."

Bilbo kissed him softly and said, "You toasty marshmallow."

He blushed to the tips of his round ears and shushed her.

The truly best part of the inn was the chance for one last hot bath. Bilbo had to stand on an upturned basin to reach over the sides of the man-sized tub, and Raetha still splashed suds everywhere, but once she was wrapped in a warm towel and fed, she fell fast asleep. The man-sized closet was the size of a small room to them, so she set up the borrowed bassinet, carefully tucked her into a nightgown, and laid her down to sleep. Bilbo stood still for a few breaths, but Raetha just heaved one big sigh and snuggled into her blankets. Then Bilbo tiptoed away.

Thorin was already pouring more hot water into the tub, and he eyed her by the light from the hearthfire. She tilted her head at him, asking what? and he looked from her to the tub speculatively.

This time she did ask, "What's that look for?"

He grinned at her. "You know, there are some benefits to these too-big rooms."

Bilbo blinked and then smiled coyly at him. "Is that so?"

Thorin set down the water pitcher and reached for the top button of her waistcoat. "Aye. Why, this tub is big enough for two. Just think of how-- efficient we could be."

Bilbo arched her neck and sighed, "Just think of how much water we'll save, mmm. We'd better."

A slow laugh rumbled through his chest, and he bent to press a set of slow, languid kisses from her ear to her collar as he slipped open the fine buttons of her blouse. Her toes curled on the tile floor, and she reached out to wrestle with his belt. He slid her skirt and waistcoat down her arms, letting both fall to the floor, and then he delicately flicked open the clasps of her mail. She growled at his buckle. He chuckled through his kisses and swiftly unclasped it. The belt fell to the floor with a solid thunk and he quickly shrugged out of his mail. Bilbo started to pull her mail over her head, but he stopped her with a grunt. She blinked at him, hands fisting emptily at her sides, as she watched him bend to unfasten his boots. She groaned as he looked up at her and a wide grin spread across his face. She tangled a fist in his hair and croaked, "Thorin please--"

He just beamed up at her, then he wrapped his hands around her hips and leaned forward, pressing a kiss to her belly through her mail. She flushed to the tips of her ears and choked on a breath. He looked up at her again, eyes soft, and he must have seen her expression, because he swiftly rose and kissed her deeply. She cupped his cheeks and when he pulled away, she ran her fingers through his lengthening beard. His eyes fluttered shut, and then he slid her mail up, up, and over her head. While he folded it over the back of a chair, she reached up and pulled her combs loose, and her hair
tumbled down her back. He quickly shrugged out of his quilted undershirt and they both stepped out of their pants. She arched when his warm, rough palm slid up her bare back and he tugged her close, his furred chest scraping against her piqued nipples, his hard length pressing hot between them. Then he ran the backs of his fingers up her neck, then her ear, then up to his bead. She felt him pause for a moment and she looked up at him. Then he reached for her and guided her hand up to one of his beads.

He gently pulled the bead from her braid, carefully putting it in a small velvet pouch. She gingerly pulled his aglet free and placed that, too, into the pouch, while he tenderly unraveled her braid and ran his fingers through her hair. She shivered, warm skin against warm skin, and he grinned down at her and tightened his arm around her waist. Then she turned her attention back to finding all his beads and clasps and finally, finally, she ran her fingers through his freed locks, too. He puffed a sigh and let his head loll.

Then she ran a hand through the bathwater and eyed the tub. Its walls came up nearly to her armpits, and she huffed, "Well there really is going to be no dignified way to--" she stifled a shriek when Thorin lifted her up and slipped her into the water. He tried to shush her, but she couldn't stop giggling. He clambered in too, and the water rose to her neck.

He huffed a laugh at her and rumbled, "Come here." He opened his arms and she settled into his lap, chest to chest, her hips stretched wide over his hips, and he kissed her deeply. The hot water soaked into her sore muscles, and she sighed into his lips. Then she ground down against him, and his arms tightened around her back. She broke the kiss to run her nose up the line of his jaw, and oh, he tilted his head back for her, eyes closed and lips swollen, and warmth flooded her chest. The metal of the tub dug into her knees as she shifted, but oh! his hands slid down to grip her waist, tightening over old bruises. Her hips snapped forward and the water nearly slopped over the tub. She let out a startled gasp as he huffed out a laugh. When she glared at him for laughing, he ran his hands up to cup her breasts and flick his thumbs over her nipples, and her head fell back.

The firelight from the hearth played over their faces, and the water made every touch feel new, lending to a sense of quiet reverence. Bilbo could see the open adoration on Thorin's face. She pushed his damp hair back from his brow, brushing her fingers through the gleaming silver, and she felt the reality of it all start to settle in her bones. She was his, and he was hers, and that would be true even after the rebuilding of the world.

Thorin must have read something of this on her face, because he reached up with one wet hand to cup her cheek and pulled her in for a slow, sweet kiss. His hips ground against him in a long, slow drag, and he groaned into her lips.

Then he pulled back and said roughly, "You keep that up, and this bath isn't going to stay clean for much longer."

She froze and stared at him for a moment, then she snorted and stifled her giggles in his shoulder. But he groaned as she shook, so she took pity on him and slid off his lap, her hips and knees...
His cheeks flushed and he shifted to wet his hair. She poured the liquid into her palm and worked it into his hair, and he looked like he was on the verge of bliss.

She quirked a smile and said lightly, "You dwarves and your hair."

His eyes opened like his lids were heavy and he rumbled slowly, "It's ours." He sighed as she scrubbed her fingers against his scalp. "Our hair is an expression of ourselves. We braid it to show what-- and who-- is important to us. And this? It's...intimate, to wear it unbound, to care for it."

While she rinsed his hair, she took a moment to process that, and then she said gravely, "Then I'm honored."

He blinked water from his eyes and told her, "As am I." He pressed a soft kiss to her lips once more. Then his gaze sharpened and he reached for a bar of soap. "Stand, ghivashel."

She had to grip the metal edge of the tub as he lathered soap over her skin, her heavy breasts, her soft middle, and one thigh, calf, and foot at a time. Heat flickered beneath her skin, and she knew from the way his eyes glimmered dark that he was enjoying this slow torment just as much, too. And when it was clear that his scrubbing had turned into teasing, she snatched the soap from his hands and gave back as good as she got. But her patience was now worn thin, and she did not linger like he had. He tried to distract her with peppered kisses, to wrap his arms around her waist, and he smirked impishly at her as she tried to bat his wandering hands away.

Finally she dropped the soap back in its cup and ordered, "Rinse, and then get in the bed." She flushed at her daring, but when she saw his reaction-- oh, his eyes darkened even further, and he actually listened-- she hastily rinsed herself once more, and then he helped her out of the tub. She quickly reached for the towel, drying off roughly, and then oh he was on his back in the bed, eyeing her hungrily. She gave up trying to dry her hair and scrambled up onto the bed.

He looked up at her, his broad arms thrown over his head, his wet hair fanned out and no doubt soaking the pillow, but something in his expression-- oh! She straddled his thighs and pressed down on his shoulders, peering down at him, and asked, "Did you like that? Did you want me to order you about?"

He tried to rock his hips up, seeking friction against her, but her eyes snapped to his and he let out a low groan.

She shifted her hands to his wrists, knowing it was a bare pretense, that she couldn't truly pin him, but she felt him throb between her legs. She grinned wickedly and crooned, "Tell me--"

He gave a low whine and choked out, "--yes."

She met his wild eyes and said, "Good." Then she shifted and slid down onto him. He groaned rough and low, and then she began to move. His hands shifted beneath hers, like he wanted to reach up for her, but she tightened her hold on his wrists, and he stilled. Then when he couldn't move, words started to spill from his lips.

"Sanzeuh, mizimel, nnh-- I'm yours-- all of this is for you-- oh!" She pressed a biting kiss to his jaw and his hips juttered upwards. "Tell me I please you-- please, I need to hear it-- tell me how to please you, âzyungâl--"

She kissed him fiercely and whispered hotly, "You do."

He tossed his head back, neck cording, and she shifted her hands into his, lacing their fingers together, and she used the leverage to snap her hips harder. She bit back on a high moan as he drove
against that-- that spot inside. He lost his grip on Westron, Khuzdul grating out, low and desperate, and his hands spazmed in hers. Her breath started to come in pants and gasps, and the bed frame creaked and groaned, but she couldn't stop now, not-- *Oh!* not with this perfect angle, and she could feel her fingers start to tingle as her world shrank to one small diamond point--

Thorin, clutching at her hands, nigh beyond words, begged, "I'm close, Bilbo-- come, please come--"

And his gravel voice lodged beneath her chest, and there-- and there-- and there-- she broke around him with a high mewl, body fluttering around him, and her hands went numb.

With a feral cry, he broke her hold on his hands, clutched her waist, and lifted her off him. Late, she caught on, and she sat back on his thighs, staring as he roughly fisted himself and came in thick streaks across his chest.

Panting, she creakily toppled to the sheets beside him, and she tucked her head above his still-pounding heart. Then she grimaced at how sweaty they were, and she mumbled, "Let's do this before the bath, next time."

Beneath her ear, his low laugh rumbled in his chest.

Chapter End Notes

So, apparently my tastes run less-than-vanilla, but I don't think it's enough to really warrant a d/s tag? I just really think that with the dwarrow custom that dams are the ones who initiate courting and all, that there'd be a sort of cultural sense that they're the ones who take the lead in the bedroom too.

(And jfc, please take this with a grain of salt-- remember the withdrawal method is *not* a recommended way to avoid pregnancy.)

As always, thanks to the Dwarrow Scholar for the gratuitous Khuzdul endearments.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Of roads and rivers

Chapter Notes

Additional warnings apply, but they're spoilerish so I'm putting them at the bottom.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The caravan and the guards moved out before the sun was above the trees, while mist still clung to the hollows. Their long line of wagons clattered and rattled over the grassy remains of the East-West Road. Trilliums carpeted the forest floor, birdsong floated down from the branches above, and sunlight dappled through the tiny red flowers that covered the maple trees. In spite of Halthur's misgivings, the Rangers had already melted into the brush, flanking them unseen.

Despite the calm spring morning, though, Raetha would not stop fussing. She squirmed in her wrap on Bilbo's chest, and there were only so many kicks to the belly that the hobbit could take. So Bilbo climbed down from her pony, untied the wrap, and gently lifted Raetha to the ground. When Thorin's steel-capped boots also stomped to the ground, she raised a brow at him. He just gave her a level look and handed the reins of their ponies to one of the dwarrow guards. She quirked a half smile as she shook her head at him, but then Raetha darted out and she yelled, "Stay away from the wagons!" Before she could move, Thorin ran forward and caught their fey imp by the arm, swinging her up and away from the wheels that were taller than her by half. Raetha giggled, but he growled something too quiet for Bilbo to hear, and her face fell into a pout. Thorin shook his head at her and put her down in the grass far away from the caravan line.

He knelt down to her level and said firmly, "You can run around for a bit, but do not go near the wagons." Raetha shuffled her feet and looked away, but he said sternly, "Look at me, my nâtha." He waited till she looked back at him, then he held her gaze for a moment and asked gravely, "Are you going to play by the wagons?" She shook her head. Thorin smiled softly, brushed her cheek with his thumb, and said, "Good." Then he stood, but Raetha reached for his hand. Bilbo hid her smile at the flash of surprise that crossed his face. Their daughter's hand was tiny in his.

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The days passed. They drove into the wildlands, past landmarks that Bilbo thought she could recognize from the quest. She had thought the journey hard the first time, but it was infinitely more difficult with a fauntling. Throughout any given day, they pinned enough clean diaper cloths to the canvas cover of their wagon to make it ruffle in the wind. While Raetha was eating some solid food, she was still primarily breastfeeding. She was, however, too old to be content to ride in her sling for too long. Bilbo was intensely grateful for her extended family. Between her cousins and the Company, Raetha always had someone to mind her. But that did not stop Bilbo from collapsing into her bedroll each night.
The land got rougher as they pushed east, up into the Weather Hills. After a chilly, grey day that had belied the advancing spring, Bilbo huddled close to the campfire. Beside her, Dis cradled a drowsy Raetha. Thorin was a solid warmth at her side, and she quickly downed the last of her laswort tea. The sounds of crackling fire and the mingled murmuring of conversation lulled her, and then Thorin began to play with a lock of her hair that curled around her ear. She sighed, tired but content, and then he said quietly, "Do you know-- at first I thought I'd been misremembering-- but your eyes change from brown to blue depending on the light? It's rather like your hair--"

But she sucked in a breath and stiffened.

He quickly asked, "What?"

At first she opened her mouth a few times without a word, and she looked away, beet red. He tugged on her lock and she finally replied, affronted, "What a-- you can't just-- that's a horribly impolite thing to say-- you don't just comment on it!"

Thorin just blinked down at her, but after a long moment of quiet, a distant howl rent the night. Bilbo's head whipped toward the sound. "W-wolves? Are there wolves here?" Thorin's eyes snapped to hers, and she quickly checked that Sting was not glowing.

But Halthur huffed, "You're frightened of mere wolves?"

Before Thorin could respond, Adalgrim took his pipe from his mouth and snapped, "You'll keep a civil tongue in your head, not when you've no idea what you're talking about."

Halthur scoffed.

Adalgrim, incensed, bit out "I'd like to see how you'd react after watching your own da get ripped apart before your eyes by a 'mere' wo--"

"Ad--" Bilbo called roughly.

Halthur opened his mouth to reply, but Thorin barked something in Khuzdul. The captain stared at his king, but stayed quiet.

Thorin's gaze bore into hers, then he rasped, "Is this true?"

Bilbo opened her mouth, but no words came out. She just nodded.

Adalgrim explained gruffly, "Back in the Fell Winter, they--"

"Ad--" Bilbo again stopped him.

"You were still just a faunt--"

"Don't."

Her cousin looked volumes at her, but she shook her head minutely.

Thorin, frozen, asked slowly, voice ringing oddly, "And yet-- despite this-- despite what you witnessed, despite your fear, did you not defend me from an entire warg pack on our quest?" He stared at her, eyes blazing, waiting for her answer.

She shifted her shoulders and muttered, "What? No-- I did."

He asked louder, "And were you not the first to my aid when I fell before them?"
Her face crumpled, but she grit out, "I was."

The dwarrow listening started murmuring.

"And did you not place yourself bodily between me and the Defiler without a day of weapons training?"

Bilbo snapped, "You know very well I'd never held a sword before I got Sting."

Thorin asked again, intent, "Did you not stand between my broken body and certain death?"

Bilbo leapt to her feet and shouted down at him, "Of course I did!"

Thorin's face melted into a glowing smile as he rose to his feet, and he said softly, "Markheluh," and the dwarrow listening in gasped.

Halthur tried to interject, "But-- Sire!"

Pressed beyond his patience, Thorin snapped, "Be silent. I speak to kin, and I will honor them."

Bilbo cried, "What? Wait-- are you accusing me or praising me?" Then she blinked and tossed her head. "Thorin! This-- This is the Carrock again, isn't it! You--!" He swept her into a tight embrace. She muttered into his fur mantle, "Your sentence structure is appalling."

Thorin chuckled and pressed his forehead to hers. "Do you deny any of it?"

"Of course not!"

He smiled and pulled away, hands gripping her shoulders. "It doesn't translate as well into Westron, but I had to give you the formal opportunity to refuse the honor. Again, do you deny it?"

Bilbo's nose twitched but she quietly said, "I do not deny it. But I don't want to think about that, either. Not now, not ever." She shuddered and buried her face in his chest again. "I've come too close to losing you, I can't bear it--"

He wrapped his broad arms around her and held her close until she stopped trembling.

The nosey dwarrow all looked away and spoke excitedly amongst themselves, but Halthur stood and stomped away in a huff.

Adalgrim gave a small whistle to get Thorin's attention, and he nodded at Halthur's retreating back. "What's put a bee up his trousers?"

Thorin sighed and sat once more, pulling Bilbo into his lap. (She primly tried to shift away but soon gave up). He kept his voice down and explained grudgingly, "He does have a right to protest, in the strictest sense. Our language is sacred-- and private. To speak it in front of Outsiders is forbidden, but you are no longer Outsiders. He will need to come to terms with this, that's all." He flashed a grin and added lightly, "They don't speak of the stubbornness of dwarves for naught."

Adalgrim chuckled, and the mood lightened. Bilbo rolled the foreign word around in her mind, letting its harsh consonants rattle around like loose stones along with the other endearments he'd already bestowed upon her. She rather liked that he seemed to take it for granted that she knew what he meant (which, given the tenderness with which he said them, she thought she had a pretty good idea).

The others' conversations slowly started back up around them, but Raetha shuffled in Dis' arms.
"Mama?" Bilbo held out her arms and Dís let the fauntling wriggle out of her lap. Then she toddled over and crawled into Bilbo's lap, snuggling her face into Bilbo's shoulder. Bilbo in turn pressed her cheek into the fur mantle over Thorin's shoulder, and she felt as much as heard his contented rumbled note.

But then her dwarf tugged on her stray lock of hair once more and asked, "What hobbitish manners did I break, before? Your eyes and your hair are beautiful, mizimel, why will you not let me complimnet them?"

She couldn't help but flinch, and he tightened his arm around her waist. Finally, she muttered, "It's--well--it's as good as calling me a changeling, that I'm fairy-born and not a proper hobbit. It's been a--a sore spot my whole life."

Adalgrim puffed a smoke ring at her. "Took lass."

She huffily batted the smoke away and sniped, "You were a Bounder and you liked it."

Adalgrim laughed and told her, "You say that like it's a bad thing."

Bilbo replied with a scowl, "Yes, well, you would. You could, living in Tuckborough as you did, an oddity among oddities. I was the only one that stood out in Hobbiton, and you have no idea how hard I had to fight for every ounce of respectability."

Adalgrim had the grace to look down.

Thorin rumbled quietly, "I don't understand."

Bilbo sighed. "They say there's fairy blood in the Took clan, that that's why they're all--" she wriggled her fingers.

Adalgrim snorted, "Yep, that about sums it up." But he sobered and told her, "You know it's all nonsense and old biddies' gossip. Don't let it let you down, cousin. You're beyond that, now."

Thorin pulled her more tightly against his chest and told her, "You're ours, now, Burglar. Don't fret." She huffed a sigh against his chest and focused on the warm weight of their daughter in her arms. But she couldn't help but notice the stares the dwarves tried (badly) to hide.

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When they reached the Trollshaws, Dís demanded to see the stone trolls. The place looked very different in full daylight, but Bilbo could tell from the tight set of Thorin's jaw that he was as uncomfortable in this place as she was. Raetha eyed the stone trolls from her sling on his back, but she looked to her mother and asked, "Poof?"

Bilbo barked out a laugh, "Yes my dear, 'poof!' indeed. Very good."

Thorin lifted a brow at her and asked in the same high tone, "'Poof?'"

She swatted at his arm and instead asked Raetha, "My goodness, how many times did you faunts make me tell that story?"

Thorin chuckled at her, while behind them, Dís loudly berated her sons.

But their smiles quickly fell from their faces once more. Bilbo shivered as they passed the burnt ruin of the farmhouse. When they broke through the trees onto the Ettenmoors, she couldn't help but feel
exposed and vulnerable. The memory of warg howls haunted her dreams, but so far—so far they were not attacked. She dared to hope that word of her daughter's true parentage had not spread, but whether their spate of good luck was due to their strength in numbers or to a lack of pursuit was beyond her.

The high golden grass hid the great fissures that split the ground, so their caravan traveled very carefully across the moor, and the Misty Mountains now towered above them. Raetha was decidedly displeased with the whole affair, since no matter how much she fusses, she was not let down to play. Finally, Prim took her to sit in the driver's seat of a wagon again, and this change of pace was enough to satisfy the faunt for the moment.

Bilbo's eyes were ever drawn north. It hurt to pass this close to Rivendell without stopping, but she knew that such a visit with so large a caravan was impractical bordering on impolite. So she looked to the near mountains and wished her friends well, while they drove ever on over the moors.

Elrond must have heard her, though, for the next day, they were met by a party of elven riders, Gilraen and Elrond among them. Bilbo dismounted with a tearful cry. She ran to her friend, who knelt to embrace her. Thorin had Dwalin sound the call to break for a meal, and he and Elrond dismounted as well, staring at each other. Elrond smiled faintly at the shimmering wrap tied around the dwarf King. Thorin planted his feet and lifted his chin stubbornly. Then Raetha pulled one of his braids and asked behind his ear, "Adad?"

Gilraen popped up to gasp, "Oh my stars-- Hiraeth? Look at how big you are!"

Thorin's gaze snapped to the woman as Bilbo said wetly, "Gilraen, please meet Thorin. Thorin, this is my friend Gilraen." She pulled Raetha from the sling across Thorin's back and handed her to the woman, adding, "We call her Raetha now."

Elrond fought to hide a smile. "Now that is interesting."

Thorin stiffened, but Bilbo just said good-naturedly, "Oh bite your tongue, you great meddler, we know exactly what it means. It was Thorin's choice anyway."

Instead of turning to ice like Thorin half expected, Elrond held his hand out for Bilbo's and bowed over their clasped hands. "It is a beautiful name for a beautiful daughter."

Bilbo smiled up at the elf and declared, "I've missed you, my friend."

Elrond nodded and Bilbo went over to sit with Gilraen and the man-child, who were pouring affection over his daughter. Thorin looked uncomfortably back up at the elf, who merely looked back gravely. After a long moment, Thorin shuffled his weight, and after another beat of silence, he said gruffly, "You have my thanks, for keeping her safe when I could not."

Elrond looked down at him, as impassive and immutable as marble, then over at Bilbo, Gilraen, Estel, and Raetha. After a long moment, he said slowly, "In a way, I am glad that she was in Rivendell when she was. I don't mean to disparage Ereborean healers, don't misunderstand me," he added when Thorin stiffened. "I only mean that at the time, there were few midwives and fewer supplies in the mountain, yes?"

Dread slid down Thorin's spine.

Elrond nodded and looked at Bilbo again, saying thoughtfully, "Hobbits are remarkably resilient creatures. They can face such suffering and yet still come out again wondering about elevensies." Then he turned steel eyes back to Thorin and added, "But I am glad that you have each other again."
To his great consternation, Thorin blushed to the tips of his ears.

Elrond continued blandly, "I knew her mother, and I consider Bilbo a friend. For this reason, I'm offering guards to help you cross the Misty Mountains."

Thorin blinked hard and stared up at the elf.

Elrond said firmly, "There was once friendship between our peoples. I would like to see that once more."

Thorin blinked again, then bowed his head and rasped, "Again, you have my thanks."

Elrond smiled with quicksilver grace and turned to walk away. "Come, let me introduce you to my captain, Glorfindel."

"One of my captains you've already met." Thorin said with a smirk.

Elrond asked delicately, "Ah, was he the one who shattered my furniture, or the one who maligned my fountains?"

Perhaps it was Bilbo who had taught him a second language, because Thorin could now see the mischief glinting in the elf's eye, so he replied in the same vein, "Both."

From across the field, Balin saw Thorin, Elrond, and a strange elf approach his brother and Halthur. He hurriedly passed his pack to Oin (who griped loudly, but when he too looked up, he piped, "Oh!" and shoved him toward them). Balin reached them in time to hear Thorin say gruffly, "--Halthur, this is Glorfindel, captain of the guard who will accompany us over the High Pass."

Halthur puffed up like an angry cat, but Balin could see Thorin's angry Iglishmek command to save it. Halthur ground out from between clenched teeth, "Yes, Sire."

Elrond saw Balin and said graciously, "Ah, Master Balin, it is good to see you again."

At his side, his brother snorted rudely, but Balin smiled blandly and replied, "Aye, my lord. It's good to be here to be seen."

Elrond's eyes crinkled with a hidden smile and he bowed, saying, "You must forgive me, I would like to spend time with my friend while I may." He walked back to Bilbo, who sat in the grass with a woman while Raetha and a boy-child played a merry game of tag.

Balin glanced from Dwalin, who leaned menacingly on Grasper, and Halthur, who looked like he'd just sucked a lemon, up to the stern, armored elf. The silence stretched, so Balin asked politely, "So you'll be helping us across the mountains? That's mighty kind o' yeh, Master Elf."

Said elf smiled faintly. "The honor is ours, Master Dwarf."

Dwalin started to huff, "But wh--"

Balin shifted to stand slightly in front of his brother and asked loudly, "Glorfindel, wasn't it? Are yeh kin to the Glorfindel that fought and slayed a Balrog?"

The elf's brows furrowed. "--No, I am he."

Dwalin's grip slipped on his axe and he grunted, "Yeh fought a Balrog and lived?"

The elf turned sharp eyes on Dwalin. "No, I did not. But I came back."
Three dwarrow stared up at him.

Glorfindel sighed minutely. "Well, now, see, this will not do. I'm here to work with you to help you pass over the mountains unscathed this time. So can we please get past this?" He waved a small circle in the air in front of his chest and then adding, "And past this elf versus dwarf mentality, at least for the moment? I'm here-- we're here for Bilbo and Hiraeth. Then we'll be on our way."

Thorin nodded, but then Tracker came running up to thump Glorfindel in a rough hug, yammering something in Sindarin. Then he turned to the dwarves, more animated than Thorin had ever seen him, and said, "These are the finest fighters in Imladris, my friends. This does my heart glad."

Glorfindel gripped the back of Tracker's neck and muttered, "You are entirely too excitable," but a faint blush painted his cheeks. Balin fair goggled.

Thorin smiled and told Dwalin and Halthur, "Work out how you want to integrate these new guards, then we'll discuss our route over the High Pass--" his stomach growled. He snorted and added, "After lunch."

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This time, they camped before the pass and didn't attempt to push on through the night. This time, they stayed on the road and didn't try to take the short path.

Bilbo had been quiet since they took leave of Elrond and Gilraen, and she snuggled Raetha close in the sling across her chest. Until they crossed the mountains, she would not put their daughter down. Not with the cliffs surrounding them, not with the goblins they knew still lived below, in the dead rock that made Thorin's skin crawl.

Their caravan spread out-- the last thing they needed was a spooked ox or pony plunging themselves and all in their path into the abyss. The Rangers came in from their flanks, though their grey and green garb still blended with the rocks in such a way that rendered them still almost unseen. The elves' armor gleamed all the brighter in contrast. No one's hands strayed far from their weapons.

The mountains echoed in odd ways, and Thorin was still chilled by the thought of how indiscernible the goblins' trap had been to their tired, frightened eyes. He did not let Bilbo and Raetha out of his sight. Every falling rock could be an orc or warg scout.

Up this high, in the snowfields, the guards had to use their ponies to break a trail. Every time they had to stop to dig out a wagon, every time an ox slipped, his heart clenched painfully. And at the very top of the pass, even the very air seemed to abandon them, as they fought for every thin breath. But there, on the far horizon, they could just see the Lonely Mountain. Bilbo pointed for Raetha to look, and Thorin couldn't help but reach out to place a hand on her back.

If anything, he grew even more nervous on their descent. He worried his people would be so relieved that they'd lower their guard too soon. The setting sun sank behind the peaks, and the long shadow of the mountain stretched over them in a premature twilight. They still had a ways to go before they would get off the mountain, though, so they drove on while the sky above was still bright.

From this road, they could not even see the Carrock, which just went to show how very off-track they had gone during the quest. Thorin had to keep reminding himself to loosen his grip on Orcrist, lest his hand stiffen. They left the snowfield behind and drove beneath the old pines once more. Their hoofbeats and wagon wheels were muffled by the thick carpet of pine needles. Robins sang out from the branches above. The first stars began to glimmer in the east. And as they drove lower,
the air grew warmer, damper, thicker. Soon the frogs and crickets joined the robins' song. And below, he felt again living stone. He let out a harsh breath. They were off that accursed mountain. Then Glorfindel led them to a meadow, through which flowed an icy little brooke, and at last, they made camp for the night.

As they sat before their fire, as the sounds of the night wound down around them and their full bellies warmed with dinner, Bilbo curled against Thorin's side. She finished her cup of laserwort tea with a small smile, then leaned up to murmur in his ear, "Just a few more days, and then this--" she turned her empty mug, "this will be in effect."

She felt the moment he realized what she meant. First he froze, then his hand around her waist tightened almost to the point of bruising, and he breathed out a Khuzdul swear. She let out a peal of delighted laughter, and he pressed his face into her hair.

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The next morning, Glorfindel and his guards said their farewells. Bilbo, with Raetha tucked snug in her sling across her chest, said warmly, "Le fael. Na lû e-govaned vîn."

Halthur, standing nearby with Dwalin, was scandalized. "She speaks like an elf! What's she saying?"

Dwalin muttered, "Given that they're about to leave, I'm willin' to bet she's sayin' goodbye."

Halthur gave a low *fah!* and looked away.

Once more, the Rangers disappeared into the woods, and they drove on out of the foothills. Late that afternoon, they reached the upper Anduin and made camp at the Old Ford. The day was hot, and the broad oaks that lined the river were now in full leaf, but the water still ran high from the spring melt. Bilbo plucked at the cuff of her dirty, sweat soaked, now-grey blouse and decided that enough was enough. Unlike their first journey, when they had to pack light enough for their ponies (and then their backs) she now had access to more supplies. She rummaged through their wagon and unearthed two sets of clothes, towels, and a bar of soap, and then she and Raetha headed for the river. She met Thorin's eye on her way, but he was in council with Dwalin and Tracker, so he nodded but remained.

When she reached the water, though, she had to clap a hand over her eyes, because she wasn't the only one with the same idea, but she could not yet reconcile herself with that much public nudity. Instead, she headed upstream, until she found a riverbend that cut into a steep bank. As she climbed down the narrow path, she marveled at the sheer force of the true spring melt, because the river had sheared into this hill, and even as high as the water still was, there was a narrow strip of pebbles along the water's edge. During the melt, the water would be up to the top of the bank, and that was taller than even Dwalin.

Bilbo kept up a small argument with Raetha the whole while. "You're going to have a nice bath, my love."

"Nuh-uh."

"Oh yes you are."

"No baff."

Bilbo chuckled and put their towels and clean clothes on the pebbles, high enough that they wouldn't get damp. She untied Raetha's wrap, holding her tightly in one arm, and then unbuckled Sting and laid that over their clothes so they wouldn't blow away if there was a gust of wind. She had *no*
illusions about how not warm this bath would be, but she grit her teeth and stepped into the river. The current tugged at her foot hair, and she winced as the water reached her knees. She sat on a flatish rock, set the soap down beside her, and tried to build up her nerve.

Bilbo unbuttoned her waistcoat first, but then she heard boots crunch across the rocks. She clutched at her open waistcoat and started to turn, to yell at them to go away, but then a kick slammed into her back. Her arms locked around Raetha as they pitched face first into the river. Breath knocked out of her, she couldn't even scream. The water closed over her head, and then she couldn't tell up from down, but she couldn't let go, she couldn't--

The current buffeted her, and then her heels kicked the bottom. Lungs burning, she thrashed to get her feet under her, and she did, she did, and she pushed off with all her might-- and burst out of a surface that was closer than she'd thought. She got her footing again, swaying as the current tried to pull her under, and she stood with her head and shoulders above the water. She choked and coughed and breathed, but Raetha wasn't-- Raetha wasn't-- her daughter's eyes were open and glassy, and she-- Bilbo quickly tipped her forward, along one forearm, holding her chest, and she pounded on her back. Then she felt her baby cough, water choking out, and then Raetha began to wail and cough. The sound ripped into her chest.

At the same time, she saw Halthur standing on the rocks, not ten feet away, now with a drawn sword, and he was shouting-- her mind could not process-- had he killed what (who) had knocked her into the river? But there was nothing else, no one else there, and his blade was clean, but he-- he couldn't-- and then she registered what he was shouting, "--you fey witch, you can't even be drowned!"

Her heart seized. He stood between her and the trail up and out of the bank, and she didn't dare risk the rushing current to try to escape downstream. Her limbs already shook from the cold. She didn't have enough breath to scream; it felt like one of her ribs was broken, and her lungs burned from the river water. But Raetha was shrieking up a storm, so someone would hear, someone would come--

But then Halthur stomped into the water, coming after them. She stumbled back a step and the river nearly took her again. She flailed, and then she remembered the ring in her pocket. She fumbled one-handedly into her waistcoat, and when her finger slipped through the smooth band, the whole world shifted.

Bilbo saw the horrid, abstract, too-big shape of Halthur skid to a stop. He slashed the water with his sword and roared with impotent rage, "I know you're still there, witch!"

If anything, Raetha shrieked louder, and when Bilbo looked down, the howling, driving, not-even-there wind seemed like it was sucking the light out of her. Halthur raged and waded in deeper, so Bilbo dashed to the side, splashing water and not caring, going for speed for once and not stealth. But Halthur also moved, cutting off her path to Sting, and then a horrible rage kindled in her, burning away her fear. She pivoted away, faster than him, and then she was on the shore. He still stood between her and the path up the bank, but now she was on dry land. The rocks clattered loudly beneath her feet, though, and she could see her wet footprints. He knew where she was, and his sword flashed. She jumped out of the way, clinging to Raetha for dear life, but Halthur kept coming--

Then a wordless roar echoed behind him, and Halthur dropped his sword. Thorin sprinted across the rocks, Orcrist raised, and Halthur dropped to his knees with his hands in the air. Thorin checked his swing, but he held the edge to Halthur's throat and shouted, "Where is she!"

Halthur cried, "You've been trapped under her spell, Sire, I'm trying to save you!"
Thorin bellowed and swung Orcrist back, ready to strike, but Bilbo pulled off the ring and shouted his name. His head snapped to where she'd appeared from thin air, and he ran to them. He wrapped one arm around them both, and she clung to his chest, Raetha buried protectively between them, but then she heard rocks clash and--

Time slowed. She spun Thorin to the side as Halthur reared up with a boot knife, and she wrapped herself between him, and Raetha, and Thorin. His knife slammed into her side, and the breath was punched out of her again, but her armor, her mithril armor held. In the same movement, Thorin cut off Halthur's head. She pitched forward, one arm outstretched to catch her fall, the other wrapped around Raetha, who screamed and screamed and screamed.

Dís and Dwalin's boots skidded into her view, and Thorin was on his knees. He tore at the hole in the side of her waistcoat and shirt, and when he found her mail, he pulled her into his arms. She cried out in pain, and he loosened his grip and shouted, "Get Oín!"

Dís tried to reach for Raetha, but Bilbo clung to her and shook her head, even though her chest burned. Dís tutted and wrapped a towel around them both. Bilbo burst into tears.

Oín rushed up and dropped to his knees at her side. Above her, she heard their voices, but she could not make out their words, and her vision began to darken around the edges.

Dís knelt beside her and ordered, "Bilbo, Bilbo, breathe with me. Loud and slowly now, with me. No, no, look at me, right now." She pulled in a dramatic, full-belly breath, but Bilbo couldn't understand. Dís patted her cheek and repeated, "Do it with me, now." She patted her belly and breathed again. Bilbo tried. She did. But a deep breath flared pain across her side and she cried out. Dís said calmly, "Alright, you're alright. We'll take smaller, slower breaths. Like this, stay with me now." She breathed shallow but slow breaths, and gradually, the tingling in her hands and the darkness at the edges of her vision receded.

Meanwhile, Oín cut her shirt and waistcoat open, but the mail was still intact. He held his ear trumpet to her back as she breathed in, and he told Thorin, "Broken ribs, but they didn't puncture her lung. I'll need to wrap it straight away, though."

Bilbo still clung to Raetha, who was now shivering from cold, and Thorin rasped, "Let me take her, markheluh, sanzeuh. Oín needs to see to you. Let me take her."

Bilbo's grip tightened for a moment, but then she let Thorin take Raetha into his arms. He wrapped the towel more tightly around her and rocked her against his chest. Raetha would not stop crying, though, so he rose to go get her into dry clothes.

Someone dragged Halthur's body away.

Oín helped her pull off her ruined clothes, but she could not lift her arms to take off her mail. They were forced to ruck it up to her armpits. He quickly popped the top off one of the jars and jars of salves and poultices that he kept in his bag, but then he shook his head and re-capped it. Bilbo made a questioning noise and he said, "What? Oh-- no, not with the little one." He gestured vaguely at her bare breasts. "I'll get sage and vinegar for you later, at least. But we've got to get this stabilized now." Then he started to wrap a long bandage around and around her ribs. "No wearing the wrap for a few weeks, and you're not to lift Raetha for at least two weeks."

"But!" She cried as he slid her mail down over her bandages.

"No buts. Someone will bring her to you when she needs to eat, and you can hold her while sitting, obviously, but you're not to bend down and sling her about, do you hear me?"
She nodded mulishly.

Dís said, "You brave lass. What on earth possessed him?" She cut herself off with a growl and reached for Bilbo's hands with both of hers.

Bilbo's hands trembled as she said, "He called me a-- witch. A fae witch."

Dís' nose flared as she spat something in Khuzdul. "That superstitious old goat. What a--" she snarled another word that had too many consonants for Bilbo to keep track of.

She shook her head and said, "I-- I don't understand. Why would-- why?"

"Some of the hard-line traditionalists don't think someone can have a One that's not a dwarf." Dís tossed her head as if disgusted that she needed to quote their ideas. "That if a dwarf finds their One in one who is not a dwarf, that they're mistaken at best, and hoodwinked at worst."

Bilbo shrank into herself and asked, "How many think like that?"

Dís burst out, "Not many. And even fewer who would act on that. That absolute idiot, as if any one could not see how dwarf-hearted you are. If Mahal didn't have a hand in your making, I'll eat my axe."

Oín cried, "Hear, hear!" and waved his ear trumpet as he packed up his bag.

Dís shook her head. "Rest assured, Kingshield, this will not be your normal reception."

Bilbo ducked her head, but frowned and looked back at her, saying, "Wait-- Kingshield?"

Dís smiled at her and said, "From my brother's own lips. 'Markheluh' means 'my shield."

Then Thorin came back with her still-dry, clean clothes, and Bilbo burst out, "I didn't even get my bath!"

Chapter End Notes

Additional warnings for violence, attempted murder, etc. I mean, there's nothing more graphic than what's already in the movies, but there's a little kid involved now, so just... be warned.

Gratuitous herb references:

Laserwort is an ancient (now extinct) contraceptive.
Comfrey poultices are used to help heal broken bones, but you're never to use comfrey if pregnant or nursing. A poultice of sage and vinegar is used to help with bruising.

Khuzdul:

Markhel - shield of all shields

(And yesss. I was hoping to get this posted today. It's me and Mr.61Below's 10th anniversary today. He's been a very spotty, but beloved beta for this and all my fic, though since he still doesn't know the difference between seen and saw, his help is
mostly for moral support.)
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Of power and treason

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Adalgrim looked up when he heard Raetha's distant cries, and he saw Thorin and his guard fellow straighten and run off. He stood warily. Then that burly fellow--Dwalin came sprinting back, bellowing, "Oin!" and the dwarrow lept to their feet. An old grey dwarf slung a bag over his shoulder and they ran back toward the river.

Fíli yelled at Dwalin's back, "What happened?"

Dwalin snarled over his shoulder, "Halthur attacked our Burglar!"

Chaos erupted.

Over the din, Hamfast shouted, "Your own captain tried to kill her!"

One of the Third Company yelled, "Well somebody had to!"

Kíli snarled and shoved through the crowd. "What did you say?"

The dwarf gestured wildly at the hobbits and cried, "From their own lips, she's a fae thing!"

"Oh Holy Mother, she's not fae!" Adalgrim threw his hands up in exasperation. "They've called the whole Took clan that for generations because by hobbit standards, we're fair odd!"

Some of the Third Company reared back in shock.

Kíli bellowed, "What are you doing? She deserves your allegiance! She faced a dragon for you--"

Somebody else cried, "How'd she survive the dragon then if she ent magic?"

Kíli shouted, "Am I magic, then, too? Don't speak of things you don't understand! Bilbo has done more to reclaim Erebor than any of you, and this is her thanks?"

The first dwarf thumped his chest and yelled, "Why'd she help in the first place? She's no dwarf! Maybe this was her plan all along, to 'help' take back the mountain, only to really take the King--!"

Kíli fist his hands in the dwarf's tunic with a shout.

"Shazara!" a voice thundered.

Silence rang and they stared up at Thorin. He held Raetha in one arm, but blood spattered his face and he held Halthur's severed head aloft. He looked every inch a warrior king as he roared, "If anyone else thinks my One is unworthy, let them bring their necks to my axe!" He slung the head with a wordless snarl, out over the crowd, out across the field, and held out his arm in invitation.
"Well?"

Bilbo appeared at his side, wincing, and put a hand on his arm. "No, let them speak. If they have questions, let them ask, or else this will fester."

Thorin's wild eyes snapped down at her and he huffed out a frustrated breath.

Bilbo stared up at him and called loud enough for all to hear, "No, everyone is entirely too excited right now. We need tea, and then we will discuss this like rational adults." She turned and nodded to Menegilda, Mrs. Cotton, and Dori, and they started to draw out their supplies. More quietly, she directed those of the Company at their side, "Bofur, Nori, please call in the folks still at the river. Bombur, if there's such a thing as a universal comfort food, will you prepare that tonight? Balin? Is there a typical format for this sort of thing? Usually, if we call a town meeting, we all take turns to speak, but--" she trailed off, biting her lip.

Balin nodded and said, "We'll use court rules." Then he bustled off to get everyone seated.

Bilbo reached for Thorin's hand, and he gripped her fingers tight. He grated quietly, "I am so sorry."

She lifted her brows in shock. "Whatever for? For this? Hush." She squeezed his fingers.

He rasped, "You-- how are you--? How can you be so calm?"

She sucked in a shivery breath and winced, but she shook her head. "I'm not. But-- in the grand scheme of things, really, what else is new? I've fought orcs and cut spiders, bandied wits with a dragon, and lived to face down my cousin. At least I can hold a civil conversation with your dwarrow."

Thorin looked pained, but he dipped his head to press his brow to hers. He took a deep, shuddering breath. Then Raetha asked, "Mama, hold me?"

With a twist in her gut, Bilbo said, "In a moment, dearest. Once we sit down." Her ribs throbbed.

Balin approached and hemmed. "This way, please." He led them to a flat rock, where they could sit and be seen above the crowd. Gingerly, she sat and held her arms out for her daughter. Raetha wrapped her arms around her neck and buried her face in her shoulder. Her dark curls were still wet under her cheek. More and more dwarrow shuffled into the field, sitting in the grass, and at last, hobbits and the Company passed out mugs of tea. Mrs. Cotton handed Bilbo hers, doctored with entirely too much milk, but she said, "This'll help knit your bones faster, ma'am." Bilbo blinked at hearing the honorific from the older hobbit, but then she bobbed a curtsy and left.

Bilbo asked Thorin, "How can you stand it?"

He hummed a questioning noise, but it was clear he didn't get it. Bilbo reminded herself firmly that he'd been raised into this, so of course this behavior wouldn't seem out of the ordinary to him.

Once everyone was settled, Balin shouted something ringing in Khuzdul, and the crowd fell silent. Then he called, "Today, an attempt was made upon the Queen-to-be's life, upon the King's daughter's life!" From the murmurs from the crowd, their people hadn't known Raetha had also been attacked too. Bilbo was shocked at the anger in old Balin's voice, and she was reminded that he had been a warrior before he became a diplomat. Then he continued, "Now, it is her right to seek out and execute every one of that traitor's associates, but she has chosen to let those malcontents speak so that she may address their treasonous claims--"

Bilbo cleared her throat pointedly.
Balin puffed out his cheeks and concluded grudgingly, "By the will of the Burglar, state your concerns."

Silence rang.

After a beat, Dís cried, "Well? Ragir, you had a lot to say earlier, why don't you ask her now why she joined the Company and fought to reclaim your homeland, when you did not?"

Bilbo chided quietly, "Dís--"

Dís tossed her long hair, nose flaring.

Gloin opened his mouth angrily, but Bilbo stood with a wince and--

"What'd I tell yeh?!" Oín shouted from the back.

Bilbo huffed and passed Raetha to Thorin. Then she took a shallow breath and huffed, "This is turning out far more confrontational than I wanted. I feel that it would be timely to remind my Companions that they initially doubted me, too." Thorin made a pained sound at her side, and she saw shame flash across Ori and Dwalin's faces before she looked back out over the three hundred-some dwarrow, men, and hobbits before her. "They asked the same question of me then, too, 'Why are you helping us?'. That broke my heart then, and it breaks my heart now, because you should not be so used to the indifference of others that you distrust hands that are extended to you in friendship. And like I told the Company then, I'll tell you now: you deserve a home, and I will do what I can to help you make Erebor your home again." The crowd shifted and murmured, She looked around, making eye contact when she could, and added firmly, "I don't have an ulterior motive. I'm not playing some long game. Good gracious, I had my hands full enough back in the Shire. But now I've--" she glanced down at Thorin and Raetha and swallowed hard around the sudden lump in her throat, "I've found a family, and I will stop at nothing to defend that. I hope that as you get to know me, you will learn to trust in that, and to trust in me. And if I am not enough, if you doubt that an Outsider, a hobbit, can love a dwarf, well, look to the Green Lady, as I am made in her image, and--" she smiled fondly at Thorin, "well, look at our choice in husbands."

There was a beat of silence, then one of the dwarves asked hesitantly, "--The Green Lady?"

Bilbo blinked, caught off guard. "Yes? Our maker?" She looked around at the incomprehension on their faces and stuttered, "Aulë's-- Mahal's wife?"

Gasps broke out across the crowd. Some dwarves even cried out in Khuzdul. Bilbo looked a question at Thorin, and he stood, eyes searching hers. He must have found his answer there, because then he turned, and his voice rang across the field, "Do you now see? I need no saving, I am under no spell. I have found my heart in one who is not dwarrow, this is true, but we must remember our dependence upon all who live in this world. Though the hobbits' ways are not our ways, I would honor Mahal's lady wife by my love for her daughter."

Thorin's declaration was met with silence, and for a moment, Bilbo's gut clenched and she wondered if she'd badly misjudged the situation. But then one of the dwarves stood and cried, "Forgive me my doubts, my Lady." They dropped into a deep bow.

Then another, and another, and soon a handful also stood, pleaded forgiveness, and bowed, and then some of the dwarrow began to shout, "Traitor!" "How could you!" while more shouted back.

Bilbo feared a riot, so she hollered, "Listen here!" She winced at the strain in her side, but the dwarrow-- her people quieted down. "I'm not out for recriminations! Halthur--" her voice broke, and
she took a quavering breath. "Halthur was killed in a fight, not executed without a trial. But now, with your loyalty, I am willing to move on. So let's put this behind us, now, and move forward."

The dwarf, shocked at her leniency, stared up at her. Then someone cried, "To the queen!" and the call was taken up by the whole roaring crowd.

Bilbo looked up at Thorin, eyes wide, and he nodded minutely. Then he helped her down from the rock and they headed back to their wagon.

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Later that evening, Bilbo huddled close to their campfire, still chilled to the bone. Thorin gently ran a comb through her damp hair, humming low. Dís rocked Raetha, who drowsed in the firelight. Prim and Menegilda sat at her sides, and Adalgrim, Rorimac, and Drogo puffed rather aggressively on their pipes. The Company found excuses to stay close, and they fair bristled with weapons. When Thorin's deft fingers wove her azlâf braid back into her hair, Bilbo sighed and leaned into his touch. He said softly, "A braid for valor, one you've already earned many times over." He reached into his hair and pulled a bead from one of his braids to cap hers.

Bilbo shook her head at him, but she let him pull her back to lean against his chest. She listened to his steady heartbeat and felt his every breath, and she focused on just that, just that.

Menegilda handed her her evening tea, but Oín called, "Wha's that?"

Bilbo flushed and peeped, "Laserwort."

Her heart plummeted when he shook his head. "No, too much a risk for bleeding, not with your ribs broken and you in danger of a puncture--"

She gasped and winced violently, and Thorin gripped her shoulders to help her sit upright. She couldn't fight back the litany railing through her head, Not fair, it's not fair-- we'll be back at square one even after the stabbing agony dropped back to low level pain, and she leaned back into Thorin's arms.

Later that night, Bilbo woke with a gasp. Raetha, snuggled between them, slept on, and she reached blindly for Thorin's arm. He was awake instantly, but he held her gently as she shivered. She turned on her side, ignoring the flare of pain, and curled around their daughter to bury her face in his chest. He whispered comfort lowly into her ear and rubbed his hand up her back. When she got hold of her breathing, she sighed and told him, "I can't-- I can't help--" she bit her lip and he nuzzled her temple. She took a quakey breath and whispered, "I can't stop remembering how-- oh Thorin, the worst part wasn't Halthur. When I put on the Ring, Raetha screamed. It was like-- the whole world is different when I put that thing on, but it was like something was taking her light-- I'm-- I'm so afraid that I hurt her--" her voice broke, and he held her as tightly as he dared.

He told her gruffly, "Ghivashel, thanks to your quick thinking and to that ring, you're both still here." She nodded and he pressed a kiss to her lips. Then he pressed his forehead to hers and said warmly, "Markheluh, I cannot praise you enough. You saved me today, you saved our daughter--" his voice broke, and his Westron failed. "Amrâlimê, sanzeuh--"

Bilbo kissed him quiet.

They crossed the ford the next day. Bilbo cringed as the water reached her calves even on pony back. After she put her feet back on the bare earth, she took a seat to wait for the rest of the caravan.
The sight of the wagons swaying in the current was enough to make her stomach revolt, though, so she turned away. Thorin put Raetha in her arms and went to go help guide the oxen. Raetha, for once, was content to simply stay in her lap. Bilbo pressed her face in her baby's cloud of black curls and let the sunshine soak into them.

By mid-morning, they were on their way. Bilbo hadn't realized quite how painful riding would be with her broken ribs. After lunch, she could take no more, so Thorin handed their reins to a guard and walked with her. When she protested, he shrugged his shoulders beneath Raetha's wrap and said, "Indulge me, I'm feeling nostalgic."

Bilbo blinked at him. His ribs-- his ribs after the first, no the second fight with Azog-- the horrible uncertainty after he fell--

Thorin brushed his fingers over her cheek and she blinked back at him. His expression was soft as he looked down at her. "While this journey with broken ribs is-- how did you refer to it? 'No picnic?' You'll be fine." She glared at him and he corrected, "As I was fine." He pressed a soft kiss to her lips then and laced his fingers with hers. His voice rumbled low as he said, "Do you know how much I wanted to kiss you that night? After the Carrock?"

"Probably not half as much as I did," she replied lightly. She quirked a half smile and tried to shake off her chill.

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They walked on for the next few days, but soon, she did not have the breath to spare to banter. Her lungs burned, and she could not take a full breath, so she was reduced to shallow panting. A cough had started tickling the back of her throat that morning, but that jarred her ribs horribly, and by the time they made camp on the edge of the Mirkwood, cold sweat had broken out upon her brow. Dwalin's horn sounded oddly distant.

Raetha was listless and pale when Kíli pulled her out of the sling across Thorin's back. Bilbo held her and ran a hand up and down her back, feeling her little lungs fluttering too fast, and then she would barely eat. Thorin's brow furrowed as he watched them, and he quietly asked Kíli to fetch Oín. Finally, Bilbo gave up and rebuffed her shirt, but then she was wracked by a coughing fit. She clung to Raetha, and she whimpered as she tried to draw breath.

Oín hustled up and deftly lifted Raetha out of her grip. "There, lass, sit up straight, there." While Bilbo blinked back tears and panted, he sat and put Raetha in his lap, gently poking and prodding at Raetha's jaw, armpits, and belly. He murmured, "No fever, has she thrown up? Coughed?" Thorin and Bilbo both shook their heads. Oín turned Raetha and lifted her shirt, pressing his ear trumpet to her bare back, and his lips twisted. "Yeh breathed in a lungful of river water, didn't yeh, my wee lass?" Bilbo's skin prickled with goosebumps. Then she was seized by another coughing fit. Oín tucked Raetha's shirt back down and passed her to Thorin, then he held Bilbo's shoulders as she fought to breathe. When she took a shuddering breath, Oín said, "I'mna lift your shirt, lass, a moment." His ear trumpet was cold on her bare back above her bandages, and she winced. "As deep a breath as yeh can, please." He hummed sadly and carefully tugged her mail and shirt back down. "Pneumonia, both of yeh. The river water settled into your lungs." He shook his head and stood. "I'll be right back with tea."

Thorin held his arm out to her, and she buried her face in his shoulder.

Oín soon came back with teas and cough syrup, and Bombur made her rich soup. Oín hid Raetha's herbs in some rice porridge and patiently fed her til she'd eaten most of it. Thorin held his daughter close and hummed a lullaby so he would feel a little less useless.
The next morning broke damp and grey. Bilbo hadn't been able to sleep through the night, waking again and again to coughing fits, and Oín's cough syrup made her head feel like she was thinking through thick cotton. Raetha had to be coaxed into nursing, and then she had to be fed herbs in her porridge again. The poor faunt's nose had stuffed up in the night, and her too-fast breaths rattled in her chest. Oín concocted a kind of mint lotion for Bilbo to rub on their chests that offered some relief, but they were both becoming quite ill quite quickly.

The elves must have been close, though, because their reedy horns called back before lunch. Bilbo watched hazily as a tall, lithe redhead led her warriors out of the trees, then she was before them, nodding deeply. Dís was actually friendly toward the elf, and Kíli seemed to glow. Bilbo blinked slowly and leaned a little against Thorin's arm. Their words sort of passed her by. Then Kíli cried, "Wait, but you've never actually met! Tauriel, this is our Burglar, Bilbo. Bilbo, this is the captain of Thranduil's guard--"

Bilbo cocked her head up for a moment, then piped, "Oh! I broke the dwarves out of your jail!" She glanced uncertainly from her to Thorin, but there was no defensiveness or hostility in his mien.

Thorin explained quietly, "She saved Fíli and Kíli during the battle."

Dís added, "And we fought spiders together."

And Kíli sighed dreamily, "And she healed me when that orc shot me in the river." Then Tauriel shot him a pointed look, and he cleared his throat and ducked his head.

Dís and Thorin exchanged a glance, but Tauriel asked firmly, "How long til your people will be ready to move out?"

Thorin gave her a look, but said, "Given the timing, it would make sense to eat lunch first. Then we can move out."

Meanwhile, Kíli tried to slip away, and Dís called, "We will be having words later!"

After their cram and cheese and sausages were eaten, and after Raetha again barely nursed, the caravan bustled to make ready. Thorin wrapped Raetha in her sling across his chest, but Bilbo had to concede that she didn't have the breath to walk any more. Mounting the pony made spots dance before her eyes, but then once they entered the wood, it became even worse.

The whole place still felt rotten, the very air seemed suffocating, and the constant dim darkness seemed to crowd her vision until she felt she would scream from it. And then Raetha started coughing. The sounds of her baby in distress tore at her heart. Thorin kept offering Raetha sips of water, but they needed to ration that tightly. Riding was nearly unbearable. It wasn't at all like sitting on a park bench, no. She could hardly believe how much she had to rely on her stomach muscles to stay in the saddle. And on and on they rode, until the dimness became darkness, and they broke for camp once more.

Thankfully, the elves had some magic and they were able to have fires without attracting the flocks of horrid moths this time, but Bilbo was now in that wretched state of illness where every breath felt like knives and her whole body ached. She had no appetite, but she forced down as much broth as she could. Raetha's reluctance to nurse was now becoming a problem. Oín scoured the caravan for a honeycomb and coaxed food and water down Raetha's throat. Her eyes were glassy, her head lolled, and she kept whimpering. Bilbo wanted to cry. When she was seized by coughs, she did.

Her days and nights began to bleed together. Her limbs seemed to grow heavier and her thoughts became wobbly, ponderous things. Finally, one morning, Oín stopped her from mounting her pony.
Bilbo blinked blearily at him, and he repeated, "You're in no state to ride, lass."

She said blankly, "But I can't walk--"

Oín felt her forehead, but while she was clammy, she wasn't running more than a low grade fever. "No lass, but in case yeh haven' noticed, there are a few wagons about."

Bilbo thought of the clattering wagons, running rough over the still-overgrown track of a road, and she blanched. Oín hummed and said, "There's got to be a way--"

They redistributed some of the supplies to free up one wagon, and then with some clanking, they rigged up a rough hammock frame and strung up a blanket. Thorin held Raetha and watched as Oín helped Bilbo lie back in the swinging thing. She was wracked by another coughing fit, so Thorin bent down to wipe away her tears. He cupped her cheek and said, "I'll be right outside the wagon, so don't hesitate to ask for anything." Bilbo nodded and shifted to try to get comfortable in the hammock, but she winced instead. Thorin kissed the back of her hand, and then he and Oín left the wagon. The caravan clattered on.

The hammock only provided so much protection from the jarring ride, though. Thorin, walking beside the wagon, bit his cheek when he heard her rattling cough and her muffled yelps as the wagon clattered over roots. But then, if anything, he worried more as the day progressed and she cried out less and less often. Raetha seemed to grow more lethargic, too.

When they stopped for lunch, he and Oín ducked into the wagon. She blinked slowly, but her eyes didn't seem to focus on him, on anything.

They looked down at the hobbit, and Thorin asked raggedly, "What's wrong with her? With them?"

Oín shrugged helplessly, and the bottom fell out of Thorin's stomach. Oín gestured at Raetha, "I don't know, it's like they've got fevers, but there's no fever. I've never seen the like."

Thorin brought both hands to cup Raetha's back through her sling. His daughter slept, too still, against his chest. "Have you spoken with the elf, the one who hea--"

Oín shook his head. "Til now, I thought it was just weakness with the pneumonia-- which, make no mistake, does a number on yeh-- but-- this--" he floundered and looked down. "I'm sorry."

Thorin stared at his cousin, shocked. "Apology accepted, Oín. But-- if this is like nothing you've seen before, though, can you...discreetly ask? I don't want word to get out just yet."

Oín nodded and clambered out of the wagon. Thorin leaned over Bilbo and brushed her hair away from her brow. Then he noticed that she'd slipped one hand into the pocket of her waistcoat. He looked back up at her face, blank of all expression, like she was asleep. His brows furrowed and he reached into her pocket to see what she was hol--

FireShriekGoldFIRE

He snatched his hand back and nearly toppled. He stared in horror and shook his head to clear the echoes of the warmburningdrowning feeling of his gold sickness. He clutched Raetha, bent his head to press a kiss to the top of her curls, and breathed, and breathed. When he looked back at Bilbo, she still dozed, oblivious to his distress, and goosebumps rose on his arms.

She kept her ring in her pocket.

"It was like it was taking the light from her--"
She had told him it had frightened her. Why hadn't he listened? He'd thought she was just upset from the attack, rightfully so, and he'd focused so hard on reassuring her, but still— he was of the line of Durin, he should know better than most the dangerous nature of magic rings. Yet it seemed like such a little thing, invisibility was useful, but it wasn't—it was just a trinket. It was not like his forefathers' ring, which could draw forth new seams of riches from dry mines and sway a kingdom to serve--

Thorin shook his head like he was clearing water from his ears. He needed to get it away from her, now, but he was afraid to so much as touch it. After a moment, he reached down to pull her hand out of her pocket, but her fist clenched. His heart clenched. She did not wake. For a beat, he was at a loss. But then he unbuttoned her waistcoat and lifted her limp form enough to pull the coat off one arm. Her other hand remained in her pocket. Then he reached down to stroke her cheek and called softly, "Bilbo, Bilbo-- look at me, love--"

Her lids fluttered, but she did not open her eyes. However, she did shift enough that she loosened her grip, and with the smooth dexterity built from years of smith-work, Thorin lifted her hand from her pocket and slid the waistcoat down her arm.

She reached blindly, and he quickly bundled the waistcoat into a ball, fighting back bile as he felt a wave of gold sickness rise even through the fabric. Bilbo's arm fell back onto the sheet. Raetha shifted against his chest and whimpered.

"Has there been any change?"

Oín's voice at the back of the wagon made him jump. Tauriel and Tracker stood with him, peering inside the dim wagon. Thorin swallowed hard and said gruffly, "No, none." He climbed out to make room for the oversized elf and man and asked, "Please, will you also look at Raetha as well?" Oín nodded and loosened the wrap enough to lift her limp form into his arms. A sick feeling of possessiveness nearly swamped him, and he signed to Oín that he would be right back. While his cousin furrowed his brows in confusion, he said nothing.

Thorin walked up the line to their personal wagon, sweating and fighting to keep his demeanor calm, and then scrabbled for his keys and stuffed the balled up waistcoat into one of the lockboxes. The sight of the gold swam before his eyes, and he slammed the lid shut. The gold left tracers on his vision, like he'd looked too long into a too-bright fire. Then he forced himself out of the wagon, despite his warring desires to stay with the gold and run back to her side, and he went to find Balin.

The dim, rotting air of Mirkwood pressed down on his temples, and he grabbed Balin a little too forcefully to pull him aside. His cousin peered up at him in shock, and Thorin choked on a breath. "Balin, I'm sorry--"

Balin, now thoroughly worried, asked quietly, "Whatever for--?"

But Thorin thrust his keys at him and whispered, "I felt it again. The gold sickness--" Balin's face fell so he added quickly, "And I'm afraid that-- I have a suspicion about why-- but here. Take these. Keep it secret, but gather the Company, quietly. They have a right to know."

Balin took the keys but when Thorin started to rush off, he asked, "Thorin, wait! Where are you goin' now?"

His brows furrowed and he answered, "To Bilbo," like it was obvious.

Balin reached out to catch his arm and asked, "But-- Wait, you can't, what if--"

Thorin paled and he shook his head wildly. "No, I wouldn't-- no, I am not a threat to her! Not--!"
whispered in Balin's ear, "I felt it, just a brush of it, when-- but not now. Balin, I think her ring is more than it seems. She told me-- she told me that Raetha--" his voice cracked and he pulled back to pinch the bridge of his nose. "I've locked it up with our funds. I only felt it when I held her ring-- Balin, I'm no threat to her, but I need to go back-- she's gotten worse."

Balin let him go, face haunted, but he nodded. Thorin got back to the wagon in time to hear Tracker say, "I don't understand, it's like she's been hit by the Black Breath."

Thorin froze. But that-- that wasn't possible.

Oín half shouted, "And when could she'a got tha'? A Nazgûl is just about the only thing we haven't faced! Please, Maker willing," he supplicated as an afterthought.

Thorin rasped, "If that's what it looks like, treat them like it's that."

All three looked up at his sudden appearance. Then Tauriel asked Oín, "Do you have any athelas?"

"None fresh, only dried."

"We'll have to hope it works, then. It doesn't grow near here," she said with the seeming indifference of elves. A year ago, he would have torn into her for her coldness. Now he could see the brittle edges of her mask.

Oín pulled the packet and a pestle from his bag. When he added a bit of water to make a paste, the smell seemed to light up the wagon. Thorin was reminded of cool spring breezes and a high blue sky, and the back of his throat no longer burned. Oín scooped the paste onto Bilbo and Raetha's chests, and already, color came back to their pallid cheeks.

Oín sat back, saying, "But that doesn't make any sense--"

They sat in silence for a moment, all at a loss. Then Balin hemmed from outside the wagon, and Thorin asked Tauriel, "Please excuse us a moment, will you stay with them?"

Tauriel blinked, not expecting the trust in the dwarf king's face, and she nodded.

Thorin stood and bowed. Then he tugged on Oín's sleeve, and they left with Balin.

Chapter End Notes

Edited to include this wonderful line from the Dwarrow Scholar: "On the brink of starvation, Durin II closed his eyes in prayer to Mahal, asking the Great Smith to help his children. When he opened them once more Kaminzabdûna, Mahal’s wife, had appeared to him. She gave Durin a handful of seeds and seven straws of spring barely, to be given to the kings of the dwarven clans, as a reminder of their dependence on all that lived in the world. The seeds were planted in the heart of the mountain and with little natural sunlight, nor little warmth, they grew. Northern Barley men still call it, yet to the dwarves it will forever be known as 'The Queen’s Gift'" — The Annals of the Dwarves

"They had to have the whole vanishing business carefully explained, and the finding of the ring interested them so much that for a while they forgot their own troubles. Balin in particular insisted on having the whole Gollum story, riddles and all, told all over again,
with the ring in its proper place." --*Flies and Spiders, The Hobbit.*

I'm adding magic hand-waving notes because tbh I, uh, forgot that Thorin was in fact not present when Bilbo told the dwarves about the ring in the book, and it's not specified if he tells Thorin when they're reunited in the dungeons. My own memories of this story's 'canon' have now become such a jumbled mess of bookmoviefanon that I can hardly tell up from down anymore. So shh, just accept the headcanon that Thorin was in fact there. You cannot convince me that his absence *not noticed*, as if he wouldn't be the first person Bilbo would know was missing.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Of power and influence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Balin led Thorin and Oín further back down the trail. They didn't dare go off into the trees. The rest of the Company were already there, and they raised a clamor when they saw him. "What's going on-?-?" "What's wrong with our burglar--?" "Why so hush-hush, eh?" "Thorin, what--?" He raised one hand and they quieted down.

Thorin rasped, "Bilbo and Raetha have both been suffering the same symptoms as the Black Breath."

"Which doesn't make sense," Oín muttered as Kíli asked, "What's the Black Breath?"

Balin, horrified, cried, "That only comes from the ringwraiths-- what? How!"

Oín held his hands out to Balin like, See?

Fíli asked quietly, "How are they?"

Thorin brushed a hand down his face and said, "They seem to be responding to treatment now, but-- there's more. Do you remember her ring? With the spiders?"

They nodded, nonplussed.

"When she-- she said that when she wore it to escape Halthur--" he spoke over the sudden round of growls, "She said afterwards that she was afraid that it hurt Raetha somehow. I don't know how, I didn't listen-- I was too glad that they had the means to become invisible in the first place, but now--" his voice broke. "She lost consciousness today, but she was holding that ring even still. When I-- when I reached for it, I was hit by a wave of gold sickness."

The Company gasped. Fíli cried, "But that-- that was from the cursed dragon hoard! That's what Gandalf said!"

Thorin shook his head. "That's what I thought too. I don't feel it now, now that I'm not holding it, but-- we need to get word to Gandalf somehow."

Balin said faintly, "A plain gold band, wasn't it?"

Thorin nodded and looked sharply at his cousin. "Why, what are you thinking of?"

Balin shook his head. "I was just-- but no. I was just thinking of the Black Breath and wondered if it was somehow one of the Nine--"

Thorin reared back in horror.
Balin shook his head again, "But it's not." He patted his beard fretfully. "Send word to Elrond, maybe he'll know how to get in touch with Gandalf."

Roäc, who had seen the gathering of dwarrow and followed, flew down from the trees. Ori reached into his bag for paper, but Thorin shook his head. "I don't want word of this to get out. My reign has already been tarnished by one bout of madness. If any suspicion falls to Bilbo, there's no telling what-- no. Roäc, tell this to Elrond privately, please--"

Thorin gave instructions to the raven, then Roäc flew off. Kíli asked Balin, "One of the nine what?"

Balin's lips pursed. "You, of the line of Durin, should already know this. If you'd paid attention to your lessons, lad--"

"Balin!" Kíli nigh whined.

The old dwarf huffed and said quietly, "Nine for the kings of men, seven for the dwarf lords, three for the elves, and one--" a gust of fetid wind hit their faces. Balin shook his head again and replied more calmly, "But it was just a thought. It couldn't be--"

A rustling and crackling tore through the underbrush, coming closer. The dwarves all drew their weapons and-- rabbits, then Radagast burst out of the woods, shouting, "Fire! Death! Sickness! Where is it!"

The dwarves slowly lowered their blades, and Thorin said, "Welcome, Radagast."

The wizard stared blankly at him and asked, "Who are you? How do you know who I am?"

Thorin said slowly, "You helped us escape wargs on the Ettemoors."

Radagast blinked once, then cried happily, "Oh right! Thimble, wasn't it?"

Thorin stared, then finally said, "No, it isn't. But I'm glad you've come. We need to get word to Gandalf."

Radagast hummed and lifted his hat to let a fluttering bird land in his hair. "What, Gandalf?" I haven't heard from him in months."

Thorin hid a sigh and asked, "What brings you here, then?"

Radagast cocked his head like he was confused, then he piped, "Oh! Right. I felt something."

When he didn't elaborate, Kíli cried, "What! What did you feel?"

The wizard suddenly looked grave and wholly present. "Something dark. It had been like a kind of fog, but then this morning, I felt it like a thunderclap. It came from this direction." He glared at them with suspicion. "What've you lot been up to?"

Ofn huffed, "Two of ours have been hit with something like the Black Breath."

Radagast cried, "What!" and jumped so hard he knocked his hat from his head. "Bring me to them."

They rushed back up the overgrown road in a gaggle, and when they reached Bilbo's wagon, Radagast startled Tracker and Tauriel. He clambered into the back, staff banging about, pushing Tracker out of the way, and picked Raetha up from Tauriel's arms. The wizard held a palm over her face, her eyes fell shut, and he let out a strange, low droning sound. Then Raetha seemed to hiccup. She stretched and rubbed at her eyes. Then she blinked up at the strange wizard, eyes clear and
focused, and Radagast crooned, "There you are, little one."

Raetha's brows furrowed, not too sure about this new person, and sat up and looked around. When she saw Thorin, she cried, "Adad!"

Thorin blinked away tears, climbed into the crowded wagon, and pulled her into his arms. He let out a quavering laugh when she buried her face in his neck, and he murmured into her hair, "Oh thank Mahal, Kurkarukê, my nâtha, oh bless--" He saw the wizard reach over to repeat the process with Bilbo. It took longer, and he had to press another hand over her face, and his droning became slower and deeper--

Then it was like a heavy pressure lifted from the wagon. Bilbo blinked heavily and opened her eyes. She croaked, "--What? Where? --Raetha?" She tried to sit up but winced.

Thorin reached over to press a hand on her shoulder and breathed, "She's here, she's alright."

Radagast huffed, "And you, miss! Let me work."

Confusion plain on her face, she let her head fall back on her pillow. She sucked in a breath as Radagast worked, and the wizard chided, "What have you been getting up to, rolling down mountains? Three cracked ribs, full lungs, the Black Breath-- this is all together too much for a hobbit."

Bilbo took a deep breath to snap back, but then she blinked rapidly as the expected pain did not flare. Instead, she peeped, "Oh! Thank you, Radagast."

She tried again to sit up, but Radagast tutted, "Let the healing settle into your bones for a bit yet."

Thorin looked from Tracker and Tauriel back to his Company, crowded outside the back of the wagon, and he said quietly, "You have my most sincere thanks, both of you. When we reach the Mountain, you will be accorded the highest honors, but-- could you please excuse us for a moment?"

The man and elf nodded and left the wagon. Thorin signed to Dwalin to get the Company to clear the area around the wagon so no one could overhear. Balin started to leave, but Thorin signed for him to stay.

Bilbo watched the flurry and finally asked, "What's the Black Breath?"

Radagast said absently, "It's a malady that's spread by contact with the Enemy." Thorin held Raetha like she was an anchor as the wizard muttered quietly, "It doesn't make sense. There shouldn't be this much darkness on you--"

"Enemy!" Bilbo cried, "What Enemy? What darkness? Thorin, what's going on?"

Thorin reached for her hand and told Radagast roughly, "We've faced orcs and spiders and the dragon, but not recently, and no-- not any of the Nine. But, during the quest, she found a ring."

As Radagast straightened slowly and asked, "A ring?" Bilbo snapped, "Thorin! That-- you can't just go around telling everybody--" she started patting her shirt and finally noticed her waistcoat was missing.

Meanwhile, Balin nodded and added, "It's a plain gold band that--"

Then Bilbo rapped out, "Where is it?"
Thorin, startled at her tone, said carefully, "I put it in the lockbox--"

"You had no right to touch it!" she snarled.

Thorin had never heard her like this. He sat back and put some steel in his voice and said, "When you told me you were frightened that it hurt Raetha--" That seemed to snap her out of her anger, and she drew back, horrified. Thorin pressed on, "I should have listened to you then, but today, even when you fell unconscious, you had your hand in your pocket. You wouldn't respond to me, but you still held that thing-- no, I took it and put it as far away from you as I could."

Radagast asked Thorin, "You were able to touch it?"

Thorin flinched. "No. I brushed it with the tip of one finger, and it was like looking into a wildfire. And then--" he couldn't finish.

Radagast prompted, "Then?"

Shame flooded his gut and he rasped, "Then I was nearly taken by gold sickness again."

Bilbo choked on a breath and clamped her fingers down on his hand.

The wizard fluttered, "Oh dear, oh goodness-- and you, Bilbo? What happens when you hold it?"

Bilbo shrugged. "Nothing. When I wear it--"

Radagast's focus snapped into her and he interrupted to repeat, "When you wear it?"

Bilbo, a bit startled, said, "Yes? When I wear it, no one can see me or what I hold. If I pick something up while I'm wearing it, that can still be seen. I learned that the hard way in Thranduil's dungeons! I rather startled some elves, I'm afraid," she added with an attempt to lighten the mood. Instead, Radagast seemed even more worried. She cleared her throat and said more soberly, "But I don't like wearing it. The world gets-- all washed out, like there are no more colors, and it's like there's always a raging gale there." She shivered. "When I wore it while holding Raetha--"

Radagast yelped, "You wore it while holding her?"

Bilbo stared up at him, shocked, and said defensively, "It was either that or drown, or be stabbing. I did what I could in the circumstances."

Radagast plucked at his beard in distress. "What else?"

She tucked her chin and thought. "Raetha didn't like it at all. She screamed, but-- I don't know if it was from that or from the near-drowning or from the attack. And I'm-- reluctant to talk about it? I never did tell Gandalf about it, and the only reason these dwarves knew was because they piled on and practically dragged the whole story from me. Umm, I could understand the spiders when I wore it--"

He interrupted, aghast, "How many times have you worn it?"

Her brows furrowed. "A handful of times? To escape the goblin tunnels, to rescue the Company from the spiders, to try to sneak past Smaug, and I went a month in Thranduil's dungeons--"

Radagast flailed and ordered, "No more! Don't wear it again! Not ever!" He wrang his hands and added more softly, "Sorry. Anything else?"

Her lips twisted and she shook her head. But then she said, "I'm not sure about this one, there was a
lot on my plate at the time, but-- I could have sworn that, when I was running from dragonfire, that it
glowed. It never did again, though, so--"

She pittered off, because Radagast buried his face in both hands and started rocking back and forth,
whimpering, "Oh no-- oh no-- oh no--"

Thorin demanded, "What?"

Balin, pale, shook his head and croaked, "One."

Thorin's arm tightened convulsively around Raetha, and he focused on her solid weight against his
chest, on her fist gently pulling on a braid, on Bilbo's hand in his, while his mind babbled out a single
litany, *No, no no no--*

Bilbo cried, "What? What is going on?"

Radagast got hold of himself enough to whisper, "The One Ring, that was forged by the Enemy
himself to--"

Bilbo cut him off. "Yes, yes, I know the story of Isildur, thank you, I've even seen the shards of
Narsil! But-- my ring can't be-- how could Isildur have cut the Ring if Sauron was invisible--?" But
the dim light seemed to dim even more, and her ears seemed to pop with a note too low to hear. Her
voice trailed off.

Radagast shook his head and looked at her from beneath his bushy eyebrows. "No, he wouldn't turn
invisible. The rings were designed to strengthen their bearers' strengths. Elves become ever more
learned. Dwarves find ever more precious things to craft. And hobbits? Already so good at moving
about unseen? I would think that they would become invisible. But the sole purpose of the One Ring
is to rule. It will exert its will until all talents are warped and twisted into the subjugation of others.
Even if you tried to use it to do good, through you, it would wield a power too great and terrible to
imagine."

Bilbo blinked rapidly, then buried her face in her hands and wailed. Thorin reached over to brush her
hair from her face and tried to comfort her, but she cried, "I took the Arkenstone!"

Thorin blinked and tried to tell her, "Shh, you did it to try to save us from a needless battle, which I
was too blind to try to prevent--"

She shook her head fiercely. "No-- I mean, yes, eventually I did, but that's not why I took it in the
first place!" She covered her eyes again. "I don't even know why I took it-- I saw it and told myself
that this, *this* would be my fourteenth share, and then I hid it from you!" Tears ran down her cheeks.

Thorin's gut clenched, even now, at the revelation of her treachery. He hadn't known she'd had it for
that long-- he thought she'd found it right before she gave it to Bard--

Radagast hummed. "The Dwarf Lords swore allegiance to whomever bore the King's Jewel, right?"

Thorin nodded absently, wrestling with his grief.

The wizard told Bilbo decisively, "The Ring's goal is to rule, and through its machinations, you
gained the means to rule. While you held the Arkenstone, you were the High Queen of the dwarves.
Ultimately, at that time, I believe you were under the influence of the Ring."

Two dwarves and a hobbit stared at him. Raetha blithely chewed on the end of Thorin's braid.
Radagast continued, "As the dwarves were also under its influence, driven gold mad. As the elves and men were under its influence, trying to start a battle over the gold then, too. It would have made much more sense to begin negotiations after everyone was settled and had the chance to sort the treasure, what was dwarvish and what was taken from Dale, that. The whole situation got entirely out of hand. Now, knowing that the Ring was also present, I believe that it sort of-- fanned the dragon's lingering darkness into an inferno."

Bilbo asked in a tiny voice, "Do you mean it was controlling us?"

Radagast shook his head. "There's a difference between influence and control--"

Thorin snapped out of his reverie and told her fiercely, "Ghivashel, it hasn't taken your will entirely. That thing may have gotten you to take the Arkenstone in the first place, but what did you do with it? Try to negotiate for peace, for food, for comfort. You are still you."

Bilbo sniffled and he cupped her cheek. She asked wetly, "Why now? I've been-- I've had it since before Raetha was born, and I've been fine since I-- left the Mountain. I don't understand why we're reacting so badly now-- we've had nothing like this, this Black Breath before."

Radagast looked around sadly. "The Greenwood was poisoned. The Enemy was allowed to linger here too long."

Bilbo said stubbornly, "This isn't my first time through the Mirkwood though-- this is my third! And I've had no reaction so bad as this before!"

Balin added, "But you weren't acting as our Queen-to-be before. The first time, you-- ah, you weren't in azlâf yet, and if it stopped trying to influence you after your exile--"

Bilbo blanched so white, Thorin feared she would faint. "But now that I am-- You're saying that now that I'm--" her voice broke and she couldn't say the word. "You're saying it's basically woken again?"

Radagast nodded, brows creased with worry.

Thorin started, "Melhekînh--"

But her face crumpled. She shook her head and said, "Don't call me that, not now. I can take no crown while this is in my possession." She covered her eyes and drew a quavering breath. Thorin felt ice seize his chest. Then she seemed to draw on her inner reserves and asked firmly, voice steady, "So. The next question is: how do I get rid of it?"

Radagast wrang his hands. "I don't know. If I ever did know, I no longer remember. But-- Gandalf will know what to do."

"And in the meantime?" Bilbo asked quietly and reached for Thorin's hand.

Radagast twisted his lips, thinking. Finally, he said, "Keep it secret, and keep it safe, until we do know what to do with it."

"They sat in silence for a moment, letting that thought settle. Then Dwalin poked his head through the back of the wagon and asked, "Are we ready to move out? The elf wants to know." Thorin nodded and Dwalin left.

Bilbo, still lying back in the hammock, waved her arms exasperatedly in the air and asked, "Can I get up yet?"
Radagast gasped, "Oh! Yes." He helped her sit up and swing her feet onto the floor.

Bilbo stretched, happy to be able to move freely again. Then she held out her arms and demanded, "Now give me my baby." Thorin put Raetha in her arms, and she pulled her to her chest, snuggling her face in her cloud of curls with a smile. Raetha plucked at Bilbo's collar, so she asked softly, "Are you ready to eat at last, my dear? Oh thank goodness, I've been so worried about you--" while she unbuttoned her blouse and mail, and Raetha finally nursed hungrily. Bilbo met Thorin's eyes, heart full, and she took comfort in his solid presence.

-----

Their caravan drove on. The Ring remained locked away. Bilbo rode her pony with Raetha wrapped secure against her chest. Radagast struck up a friendship with Hamfast, of all people, and the two spent hours discussing companionate planting and crop-to-pasture rotation. Bilbo had to field quite a few curious looks from the dwarves-- her illness and recovery were a common topic of conversation, according to Nori, who had thrown himself into the task of keeping an ear out for any signs of future discontent. Menegilda and Mrs. Cotton fuss ed over her even more during meals, but Bilbo refused to take any extra rations, and she would not allow anyone to offer her more from their own shares.

Then, a week after they'd sent word to Elrond, Roäc returned. Bilbo's heart clenched, and she and Thorin held back until they were alone behind the caravan so they could listen to the response.

Roäc croaked, "'Based on your report, if my suspicions are correct, then it is absolutely vital that Bilbo and the Ring are not allowed near the Arkenstone. Send them to Lothlorien with all speed-- we will meet there to determine what to do. Say none of this to anyone.'"

Thorin huffed and asked Roäc to tell Balin to quietly gather the Company and Radagast. But then he saw Bilbo's frozen expression. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to his chest, cradling Raetha between them, and he pressed his forehead to hers. Her voice cracked as she whispered, "Thorin-- how--? Lothlorien?"

He said softly, voice rumbling through their chests, "If we must go, then we'll go. We'll have to entrust Dís and your cousins with Raetha--"

Bilbo gave a wordless sound of distress and he held her tighter.

Then Balin and the rest of the Company came clattering back down the path, half-shouting questions. Radagast looked lost. "What's goin'--? "Why'd you--?" "Did 'e get--?" Everyone's questions jumbled together until Thorin had to shout, "Quiet!"

In the resounding silence, they could hear a few birds take flight.

Thorin said lowly. "We need to go to Lothlorien." He held up his hand when this was met with dismay. "Elrond said he and Gandalf will meet us there to figure out what to do."

Twelve surly dwarves stared back, unhappiness clear in every hunched shoulder and wrinkled brow. Someone muttered something about witches, but then Bofur asked, 'Alrigh', when do we leave?"

Thorin pinched the bridge of his nose. "We-- as in Bilbo and I-- not the whole Company--"

None of them liked that, and they made their opinions known. Loudly. All at the same time. "What!" "Oh no yeh--" "Like hell yeh're goin alo--!" "Of all th--"

"Shazara!" Thorin bellowed. Then he heaved a sigh. "I need you here-- time is of the essence; we cannot be slowed by the caravan, but--" he closed his eyes and composed himself. "We cannot allow
Raetha to go unprotected. She must remain with you."

The reality of that statement took a moment to register, but then Bombur peeped, "--Oh no!"

Bilbo, face screwed up as she fought tears, nodded.

"I can take you," Radagast said from his perch on a rotting fallen tree. The Company all snapped their gaze to him, and he patted a squirrel absently. "Even with your added weight, my rabbits will outrun anything." Then he seemed to rethink that statement and amended, "Well, almost anything. You dwarves are a rather solid lot--"  

Thorin bowed his thanks.

Balin rubbed his forehead. "Assuming you both do go off alone, what will we tell the others? You can't just exactly slip off--"

"Tell them Bilbo's gone off to heal the forest," Drogo said.

The dwarves startled loudly.

Drogo held up both hands till Dwalin put away his axes, then he sniped, "What, was this supposed to be a secret meeting? You dwarves aren't exactly great at sneaking off if it was--!"

"Hey!" Gloin and Nori objected.

Bilbo chided, "Drogo--"

He sighed and sobered. "If you have to go, say you've gone to heal the Mirkwood. That's why we came along, right? To fix the land 'round Erebor, so as stories go, it wouldn't be that big a stretch."

Thorin thought about that and nodded.

Kíli burst out, "But why do you have to go alone? You don't need all of us to help guard Raetha--"

"Well now, my rabbits do have limits you know!" Radagast groused.

"But some of us could come with you!" Kíli persisted.

"You wouldn't be able to keep up," Radagast declared.

Kíli opened his mouth to retort, but Thorin held up a hand firmly. "Elrond said not to tell anyone else. If anyone else came with--"

Kíli cried, "And when have you ever listened to--"

Bilbo snapped, "Kíli."

The dwarf instantly hung his head.

Thorin said softly, "This is about more than us, inûdoy. This is about more than my pride. I've learned that we, too, must sometimes bow to others' judgement, if it is right to do so. There is no one I would trust more than you, my Company, at my side, in this and in all things. This is why I leave my daughter-- our daughter in your care."

Kíli's jaw clenched, but he kept his eyes down and nodded. The rest of the Company, though displeased, nodded as well.
Radagast stood and brushed crushed mushrooms from his cloak, his squirrel-friend disappearing into his beard, and said cheerfully, "Well, let's get going while there's still daylight, then. Ready?"

Bilbo shook her head and clutched Raetha's sleeping form through her wrap. Thorin told Radagast, "We will need a moment to gather supplies--"

Radagast thumped his staff and urged, "So come on then!"

Thorin clamped down on his annoyance and wrapped gentle hands around Bilbo's arms. "Come, ghivashel."

She nodded and they went back up the trail. Her mind howled as they pulled Dís, Prim, Adalgrim, Rorimac, and Menegilda aside. Thorin told them something, they replied something. She dimly registered raised voices, but her whole focus was on the way her daughter's eyelashes left tiny shadows against her cheeks, on the impossibly perfect curve of her ear, on the way her riotous curls stuck out from her head, on the silver bead glinting against the black, and how she breathed soft and deep. She didn't have the heart to wake her now, but she couldn't stand the idea that her baby would wake without her here--

"--Bilbo?"

Bilbo blinked up at Thorin, who must have called her name more than once, and she let out a tremulous, "Sorry."

He brushed the backs of his fingers along her jaw, eyes sad, and he reached for the knot of Raetha's wrap. Bilbo held her secure while he untied and unwound the shimmering fabric, and then Raetha blinked sleepily awake. Bilbo pressed kisses to her face, and Raetha asked, "Mama?"

Bilbo pasted on a watery smile and said, "Mama and Adad need to go for a while, but we'll be back soon."

Raetha rubbed her eyes and asked, "Go home?"

Bilbo's heart twisted. "You're going home, dearest, and we'll be there soon, too. I don't know when, but as soon as we can."

Raetha seemed to think about that for a moment, then she shook her head and flopped her arms around Bilbo's neck, whining, "No."

Bilbo clung to her, but then she saw Thorin's expression. She gulped a breath and pressed their daughter into his arms. First, Raetha tried to cling to her collar, but then she wrapped a hand around one of his braids and said with the absolute certainty of a toddler, "Adad, no." He cradled Raetha to him, pressed his forehead to hers, and whispered something in Khuzdul too low to hear.

Then Prim stepped forward and held out her arms. Thorin's face crumpled for a moment, then he wiped his face of all expression and put Raetha in Prim's arms.

Then Balin hemmed and produced Thorin's keys. Fíli put their last bag into Radagast's sled. The rest of the caravan gawped at the spectacle. Thorin took the keys, dread flooding his gut, and he reached into the wagon to open the lockbox. Then he staggered back as a sudden longing flooded him. The memory of Erebor's treasury swept out before him, the memory of the triumphant crowds standing before his throne on his second (official) coronation, the memory of his armies at his command-- he shook his head and clamped down on his thoughts until he could breathe again.

He turned to Bilbo, pleading with his eyes to come, and she hesitantly turned her back on Raetha and
climbed into the wagon.

Her old waistcoat was balled up on a pile of coins. She picked it up and reached into her pocket. Her fingers closed around the cold gold band, heavy and smooth, and it was like some missing piece snapped back into place. She let out a sigh and slipped it back into her pocket. Then she felt sick at herself--horrified. This, this **thing** had nearly undone them. Her hand flew from her pocket and she scrabbled out of the wagon. She clutched Thorin's hand till her knuckles went white.

Balin stopped her, holding out a long chain necklace. "A pocket is not a safe place for that. Here."

Thorin said softly, "But that's-- that was Fundin's-- Balin--"

Balin said firmly, "And my ol' Adad couldn't have thought of a better use for it, nor could he've been prouder." He stepped back as Bilbo slipped the Ring onto the chain, and she tucked it between her blouse and her mithril. The lines around Balin's eyes deepened, and he said thickly, "Mahal's hammer guard yeh." Then he bowed.

Bilbo and Thorin pressed one last set of kisses to Raetha's head, and they gingerly settled into Radagast's rickety sled.

As Radagast called to his rabbits and they started letting out a wild thumping, Raetha cried out, "Mama?" Bilbo turned to wave, throat blocked by a horrid lump. Then the sled lurched forward, and from behind them, all they could hear was her shrieked, "**MAMA!**"

-----

Gandalf knelt on the ground, studying the dirt in his palm. He ran the black loam through his fingers, but whatever he saw there troubled him. He rose with a frown.

Thingol watched the wizard anxiously, but Gandalf gave no explanation. He tossed the dirt back into the bare field. The wind ruffled the manes of the Rohirrim's mounts and helms. Gandalf appeared to track the horizon, counting something, and Thingol could take no more. He asked, "Greyhame, what can you tell us? What can be done against this famine?"

Gandalf seemed to snap out of some deep thought, and he replied testily, "I now have more questions than when I started." He dusted off his hands and mounted his horse.

Thingol cried, "Where are you going?"

Gandalf huffed, "To find answers!" And he rode off.

Chapter End Notes

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I used a few of Gandalf's lines in this chapter, so it's worth pointing out that anything you recognize isn't mine. I don't normally pull quotes verbatim, but I really want to toggle between Radagast's slightly zany space cadet persona and occasionally remind y'all that this dude is in fact a highly powerful Maia.

(...Oh dear god. Help us all.)

---
Khuzdul:

kurkarukê - my tiny raven

inûdoy - son

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I have always, *always* been bothered by Bilbo taking the Arkenstone for his 14th share. Frankly, I do think the Ring was waging psychological warfare on everyone involved in BOTFA. And Thror's gold sickness and Thrain's madness were totally caused by the Line of Durin's Ring of Power. We know from the Council of Elrond that the Ring can influence a whole crowd without being held. I absolutely think the Ring had a lot to do with Thorin's gold sickness. You cannot convince me otherwise. Fight me.
Part IV

Chapter Summary

Human beings in a mob. What's a mob to a king? What's a king to a god? What's a god to a non-believer?

Chapter Notes

- Part IV -

"Farewell, friends! The sails are set, the wind is east, the moorings fret. Shadows long before me lie, beneath the ever-bending sky
-- JRRT, ROTK

[NSFW. See below for specific warnings]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the chaos after Radagast's departure, between Raetha's inconsolable wailing, the shouted questions, and Drogo's explanations (of which Kíli couldn't tell truth from tale-- Bilbo, a secret princess; Bilbo, with the strongest affinity for the land; Bilbo, whose illness was caused by her body trying to use her own life force to heal the forest--) he shrugged his bow and quiver higher over his shoulder and casually held his bag by his side, out of sight. When Dwalin sounded the call to move out, and the wagons and livestock loudly trundled forward, Kíli started forward too, slowly. He let the guards and wagons gradually pass him by. When the last rear guard met his eye, he smiled ruefully and babbled, "My pipe-- I left my pipe." The guard shook his head at him, the foolish youngling, and rode on.

Kíli shouldered his pack and backtracked to the trail. He took a breath and stepped off the road, but Tauriel melted out of the woods and blocked his path.

"Where do you think you're going?" she asked coolly.

Kíli mumbled, "I can't tell you."

Tauriel arched a delicate brow. "And you think that's going to make me more likely to let you pass?"

He shuffled his feet and wheedled, "Tauriel, I--"

She shook her head and chided, "You'll never catch them on foot."
Kíli blinked up at her. "Wait-- what?"

She rolled her eyes fondly and tucked his hair behind his ear. "You're going after Bilbo and Thorin, am I correct?"

He opened his mouth to deny it, but he saw her expression. Instead, he caught her hand and cupped it to his cheek. "I need to go with them, do you understand?"

She quirked a smile and brushed a thumb over his stubbled cheek. "And that pretty tale about healing the forest?"

He leaned into her touch. "Just a front."

She pulled her hand away and looked back down the trail, the broken branches and bracken left by the sled clear to their eyes. "Why didn't you go with them when they left, then?"

He shifted. "They're going to Lothlorien, but there wasn't room in th--" she leveled him a look and he ducked his head. "Alright, fine, yes, I was-- we were all ordered to stay behind, for Raetha's sake, but-- there's two hundred of us and only two of them!"

"--And the wizard," Tauriel corrected.

"Two of them and the battiest wiz--"

She pressed a finger to his lips and shook her head.

His shoulders slumped. "Fine. Two of them and a wizard. But I can't just--" he broke off and shook his head. "Thorin thinks they have to do this on their own, but they don't."

Tauriel looked at him gravely for a long moment, then asked, "And nothing I or anyone else can say will change your mind?"

He smiled brightly, shook his head, and edged past her. She caught him by the collar. He looked back up at her, expression wounded. She smiled faintly down at him and said again, "You'll never catch them on foot." Then she whistled, loud and long, and after a beat of silence, something big came rustling through the underbrush, hooves thudding in the dirt, and then a giant rack appeared.

Kíli yelped, "An elk? I can't ride that! Its legs are taller than I am!" The great beast pawed the ground and dipped its head, brown eyes large and limpid.

Tauriel pulled a coil of rope out of her pack and said calmly, "Not an elk, a deer. And I won't let you fall." She looped the rope around the deer's chest, boosted a yelping Kíli onto its back, and gracefully swung up behind him. She urged the deer into a run, pressed a kiss to Kíli's ear, and laughingly told him, "Hush, meleth nîn, of course I'm going with you.

-----

Bilbo kept her face pressed against Thorin's chest. He kept one arm wrapped protectively over her head as they sped through the brush. One cut trickled sluggishly down his cheek. Passage by sled was horrible. If her ribs had still been broken-- she shuddered and pressed closer into his chest. Behind them, Radagast cheerfully recounted a story about a family of dormice. They launched over another ditch, and Thorin grunted when they landed. Bilbo whimpered, and he tightened his arm around her helplessly. They were battered from a week of this, bruised and aching, but they didn't dare complain.
Suddenly, Radagast gave a shout, "Ha! We're halfway there, now!"

Thorin brought up his free arm to protect his face from a branch as thick as his wrist. The dead wood shattered over his vambrace, and they were showered with shards. He quickly plucked one chunk from Bilbo's hair and tossed it out the side of the sled.

They drove on.

-----

Hiraeth's whimpering wail pulled her from sleep-- again-- and in a daze of pain and exhaustion, Bilbo struggled to sit up. There was no one else to help. Moonlight streamed through the delicately latticed windows, leaving twisting knots of shadows on the floor, enough to see by, and she reached for her new daughter. She was alone-- she was no longer alone. Hiraeth nuzzled against her breast, snuffling through her cries, and a tiny hand reached out blindly. Bilbo shifted her head and supported her while she got a good latch, and then all was quiet but for those tiny, impossible breaths. Her baby was a little forge against her chest. The moon cast long shadows across the room, her dark hair even darker for it.

Rosa stopped her in the dining room, hands on her hips. Bilbo blinked at her in confusion. Hiraeth's head rested on her shoulder, her warm weight grounding her in this too-busy place. Her cousins bustled around her, putting away the last of breakfast and gathering their things.

Rosa shook her head. "You're not bringing her with to the market. Hiraeth can stay here to play."

Bilbo's hand came up to rest on Hiraeth's back through the wrap. "Oh no, it's no trouble, I can bring her in the sling--"

Rosa tutted, "No, it'll do her good to be with the other faunts, and it'll do you good to step out on your own for a bit, too."

Bilbo blanched. "But--!"

"Tosh. This is your first time away from her, isn't it? Don't worry, dear. The first time's always the worst, but everything will be alright." Then she reached for the knot of Bilbo's wrap.

It felt like pulling off a limb.

It felt like missing a limb.

When she came back, Hiraeth was chewing on a wooden block next to the next youngest Took, both supremely uninterested in the other, but when she saw Bilbo, she beamed and squealed and held up her arms. And Bilbo finally learned how it felt to come home.

Most fauntlings babbled their first words between six and eight months. But as winter gave way to spring without a word, Bilbo tried to hide her fear that there was something wrong with Hiraeth-- but no. She told herself to stop trying to expect normality in this decidedly unprecedented situation, but when a younger Took babe cried, "Da! Da!" before her, she left the room.

"You, my lass, are a Baggins to the core," she told Hiraeth with a confidence she did not feel. They walked through a glade of new green ferns, while the evening sun slanted golden through the bare
branches above. "I've a feeling you will only say what you mean, when you mean to say it, never more nor less. Why, your own Grandda would've taken you on his knee, with his pipe in his teeth, and he might've offered you two sentences, 'There's a lass,' and 'Up you get.' Oh, but he'd say so much with his eyes, dear, you would just now he'd've been so happy to see you--" Bilbo's voice broke. Hiraeth wouldn't know her grandparents. They were alone in a sea of extended family-- no siblings for either of them, and now--

Hiraeth patted her cheek and said clearly, "Mama, look--"

Bilbo froze.

Hiraeth pouted and pointed.

Bilbo looked and, shocked, saw the brilliant red-orange plumage of a rare scarlet tanager not ten feet away. She breathed, "Oh!" The bird flew away. Then she blinked and peppered Hiraeth's face with kisses. "Oh, my baby, thank you for showing me."

Her daughter squirmed and giggled in her wrap, and they walked on.

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Bilbo blinked sore eyes, heart-sick and weary, when Radagast finally slowed the sled that evening. She creakily straightened her limbs and stood, Thorin's hands reaching up to catch her waist when she tottered, and then he stood, too. Radagast bent to unhook his rabbits from their stays, and he muttered distractedly, "I'm going to take a look around while there's still light." His rabbits went with him.

Bilbo winced as they gathered firewood. Oh her chest ached. Thorin cupped her cheeks, concerned. She answered his unasked question, "We left too soon." His brows quirked, and she gestured at her breasts. They were hard and swollen, and the rough ride in the sled had done her no favors.

He asked worriedly, "What can be done?"

Her nose twitched. "If I'd-- well, a firm binding soaked in cold water is supposed to help, but--" she shook her head. "This is why they're weaned slowly."

Thorin took her hand and brought their clasped hands to her heart, but she couldn't hide her flinch, and he snatched his hand away. "What happens if you don't bind, or--?"

Her lips twisted. "More pain. In-- infection in the worst case--"

"What?" He cried. "No. We're not--" he let out a hard breath, hands clenching and unclenching at his sides, and he ducked his head. Bilbo tipped her forehead against his chest and reached for his hands. She missed her baby. She missed their baby. She felt as much as heard Thorin rumble, "Could I-- could I help?"

She reached up to cover her burning cheeks, unable to put into words how many social mores backed her statement. "It-- wouldn't be seemly," she muttered, thoroughly embarrassed.
He smoothed her hands away from her cheeks and asked, "But would it work?"

She nodded slowly.

He cupped her cheek, brushing a thumb over her blush, and asked softly, "And when have you ever
let propriety overrule your practicality, my Burglar?"

She huffed out a shaky laugh. "With you? Never."

He smiled down at her, eyes soft and bright, and he pressed his forehead to hers. Then he asked quietly, "Will you let me help? I cannot stand the thought of you in pain, not if there is something I
can do about it."

Bilbo sighed, pecked a kiss to the tip of his ridiculous axe of a nose, and said, "Alright. But I am not
cradling you."

He snorted and sat on the ground, back to a tree, and pulled her into his lap. She yelped and shifted, blushing furiously, but-- she shook her head at herself. **Who are you trying to fool here, lass? Untwist your knickers, there's no one here to carp and pinch at you for not acting 'ladylike.'** She settled more comfortably astride his lap and kissed the impish grin right off his face, grumbling, "Oh you do seem set on attempting to upend every tenet of propriety, don't you?"

He said cheekily, "Maybe I enjoy seeing you in all your fussy glory? From your missing handkerchiefs to your perfectly tied neckerchiefs, ghivashel--" while he reached for her buttons, first opening her waistcoat and then her blouse, but then the Ring gleamed against her mail, and he snatched his hands back.

At first, Bilbo didn't know why, and she cried, "Thorin? --Oh." Her face twisted and she fought the urge to fling the thing into the woods. She quickly pulled the chain over her head, slipped her waistcoat off her shoulders, and balled the Ring up in the fabric. She tossed it next to their packs and leaned down to press her forehead to his. He was panting, so she asked quietly, "Are you alright?"

He nodded vaguely and she brushed his hair back from his face, where the silver gleamed even in
the dim twilight. He looked up at her, shame heavy on his face, and he rasped, "I am so sorry."

She kissed him quiet. "No, I'm sorry. I forgot about it." Her brows furrowed. "I should not have
forgotten about it. No, I mean, I would not forget it, not unless it wanted me to. Just like it doesn't want me to talk about it." She shuddered. "I hate it."

His hands clenched around her waist and he said roughly, "We'll be rid of it soon. Then we can go home."

She whimpered and nodded and whispered, "Back home to our baby. And then we've a wedding to plan."

He kissed her desperately, then pleaded against her lips, "Do you still want to marry me, then?"

She fisted her hands in his hair and told him fiercely, "What! Of course I do! Thorin-- when I said I
could not take a crown-- I meant until that thing is gone."

Oh, he really must have misunderstood her though, because he kissed her frantically. He murmured, heart thick in his voice, "Then as soon as we get home, I'll start on your crown." He nuzzled her temple, next to her ažlâf braid.

She pulled back to tell him lightly, "I'd still marry you if you were a traveling tinker, you know."
"Mmph, I know, but then how would we have met?" He quirked a half smile up at her, his expression so soft and fond it made her chest feel tight.

She replied teasingly, breathlessly, "Maybe you'd come selling buttons at the door--" he huffed out a laugh and pressed sucking kisses below her jaw. His big hands gripped her hips and she felt him stir. He pressed his lips to hers again, and she ground down on him. His hips arched up to hers--

But then he sighed, pulled back, and looked up at her, his chest heaving. His voice, impossibly deep, slid like silk when he told her gravely, "But I am a king, Markheluh, and to take me is to take my crown. Are you-- it is a heavy weight to bear. Are you sure you want it? I did you no favors, not discussing this with you, not finding out if this is truly what you--"

She shushed him and kissed him and cupped his cheeks, running her fingers through his lengthening beard. "I love you for all of you, Thorin, duty and all. And even though I've no clue if I can be the sort of queen you need, well, I'll learn."

He made a hungry noise low in his chest and growled, "You will be." Then he pulled her into a searing kiss, one hand wrapped in her hair, thumb stroking the shell of her ear, and she keened. But she couldn't bite back a whimper when he opened her mail. Her breasts really were too full, hard and painful, and though he was cupping her carefully, even the barest contact hurt.

He looked up at her, once more asking her permission. She tucked his long hair behind his ear and nodded. Then he bent his head and brought her nipple to his mouth.

At his first long drag, her toes clenched beneath her thighs and she fisted her hand in his hair. He made a low sound in the back of his throat and sucked again. At first, the pressure was almost painful, but even in that, it felt so good she felt herself blush to the tips of her ears. Then he looked up at her through his lashes, his dark head bent over her bare breast, and she whined. His brows shot up and she felt him huff out a breath, and then his big hand started squeezing gently. His other hand slid down her back to cup her rear. She fought not to arch against him, but she felt each long suck down-- there-- and she felt like her cheeks would catch fire. This was an entirely new reaction, and she didn't know-- but she let her head fall back with a bitten off whine and gave in.

His breath came in humid pants against her skin, and his hand on her bum pulled her tighter to him, but the harder they rocked together, the more her other breast, still too full, still too sore, couldn't be ignored.

She panted, "Please, Thorin, please, the other one too."

He pulled off with an obscene pop, and she groaned. But first he pulled her down into another fierce kiss. "You are going to be my wife," he grated, voice like gravel.

"Yes. Yes I am," she babbled, before she cupped his cheeks and kissed him with as much sweetness as she could. Then she whimpered again as he pulled her mail open over her other breast. Oh it was too much--

Then he cupped her in his big, rough hand, and he bent his head to her nipple again. The sharp, good-pain shot to her core, and she cried out.

She was beyond words. She could feel him, hot and blunt between her legs, even through their clothes, and she ground down against him in time with every sharp suckle. She could feel the prickle of his beard and every rough catch of the calluses on his fingers and even worse, the sounds-- their mingled pants and shifting cloth and his soft, wet swallows-- she rutted against him harder, his hips
thrust up against hers faster, and a low groan rumbled deep in his chest, and she-- and she-- and he pressed the barest hint of teeth to her nipple, and she came with a muffled shriek.

He grunted like his breath was punched out of him, and he lifted her quickly away. He tore at his laces and spun her onto her back. She let out a shocked squeak, her chest still heaving, as he straddled her waist, fisted his cock a few times, and came in thick streaks over her exposed breasts.

Panting, he caught himself on one arm, hair tumbling down around his flushed, sweaty face, and he looked so shocked at himself that she let out a peal of delighted laughter. She tucked her chin to look at the mess, still blood warm against her skin, and he bent down to kiss her like someone long starved. She quickly caught his long hair up in her fist to keep it from dragging through his come, and she told him, breathless, "And just where would we be without my handkerchiefs, now?"

He huffed out a laugh and reverently pressed his sweaty forehead to hers.

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The clatter of his mount's hooves on the cobblestones was barely audible over the pounding rain and rolling thunder as Gandalf rode into the Ring of Isengard. The storm raged above him, but as Saruman descended his steps, no rain touched his white robes.

"Gandalf, my old friend," Saruman said gravely. Gandalf bowed his head respectfully. Saruman showed him inside, but his lips twisted at the sodden state of Gandalf's robes. "What brings you to Isengard?"

Gandalf sat beside the fire with a creaky sigh and took out his pipe, but Saruman's eyes flashed, so he put it away. "The blight in Rohan troubles me."

Saruman looked away, annoyed. "And why would you come to me? Surely that line of inquiry would be best settled by Kementári's champion."

Gandalf huffed, "Radagast is already in the Mirkwood, his hands are full enough already. But no, I am also concerned about the flooding in Tharbad."

Saruman waved a dismissive hand. "Tharbad and Rohan, Gandalf, you are too soft with these mortals. Flooding and famine are ever their lot."

Gandalf replied sharply, "Tharbad was not the result of some natural disaster. Its dam was destroyed by black powder."

Saruman stilled. "Black powder? How are you certain of this?"

"I saw the ruins myself. The evidence was clear in the rubble, even after the flood washed everything away."

Saruman shifted and gaped. "How-- who would have the means to--?"

Gandalf said eagerly, "Indeed, that is what concerns me. If orcs now possess--"

A sudden loud flapping filled the room. They both looked up to see two mourning doves circle the ceiling, then each landed before the other. Gandalf reached out for the letter tied to the dove's leg, and then it flew off. The other followed right after. One tawny feather floated down to land on the glossy black tabletop. Saruman frowned and flicked his fingers. The feather vanished.

Gandalf unrolled his message and sucked in a breath. Then he froze.
Saruman frowned at Gandalf and unrolled his, reading aloud, "'We must convene the White Council in Lothlórien immediately.' What? What of that gave you cause to sputter? 'Immediately?" My, this Peredhel is beginning to grow too fond of issuing edicts."

Gandalf looked at him as though wondering if he'd taken leave of his senses. "How can you be so calm?"

Saruman frowned. "I see no reason why you need to be so alarmed, 'immediately' or not--"

Gandalf held up his letter, a full page of writing, compared to his one line. Saruman's lips twisted and, after a moment to compose himself, asked sourly, "What, then? Do share, since you now know more than I."

But Gandalf just covered his eyes with one hand. "Oh Bilbo--"

Saruman stood and snatched the missive from him and read aloud, "'A certain mother we know found something of great concern, which her partner now believes caused much of that winter's strife, and more. It's too similar to that which was taken from his father--' Gandalf, what nonsense is this?"

"Bilbo found something in those caves, and it was not just her courage," he mumbled half to himself. When he didn't elaborate, Saruman sharply tapped the vellum against the table, and Gandalf started. "Something which causes gold sickness in dwarves, madness in men and elves-- Something like the Ring of Power that was taken from Thrain in the dungeons of Dol Goldur."

Saruman's eyes glittered as he sat forward. "The One Ring?" he asked, avid, but then he frowned again and scoffed, "In the hands of a woman?"

Gandalf stiffened at his tone. "In the hands of a hobbit of immeasurable worth. There is goodness in her unrivaled by any. She's already had it for two years without ill effect-- two years! Why, it was right under my very nose."

"And yet you did not have the wit to see it!" Saruman snapped, but then he sighed and put on a kindly smile. "But you are right, in a way we are lucky. Now that it has been found, we can use it."

"Use it!" Gandalf cried, aghast. "The One Ring answers to one master only."

Saruman asked exasperatedly, "What else would you suggest? Leave it in the possession of this... good mother? This halfling of pure heart and little consequence?"

Gandalf glared. "If she were of little consequence, I wouldn't argue with that plan, at least until we knew what to do." He stood and gathered his pack.

Saruman huffed, "Halflings care more for their leaf and their meals, Gandalf. You're giving her too much credit."

Gandalf put his hat back on and snapped, "And for all your wisdom, you don't give her enough. Did you not read the letter? Did you not listen to my explanation? Not only is she not half of anything, she's the queen-to-be of Erebor. She's already born the heir to the Line of Durin." Gandalf took a moment to appreciate the shock on Saruman's face, then he declared, "Good day," and turned to leave.

But the door swung shut in his face. Gandalf stopped midstep, shocked. Then he turned to the other door, only for that to slam shut as well.
Saruman, staring at him intently, asked, "And where do you think you're going?"

Gandalf snapped, "Where do you think? What part of 'immediately' was incomprehensible to you?"

But Saruman tutted. "Hmm, no, I don't think so. Not if you're going to go against me in this."

Gandalf growled, "And you think the others would agree to this? It's madness!"

Saruman leapt to his feet. Gandalf swung his staff, but Saruman countered with a snarl, and he was thrown back across the room. He shouted and thrust, and Saruman's legs flew out from under him. He swung his staff again, and Saruman was flung back, knocking into a lamp, and burning candles scattered across the shining black floor. Saruman's parry caught him across the back, and he went skidding face first across the marble. Gandalf swept him from his feet again, but then Saruman twisted his staff, and Gandalf was flung spinning into a bookcase, heavy-bound books falling onto him in a cascade. Then Saruman stalked closer, staff leveled at his head, and he snarled, "Madness, is it! What madness is it to put the One Ring within reach of a mad king?"

Gandalf choked out past the pressure on his chest, "What's the madness of a king to the madness of a Maia?"

Saruman threw him up against the wall and pinned him there, eyes blazing. Gandalf cried out when his head cracked against the marble, but Saruman shouted, "She has no right to bear that Ring. And if the White Council will not act, then I will take it myself! You say she's part of the Line of Durin, now? Then let's see how well they fare against Durin's Bane!"

Gandalf shouted and fought uselessly against the air, and then Saruman sent him up.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Warning: sexual content and (unrelated) violence.

On one hand, I don't want to, like, warn for non-vanilla sex, when it's really not, but on the other hand...wow that came out decidedly dirtier than I'd planned.

...And stfu I did not know that quote was a Kanye lyric. The Kanye/Drill/Hamlet game just got real.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After another week, the dark, dank Mirkwood thinned to open brush land, and the feel of sunshine on her face felt almost foreign. To the west, the white peaks of the Misty Mountains gleamed against the sky, but she noticed how Thorin carefully did not look in that direction. And then, by the light of evening, they crested a hill and saw at last the soaring heights of the Mallorn trees. When the sled passed under those graceful boughs, the quality of the light and the characteristic of the land suddenly changed.

Bilbo gasped as they sped past flowers, and she cried, "Oh! That was a lady slipper! Radagast, please, may I stop and--?"

Radagast chuckled and reined in his rabbits. Their sled slid to a stop beside the smooth white trunks of a Mallorn tree, and Bilbo scrambled ungangly out onto the mossy ground.

She gave a soft "Oh!" when she gently reached out to touch a spring beauty, the flower nearly the size of her palm. Lupines splashed across the sunny glades. Bushes of honeysuckle and climbing wild roses filled the wood with their heady scent. Bilbo spun, beaming, and then she halted, frozen, and clapped her hands over her mouth with a muffled "Eep!"

Thorin took a hasty step toward her, but she stared at a stunning mass of bright blue flowers growing on spires taller than she was. She turned to Radagast in awe and quietly asked, "Jacob's Ladder?"

Radagast beamed at her, leaning on his staff. "That's one of its names, yes."

She gasped and circled the plant, her expression so open and happy that Thorin was helpless to stop his answering smile. She babbled, "Oh! This is real! I didn't think it was real!" Oh! If only Raetha were here to see this, too! Her arms felt empty, and her heart ached.

Thorin hm'ed questioningly.

She clapped her hands together and said, "It's from a bedtime story, all fauntlings know it, about how Jacobas Took fell in love with a fairy, and how he tried to make her a home and a garden, but she was fey and not suited to the quiet Shire. So he took forget-me-nots and made them grow more wild and splendid, until they were the most beautiful flower in all of Arda. She reverently bent a flower spire down to smell it.

Thorin asked, "And what happened?"

Her face fell. "The fairy accepted his courtship, and they had a son. But eventually Jacobas died, and she couldn't bear to stay any longer. She took her Jacob's Ladder with her and was said to have scattered its seeds everywhere in an attempt to find another home, but she could have no other home without him. Most hobbits don't think they still exist." She shook her head as if to banish the sad thought, and then she quirked a half smile. "My mother said she once found a meadow filled with Jacob's Ladder when she was a faunt, but she could never find it again."

"Then I am glad you have found some, too, Miss Baggins."

She jumped and whirled to stare up at an elf. Then a whole troupe melted out of the trees, their fair hair shining against their hunters' greens. She quickly slipped back to Thorin, who stood as stiff as
The same elf’s gaze flicked between them, his expression unreadable, but after a moment, he nodded to Bilbo and to Radagast. "We've been waiting for you. Come, let us show you to Caras Galadhon. The dwarf, though, will need to be blindfolded."

She felt Thorin go rigid beside her, and she snapped, "Absolutely not. I do not consent to this."

The elf tried to soothe, "No, no, you misunderstand me, you will not be blindfolded--"

"Oh! So only he is to be subjected to this indignity!" she cried, hardly able to believe it. The elves’ shock flickered over their faces and she planted her hands on her hips. "The very nerve! Now, I will give the Sylvan elves the benefit of the doubt for not taking kindly to trespassers, but *this* is how you treat those you’ve invited?"

The elf blustered, "Well, no, but only you were bidden to come. You weren't told to bring--"

She growled, "If Elrond thinks that I'd be parted from my betrothed, he's got another thing coming. It's bad enough that we were forced to leave our child--"

*That* got a reaction from the elves, who shifted and murmured and only barely refrained from slack jawed double takes, and Bilbo could feel her teeth grinding.

The elf, who she realized was probably their captain, spread his hands beseechingly. "I am limited by the laws of my people. No dwarf may know the location of our city--"

"Very well then," Bilbo interrupted coolly. "They may come to me, here." She sat on a fallen tree with as much dignity as she could muster.

Thorin stared at her, at the angry flush on her cheeks and her flashing eyes, at his beads in her braids, at the regal tilt of her chin, and he felt his heart swell. But then he saw the elves shift, and he immediately stepped into a defensive stance. If they tried to take her forcibly--

One of the archers asked their leader something in their own tongue, but he heard that cursed word, *Naugrim*. Thorin stiffened, but then he heard Bilbo reply icily, "If you are going to use such language, we will be leaving now."

Then a foreign voice sounded inside her head, *Peace, Ringbearer*. Bilbo froze, stock still.

The elf guard also seemed to pause, as if listening to something only he could hear, and then he bowed his head to both Bilbo and Thorin. "My apologies. I did not mean to cause offense. Come, she is waiting."

Bilbo remained seated, arms crossed. "So long as you require the blindfold--"

The elf shook his head and finally addressed Thorin. "The Lady has granted you pardon. You may enter Caras Galadhon freely."

As she stood, Bilbo eyed the elf suspiciously. "Pardon from what?"

The elf just looked anywhere but at her. She bristled, but Thorin tucked her arm through his, and together they followed Radagast and the guards into Lothlórien.

Night had fallen by the time they reached the elven city, but glimmering lights like stars shone all the more brilliantly. Then they reached the foot of an ancient Mallorn tree, and as they climbed up the
stairs that wound around its massive trunk, Bilbo reverently ran her fingers across its smooth white bark. She could not help but marvel at how many ages this tree had seen.

But as they were shown into an elegant antechamber, her heart rose into her throat. She became acutely aware of the snarled state of her hair, the dirt buried beneath her fingernails and embedded into her skin, and her ragged, filthy clothes. Thorin bore much the same, but it only served to make him appear even more stunning, a rugged, wild king. She just felt like a beggar.

Thorin must have noticed how she tugged fitfully at her shirt-cuffs, though, because he reached for her hand. He met her eyes and pressed a soft kiss to the back of her dirty hand, and he smiled when she huffed. He brushed his thumb over her knuckles, then, and rumbled quietly, "Shh. You need not fret, dear heart. You are lovely."

Bilbo pulled a face. "Thorin, I'm filthy."

He flashed a bright grin at her through his beard. "So? You were still lovely to me covered in troll snot and horse hair--" She let out a muffled squawk and tried to swat his arm, but he just smiled wider and ducked to press his forehead to hers. He held her gaze and told her quietly, "So we're less than presentable at the moment. I know that, they know that, and they know that you know that, but they want you to feel off guard and insignificant. It's not a terribly nice tactic, but it only works if you let it." He straightened and seemed to gather his dignity around himself until he stood, proud and regal and untouchable. Bilbo swallowed hard. He cupped her cheek and ordered softly, "Chin up, shoulders back, Melhekînh. I've already seen you do the same when Lobelia came to call."

Bilbo's eyes flashed and she opened her mouth to argue, but then he grinned and cried, "Ah! Just like that--"

Before she could figure out how to poke him through his armor, though, the door opened and a steward ushered them forward. The silver light flared even brighter, and as they stood before steps carved as much like spun sugar, she could not even see up to the dais. Sound like ringing bells swelled with the light, and she clutched Thorin's arm in a bid to stay upright.

She caught a glimpse of white robes sewn with diamonds and pearls and gleaming silver bells, but then she had to shut her eyes against the cold blaze of light. At once, in the darkness inside her head, a cool voice whispered her name. Her eyes snapped open again, and she looked up upon the shining form of Galadriel.

Bilbo had to lock her jaw to keep from gaping. To say Galadriel was the most beautiful creature she'd ever beheld did not do her justice, not just from the limits of words, but because that was only part of it. Faced with the power and wisdom in her glance, the coiled danger just behind her stern expression-- Bilbo bowed deeply, deeply in awe.

Thorin huffed a sigh next to her and also bowed.

A sharp, male voice rapped out, "You carry great evil, here. I can see the darkness on your hearts. How is it that this has come to pass?"

Bilbo flinched at his accusatory tone. She'd barely noticed Galadriel's consort, Celeborn. But he glared at Thorin, so she stood straighter and said, "It seems that a great darkness has slowly filled the world, my Lord. I only needed to leave the Shire, and I found it."

From atop Galadriel's hand on Celeborn's, a spark flashed, catching Bilbo's eye. Galadriel saw her notice and spoke, her words pealing like low bells, and the sound rippled into Bilbo's soul. "The world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places; but still there is much that is fair."
Then she smiled softly at their linked arms, and Bilbo felt her breath catch. "My son-in-law told me of your child and of your betrothal. I offer my congratulations, especially since you found that in the face of a dragon. Such darkness does lie upon your hearts and upon the world, yet you both still hold true; and though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater." §

Words lodged in her chest and she blinked back tears. Beside her, Thorin rumbled quietly, "Our thanks, my Lady."

Galadriel turned her piercing gaze on Thorin now, and Bilbo felt him tense. The Lady told them, "Be welcome in Caras Galadhon." She smiled impishly at Radagast, who jumped when he was suddenly the center of her attention, and she added, "You came on fleet feet. It will be some time before the rest of the Council arrives. Tonight, you will be shown to your quarters, where you will find rest."

Galadriel met her eye once more, and Bilbo felt like a bell that had just been struck. But then she and Thorin bowed again, and they were led out of the throne room.

Bilbo hadn't quite realized how uncomfortable she was until her feet touched the ground again. She happily wriggled her toes in the cool moss and sighed with relief. Thorin let out a soft breath, too, and she held her hand out for his with a smile. A steward led them down a leaf-lined path that wound between the trees. Above them, the city appeared as if grown from the trees themselves. The elves had set up a fine silk pavilion for them on the forest floor, its damask and gossamer walls gently fluttering in the breeze, and Thorin grumbled a little beneath his breath about how utterly indefensible it was.

The elf drew open the curtain that served as the door and said huffily, "None may enter the forest without the Lady's leave, master dwarf. I assure you, you are quite safe here."

Bilbo squeezed Thorin's hand warningly and thanked the elf, who nodded and lit the lamps inside the pavilion before they turned. He leaned on his staff, a fox curled up in one arm, and he said, "Well, I'm off. They've saved me my loft in the horse barn, bless them. And I need to see to poor Susan here." He cradled the fox closer.

Bilbo started to go for a hug, but then she stopped, not wanting to disturb any other creatures that might be hiding in the wizard's robes. "Thank you, Radagast."

He smiled and patted her cheek. "Oh, oh my, hush now. I think you'll end up needing my thanks before we're through." A haunted look flashed across his face, but then he blinked and smiled again. "Maybe I'll see you at dinner. Or maybe not. I might forget, you see." He shrugged and walked off. Several nightingales flew after him.

Thorin hefted their packs and nodded his head toward the tent. She went with him, but when she saw the carpets laid down on the floor, she yelped, "Boots off!"

Thorin stopped, about to step onto the rug, and he tossed their bags beside the pile of cushions and pillows meant to be their bed. He quickly unstrapped all his buckles and pulled his be-stockinged feet from their prisons. Bilbo delicately wrinkled her nose and shuddered. Thorin grumbled, "Well now, neither of us are particularly fresh at the moment--"

Bilbo, confused, asked, "What? --oh, no, I think I left my nose somewhere behind the Misty Mountains. No, it's your boots themselves." She shuddered again. "Nasty, clomping things--"

Thorin snorted a laugh and kissed the tip of her nose. "My fussy, dainty thing."

"Who're you calling dainty!" she sniped. He chuckled and cupped her cheeks, pressing a sweet kiss
to her lips. She smiled against his lips and melted against him.

A voice hemmed from the curtain-- door-- and Bilbo blushed to the tips of her ears. A young elf maiden, also blushing, said primly, "Please, come with me. Leave your things, I'm to show you to the baths."

Thorin leveled Bilbo a look and bent to put his boots back on. She ducked her head and mouthed sorry. As he stood, he just snorted a huff of a laugh and held out a hand for hers. The elf stared in shock down at their laced fingers, before she caught herself and quickly looked away.

She led them down another winding path. The scent of jasmine floated on the air with the echoes of distant music, and moonflowers glowed in the ghostly silver light. Though they met no one else on the ground, the constant movement and low level bustle above belied the sheer number of Galadhrim in the balconies and gangways in the trees. Bilbo's neck prickled as she felt the weight of so many eyes upon them. This place was similar enough to Rivendell, but at once completely alien, and the dissonance threw her off balance.

Then she caught a new scent, damp and mineral, as they reached a fork in the path. The elf leading them paused and turned to look down. She told Thorin stiffly, "Your baths are that way."

Bilbo asked sharply. "What do you mean?"

The elf spluttered, "Wh-what? He would not be allowed in the ladies' baths."

Bilbo sighed when she realized her error. But even for propriety's sake, she was loathe to be parted from him even temporarily. Thorin glowered, but squeezed her hand once and walked down the other path. Bilbo watched him go until the elf cleared her throat.

As they walked, Bilbo said reluctantly, "I apologize. I thought you were trying to treat him differently because he's a dwarf, too. I knew dwarves and elves were like dogs and cats, but--" she huffed out a sharp breath and shook her head. Then she looked up at the elf and changed the subject. "Enough of that, though. So tell me about yourself. Have you always lived in Caras Galadhon? Are you married? Oh-- oh goodness, I didn't even catch your name, how rude of me. What's your name, miss elf?"

Another delicate blush warmed the elf's fair cheeks. "I am Laerfindel."

Bilbo nodded and resisted the urge to tuck her thumbs into her braces. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Laerfindel."

The elf seemed caught off guard. Then she hesitantly added, "And you as well. I've lived here my whole life. I'm not married, though."

Bilbo let out a small "Oh?"

Laerfindel twisted her hands together and asked-- shyly. Bilbo then realized her brittle mien came from shyness, not aloofness, and she really felt bad for biting the lass' head off-- "Are you and the dwarf married, then?"

Bilbo smiled gently and shook her head. "Not yet. Once we get home, though..."

Laerfindel blinked rapidly, blushing furiously, and she asked in a tiny voice, "Isn't he dangerous, though?"

Bilbo cried, "Dangerous!" But then, unbidden, she remembered him cutting through ranks of orcs,
Orcrist flashing, and the blood on his face as he held Halthur's severed head aloft-- "Well, yes, to his enemies he is, of course, but then, so am I." Laerfindel looked shocked by that, so Bilbo patted the hilt of Sting at her waist. "We are all dangerous in the defense of those we love. But that doesn't mean he isn't also soft, and gentle, and kind."

Laerfindel looked as confused as if someone had told her up had always been down. Good gracious, what did these elves think of the dwarves that they could not countenance the concept of a kind dwarf? Bilbo wished for her pipe to champ between her teeth, but then she had to wonder if this elf was younger than she first thought. Finally, they rounded a bend and beheld a sweeping, graceful pavilion, its pale wooden walls carved into intricate knots, and there, a series of simmering hot springs clustered beside a low bluff. Vines of climbing roses, jasmine, and honeysuckle climbed up the sharp hillside. Some of the pools were occupied, and the musical sound of conversation and laughter floated above the water.

Laerfindel showed her to the changing room in the pavilion, but Bilbo looked uncomfortably around at the open cubbies and asked, "Is there nowhere more...secure to store my things?"

The elf looked taken aback. "I'm to take your things to be laundered."

Bilbo shook her head. "Not my mail, you're not, nor Sting or my beads or my--" she shut her mouth with a snap.

The elf shook her head. "They will be safe here."

Bilbo fought not to give the elf a hard look, but she relented. She unbuckled Sting from her waist and set it against the wall of one cubby, slipped open the buttons of her (filthy) waistcoat and then her blouse, and-- and there it was. Laerfindel gasped when she saw the mithril. Bilbo ignored the elf and slipped her blouse and waistcoat off her shoulders, then gingerly pulled her mail over her head. This late in the evening, her breasts were growing uncomfortably full again. When she emerged from her mail, Laerfindel was pointedly looking away. Then Bilbo carefully pulled her beads from her braids, folded them inside her mail, and slipped the bundle behind Sting. Hopefully the sword would deter any nosey parkers... But she left the Ring on its chain around her neck. She twisted her lips at the feel of the cold metal against her chest, but she didn't dare leave it out of sight. Then she quickly shucked her trousers and smallclothes and handed the pile to Laerfindel.

The elf in turn handed her a towel, a bar of soap, a bristle brush, and a wide wooden comb, saying, "I'll be back with something for you to wear." Then she quickly left.

Bilbo stared at her folded towel and considered wrapping it around herself-- she didn't fancy parading past the other elves in naught but her birthday suit-- but she was just too filthy. She'd ruin the towel before she got the chance to use it. There was nothing else for it. She walked outside with her head held high.

The elves had augmented the natural springs with intricate mosaics, but they had placed a number of potted ferns between the pools like natural screens, so she was able to have a modicum of privacy. She made for the nearest pool, set her supplies within reach, and gingerly slipped into the steaming water. It was just this side of too hot, and she had to bite back a groan as the heat soaked into her knotted, bruised back. For a moment, she simply sat in solitude. Then she broke for the surface with a gasp, and she scrabbled for the edge, clutching the sides of the pool with shaking fingers. She breathed. She breathed.

_Icy water closed over her, the rippling light above tumbling away--_

She broke for the surface with a gasp, and she scabbled for the edge, clutching the sides of the pool with shaking fingers. She breathed. She breathed.
As her trembling ceased, she set to work with the soap and the comb and the bristle brush. She focused on how good it felt to scrape and scrub the ingrained dirt and sweat and-- well-- off her skin. She breathed. She breathed.

She gingerly unraveled her braids and scrubbed her hair til her scalp tingled. Then she stubbornly dunked her head under the water again--

*His broad hand on her back, supporting her weight with ease, as he rinsed her hair. "It is ours--"

"Ours and ours alone." And then his face twisted and his voice twisted and--

No!

Bilbo surfaced with another gasp and angrily wiped soap and tears from her eyes. Soft and dangerous. He was soft and dangerous, but he was more than his madness. It was this thing around her neck, it wasn't *him*. This accursed Ring had been playing them like puppets the whole time, and she would *not* let it win.

She rinsed her hair once more and hauled herself up out of the water, skin steaming slightly in the cool air. She wrapped her towel tightly beneath her arms and headed back inside.

Laerfindel came in just as Bilbo was searching for a second towel for her hair, and she held out a soft, pale green dress and clean underthings. Bilbo could have wept. She eyed the low neckline and decided that her mail needed cleaning before she wore it again. The dress fit perfectly, even if it was a little longer than she would have preferred, and she looked to Laerfindel. The elf smiled quietly.

"When we were told you were on your way, my Lady had some dresses made for you. She also bade me to tell you that she's also had a late dinner prepared for you, since that might have been missed in the excitement over your admittance into Caras Galadhon."

At that, Bilbo's stomach growled loudly, and she cried, "Oh! That is the best news I've heard all day." The dresses, the late dinner, the helpful elf sent to guide her through all this-- Bilbo could not help but think that it was all very kind of Galadriel. She squeezed the towel around her wet hair once more, but she didn't have time to let it air dry, not with food waiting. She buckled Sting around her waist, picked up her mail, and tipped her beads into her hand. She would have to have Thorin rebraid them into her hair. She smiled up at Laerfindel and said cheekily, "I'm ready when you are."

The elf maid led her down a different path, through gardens wild and cultivated, and the sound of sweet music grew louder. Nightingales' songs floated above it all, and Bilbo marveled at the ethereal beauty of this place. Then they rounded a bend and stepped down into a courtyard filled with tables set for dinner. Ladies-in-waiting and courtiers mingled, and a harpist had settled into position next to a fountain. Galadriel was not there, but then she saw Thorin. Her heart clenched in her chest, because *oh*.

The silver in his clean hair gleamed, and by some odd effect of the silver-blue lights, his eyes appeared silver as well. He wore a pale silk brocade shirt with delicate filigree clasps down the quarter-collar. He was, for once, without his armor, but his shoulders seemed all the broader despite that, and she was struck all at once by the fact that he was a *king*. Perhaps she had grown so used to seeing him only in rough travel garb-- she could only recall one other instance where he had donned finery, and that was in Erebor-- but in the cold-silver light of Caras Galadhon, she could not escape that truth. *He was a king.*

Who was she?

She was a merchant with sticky fingers and a knack for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.
But then he saw her and a smile like sunshine breaking through clouds lit up his face. He stood and held out his hands for her, and she went to him, still fighting against the feeling that she was a fraud and imposter.

He bent and pressed a kiss to the inside of her wrist. The brush of his beard against her skin thrilled through her, and she chased that feeling. Then he murmured softly, "You are lovely, Melhekin."  

*The Ring-- the Ring was playing them like puppets.*

*Its sole purpose is to rule.*

*You were-- all of you-- under the influence of the Ring.*

"I have never been so wrong in my life--"

*And while his arms wrapped around her, her newly found Ring sat snuggly in her pocket--*  

*It's sole purpose is to rule, and the Arkenstone isn't your only path to the throne, now, is it?*

*No!*

She refused to believe that-- that the Ring had-- had-- made him want her. She *could not* believe that. She clung to his hand, tracing her thumb over his rings, and she swore to herself that she would make herself worthy of his regard. She would not lose him again. Thorin's brows furrowed when he saw her expression, so she buried her face in his shoulder and forced herself to breathe. Then she felt his big, broad arms envelop her, and he tucked his cheek atop her hair. She felt as much as heard him rumble soft words in Khuzdul, words she still did not know, but she clung to that. And finally, finally, she stood back.

His eyes had so many questions, but she faintly shook her head. Instead, she held out her beads-- his beads-- and asked, "Will you braid these back in?"

He nodded and she reveled in the feel of his fingers gently running through her hair. He finished one braid, slipped the aglet into her hair, and started the other. Neither said a word, but she breathed. She breathed.

Once he slipped the bead onto her azlaf braid, he ran his thumb along the shell of her ear, and she blushed scarlet. He rumbled a laugh and leaned down to nuzzle against her temple. She leaned back against his chest and--

"Bilbo Baggins!" a new voice called happily.

Bilbo jumped like a fauntling caught out, and she stood straighter.

A stunningly beautiful, dark-haired elf stepped into the courtyard, her fair skin positively glowing, and her grey eyes danced with delight. Her lavender gown gleamed with pearls and amethysts, and a white jewel shone upon her breast. But her voice, her voice was like music, "Oh! I am so glad to meet you. My father has written to me so much about you." She held out her hands to clasp Bilbo's own in a firm, cool grip.

Bilbo blinked rapidly and asked, "Lady Arwen?"

Elrond's daughter squeezed her hands and pleaded, "Just Arwen, please. Unless you would like to be addressed as Lady Bilbo?" She let out a peal of laughter like bells when Bilbo shook her head wildly. "Just so. Please, come eat!" She swept her arm out to invite them to sit, and as they sat, she
Bilbo smoothed her hands down the soft, soft gown and asked, "This was your doing?"

Arwen smiled and nodded. "I wanted you to feel welcome here." To Thorin, she said, "I had less notice of your arrival, I'm afraid, but I'm glad to see that Laerfindel was able to find something that could also suit you."

He stared, a little taken aback by her generosity, but then he nodded his head and said gruffly, "My thanks, my Lady. That was kindly done."

Arwen smiled impishly back, and then servants brought out trays and trays of food.

-----

Kíli and Tauriel ate a few bites of lembas while they let the elk deer drink from a spring. Kíli thought that the Mirkwood had gotten worse as they rode south, but he held his tongue. Tauriel ran her hand sadly along the trunk of a tree that was being slowly strangled by mistletoe and he saw her sigh. But then her head snapped toward a distant sound, and then he too heard rough calls, like sick ravens. He cocked his head, not familiar with the sound, but it was coming closer, and Tauriel clamped a hand on his bicep and pulled him under cover. He looked at her in shock, and she snarled softly, "Crebain from Dunland!"

He made a 'what's that?' gesture.

"Spies of the Enemy," she breathed, and he gasped, "Oh!"

Then the raucous flock flew over them, spooking the deer into a run. Kíli tensed, ready to run after it, but Tauriel kept her hand clamped around his arm. She shook her head at him and they stayed under cover. It took several long moments for the enormous flock to pass, and they waited several moments longer to be sure they were long gone.

Kíli lept to his feet and cried, "But the deer! Our packs!"

Tauriel checked the string of her bow and answered calmly, "He will return. But those Crebain? That is not good. Someone is looking for your uncle. Someone knows to be looking for your uncle."

Then the deer minced back out of the woods, their packs thankfully still on its back. She checked that her knives were still in place and said, "We need to hurry."

Chapter End Notes

$ "The world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places; but still there is much that is fair, and though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater."

-- JRRT, FOTR

Yes, I'm a plant nerd. And yes, Western Jacob's Ladder is a rare plant. And yes, I have
shrieked "STOP!!" when I saw lady slippers on the side of the road. They're plants! Growing!! I can't even!!!
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Within the Wood and without.

Chapter Notes

NSFW, dear readers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bitter wind cut through his robes and whipped his hair across his face. Gandalf tried once more to reach Galadriel by Far Speech, but it was like shouting into cotton batting. Saruman's dampening spells covered the Ring of Isen like a thick cloche. Hunger, like a distant thing, circled at the edge of his consciousness. He wrapped his robes tighter around his middle and curled his stiff fingers beneath his arms. The sunset was hidden behind thick clouds that threatened rain, and he fought against a growing despair.

Saruman was on his way, and he had no way to warn them.

But then, as the dim light darkened, a small shape dove past. Then another, and another. High pitched shrilling trilled at the edge of his hearing, and he couldn't suppress a delighted chuckle. Chimney swifts nested along the top of Orthanc. Gandalf whistled, a swift alighted on his finger, and with a whisper, he let his hopes dart away on the wind.

-----

Over the course of the meal, at Arwen's bequest, Bilbo and Thorin told their tale. More than one of the courtiers subtly wiped away tears when they finished, and Bilbo grew profoundly uncomfortable. She missed Raetha something fierce, and it hurt to wonder if she was still safe, if the caravan was still in the dim Mirkwood, or if she was even now approaching the Lonely Mountain. Oh stars, they would miss her first sight of Erebor. Her throat clenched, so she quickly begged the elves for tales of their own, for she could no longer bear to speak. This sparked quite a debate amongst the Galadhrim, who could not decide where to begin.

Then Thorin asked quietly, "Can someone tell me the story of Glorfindel and the Balrog?"

That sent the ladies-in-waiting all aflutter, but Arwen nodded and the harpist began a mournful, lilting tune. Laerfindel's sweet voice rang out, weaving a song of fire and ruin and death undone.

At its conclusion, Arwen saw the way Thorin's gaze lit upon the harp and asked, "Master Oakenshield, do you play?"

Thorin replied hesitantly, "It has been many decades since I held such a lovely instrument, my Lady."
Arwen swept out her arm and asked gently, "Would you like a turn?"

Bilbo felt his fingers twitch atop her thigh, and she nudged her knee against his encouragingly.

After a moment, he nodded and rose. The elf stood and he took the stool, his feet on the bottom rung instead of the ground. He reached out and plucked a few chords, and though the instrument was not to his size, the music that rippled out from beneath his fingers filled the garden.

Bilbo clutched her mail between both hands, rapt. He turned the full weight of his attention onto the strings, and he gleamed in the silver light. But then he opened his mouth and sang.

*Oh* she could almost feel his low notes rumble in her chest. The tips of her ears began to blush, and she was so distracted she almost missed his words.

---*She said to him, by light adored*  
"*All that is mine is mine and yours*  
*And where you live, there I will live.*"  
*Thus, hammer in hand, he lit his forge.*

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

*At his silver-steel, she did agree*  
*Their contract struck, now hers to keep*  
*His labor of fire, now to acquire*  
*Now two in one, and so, to sleep.*

Then he looked up at met her gaze, and she was struck by the memory of the last night in Bag End, of the thirteen dwarves' tale of dragonfire and loss, and of the one low humming voice that followed her into her dreams.

Bilbo jumped when the elves started clapping, and she quickly joined in. But from the predatory edge to Thorin's grin, she could guess something of her flustered state showed on her face. Then he took his seat beside her once more. Beneath the table, he reached for her hands, still clutching her mail, and he gently covered her hand with his.

Many songs were sung as desserts and cordials were passed around. But the day had been long, and the night was now full, so at last, they rose and bade their host farewell. Bilbo's last sight of the party was Arwen, gleaming like a star herself, waving them a fond goodnight.

Hand in hand, they walked beneath the Mallorn trees. A hush had fallen over the city, the only sounds now the frogs and crickets, and they both were quiet. His rough thumb stroked lightly over hers. Bilbo's breath caught in her throat, and she felt suddenly shy, alone with this unfamiliar king of kings.

Finally, he asked softly, "What?"

But she shook her head and quickly said, "Nothing."

-----

Kíli startled when long hands pulled him from sleep, and Tauriel quickly clamped a hand over his mouth to muffle his shout. He blinked quickly awake, eyes adjusting to the other non-colors of his...
night sight, and he saw her press a finger to her lips. He nodded and she released him. He couldn’t hear what had her on edge, not yet.

She breathed, "Pack your things, we need to move, now."

He blinked rapidly but obeyed, and at the edge of his hearing, he thought he could hear a deep, dull tramping. A chill shivered down his back. He now knew that sound.

While he packed, Tauriel scaled a tree, graceful as a dancer, and the deer nervously pawed the moss. He slung their packs over the great beast’s back just as Tauriel swung down, face pale and lips tight. She ground out, "Orcs march from Dol Goldur." Kíli’s grip tightened on one of their bags and she added, "We can no longer afford rest."

A flicker of emotion passed across Kíli’s face, but he shrugged. "Wouldn't be the first time, won't be the last." Then he handed her a brick of Lembas and gave her a wolfish grin. "Ready?"

She fondly rolled her eyes at his display of bravado and boosted him over the back of their deer. Then she alighted behind him and cried to their steed, "Goheno nin, mellon. Noro lim!"

-----

When Bilbo and Thorin reached their tent, the lamps were still lit inside, and the brightly colored fabric glowed. He held open the curtain/door and bowed her inside. She flushed deep red and ducked her head. Inside, she folded her mail next to his armor, unbuckled Sting and leant it next to Orcrist. Her long draping sleeves fluttered about as she fidgeted, but once he tied the door shut, he reached for her, caught her about her waist and swung her into an embrace. She yelped, but his mouth crashed down to hers, and he kissed her ardently. When he broke away, she gasped, "--What?"

He let out a delighted laugh, nuzzled his forehead to hers, and said fiercely, "You, my ghivashel, when you told those elves off for me. When you just sat down and ordered that leaf-eating tree-shagger--"

She kissed him quiet and replied firmly, "I'll not have someone treat you with disrespect--the very nerve of him. But you will keep a civil tongue in your head, too, Thorin Oakenshield."

He stared intently at her, his eyes tracing over her face, but his expression was so, so soft. She flushed once more under his scrutiny, and then he bowed his head to her, looking at her through his lashes, and oh that was just not fair. He rumbled quietly, "No one has defended my honor before, Bilbo. No one outside of my own kin and kind. Yet now, again, you do."

She cleared her suddenly thick throat. "Yes. Well. Get used to it. That's my job, now, you see. I'm the only one allowed to tell you off anymore, leastwise unless you deserve it, then I'll let you get to deal wi--"

He chuckled as he pressed his lips to hers, and her hands clutched at his arms. But her heart still twisted with doubt, and he could tell. How could he always tell? He pulled away to blink down at her, and the confusion on his face tightened the knot of guilt and inadequacy in her chest and--

He hooked a thumb over the chain around her neck and ordered, "Off. Take this thing off."

Irritation caught fire beneath her skin, and she fought the urge to snarl at him. Who was he to tell her--!

"Take that thing off, Bilbo. I cannot stand the thought of it pressed against your skin--"
Bilbo wrenched herself out of his arms and whirled away. Then she spun back to face him and spat, "You-- you're trying to take it from me! You want it for yourself!"

Thorin roared, "I want to cast it into the abyss!" She jumped and he felt guilt burn through him. He consciously shrank in on himself and added softly, desperately, "I only want you. I want you back and safe and I hate what that thing is doing to us."

From across the tent, Bilbo blinked back tears. He clenched and unclenched his empty fists at his sides, but he dared not push harder. Then her face crumpled, and she tore the Ring and its chain over her head. She balled it up in her mithril mail and stuffed that under a pillow, as far from their bed as possible. Then she covered her face in her hands. Thorin crossed the tent in a few strides and pulled her into a crushing embrace. He buried his face in her hair and held her as her shoulders shook.

Muffled against his silk-clad chest, she cried, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry--"

"Shh, ghivashel, shhh." There was nothing else to say. Who was he but yet another to fall under that foul thing's spell? He started to ask, "Why now--?" But the question was past his lips before he could stop himself.

She clutched at his shirt and whimpered, "I don't know."

She still trembled against him, and he soothed, "I won't let it take you, and you won't let it take me."

Her breath hitched and he felt her nod frantically.

He ran a hand up and down her back and murmured low, "In this and in all things, we do this together. You are my own, brave sanzeuh. Amrâlimê, âzyungâl."

Bilbo buried her face into his chest like she could burrow inside him. Then he chuckled wetly, "Thorin, you do realize I don't know Khuzdul, right?" She peeked up at him from against his chest.

He grinned down at her and asked lowly, "Do you not?" She blushed so invitingly and he brushed her hair away from her face. Then he brushed his knuckles across her cheek and rumbled, "Amrâlimê, my love." He ran the backs of his fingers along the shell of her ear and murmured, "Azýungâl, my lover." He grinned when she shivered in a much more pleasant way, and he buried his fingers in her hair. "Sanzeuh, my One." He heard her soft oh! and bent to claim her lips. This time she melted against him, he deepened the kiss, and he took and he took and he took.

When at last he broke away, to see her dazed expression, to see the lovely blush on her cheeks, to see her swollen lips, his heart swelled. Her chest heaved as she panted, and he could not resist. He ran his fingertips along her low collar, just barely brushing her skin, and she let her head tip back with a sigh. He murmured thoughtfully, "For elf-make, this is fine work." She let out a soft whimper when his fingers dipped below the fabric, and he growled, "But I would rather see you in your mithril, Melhekînh."

Her eyes fluttered shut, but then they snapped open again. She leveled him with a look and wrinkled her nose delicately. "Dearest, it's filthy, and not just with dirt and bracken--!"

But his fingers tightened on the embroidered collar, his eyes darkened, and he ground out, "Good!" He kissed her fiercely.

She gasped a muffled Oh! and he deepened the kiss. She clung to his arms, swimming in sensation. But she broke away to gasp, "You! Oh--!" She bit back a wail as he sucked a biting kiss to the juncture of her neck and shoulder. Her toes curled and she threw her arms around his neck.
Then he met her gaze, eyes blown dark, and he rasped, "You are my queen-to-be, and I would mark you as such-- in mithril and rubies and pearls--" he grazed a thumbnail across the hot, tender spot on her throat, where he'd just sucked a mark-- she choked on a gasp. Rubies! And-- and pearls! Surely he didn't mean-- that! She could feel his chuckles rumble in her chest, and she flushed beet red. The impropriety of-- of-- that! pulled at a knot behind her chest, but her well-bred Shire manners were no match for the kindled, molten want that flooded her. Then he pressed a series of biting kisses up her neck, up her ear, and he whispered hotly, "And I can't wait til all can see the evidence of my claim, again." He pressed an open palm over her soft belly and gently bit the tip of her ear, and she keened.

She fisted a hand in his hair and cried, "Thorin, please--!" Her breasts were heavy and full, and the memory of their snatched moments in the forest flooded through her--

He groaned against her ear, and he murmured, "Please what, ghivashel?"

She groaned in turn, hooked a foot behind his knee like she'd been taught, and pushed. He fell, shocked, back onto the pile of pillows. He didn't let go of her waist, though, so she fell with a small shriek with him down onto their bed. He let out a soft oof! when she landed atop him, and she leaned down over him, laughing, '"Please what' indeed! What is your word, again? Âzyungâl?" He shivered beneath her and she pressed her palms against his shoulders, his skin warm against her skin even through the silk.

His throat bobbed and he cried, "Bilbo--!" Then his hands slid up her waist to brush the sides of her breasts and she arched her back. "Âzyungâl, tell me, please."

She whined and nuzzled against his neck, hiding her face, the fire beneath her skin warring with her propriety, and oh just wasn't that the sum and substance of their entire relationship thus far! She whimpered, "Please, I need--" but her voice broke.

His thumbs stroked the sides of her breasts and he pleaded, "I'll be what you need, tell me, please-- let me-- tell me how to please you and I will--"

She cut him off with a desperate kiss and rocked against his hard length. He let out a ragged groan and dragged a thumb roughly over one of her hardening nipples. She cried out and then-- oh she flushed scarlet when she felt a damp spread on the front of her dress. "Thorin! Please, please-- take. Take from my breasts, they're too full--"
her dress was loose enough that he pulled her other breast free. He cupped and squeezed her, flicking his thumbnail across her other leaking nipple, and she buried her hands in his hair with a keening whine, holding his head tighter against her chest, and she could feel his damp breaths as he panted against her tender skin.

Her dress started to fall off one shoulder, and she could feel wetness spreading between her legs, and her insides twisted at the debauched state she'd gotten herself into, but she could not stop. Not when Thorin pulled away from one nipple with an obscene, wet, smacking pop, not when he looked up at her with a boyish grin and shining eyes and a fine blush above his beard, not when he kept his gaze on her as he latched onto her other breast, not when the sharp tug at her nipple pulled sharply down there in the most delicious way-- He wrapped one arm around her back, his broad hand spread between her bared shoulder blades, and she leaned back further. She knew she was panting, chest heaving, she knew she was being too loud, she knew she was losing her rhythm as she rocked against him, but the rough drag of his callouses against the soft skin along the bottom of her breasts made her toes curl. And he knew her, knew how to play her like a fiddle-- like a fine harp, and he dragged the barest hint of teeth across her nipple, and she came against him with a bitten off cry.

He pressed kisses across her chest as she panted and trembled, and she pressed her cheek against the top of his head. He wrapped his arms around her waist and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and they stayed there in a tangle for a long moment while her heartbeat slowed and sweat cooled on her skin. Then she shifted against him and murmured softly, "Your turn."

He smiled against her skin and gently tugged her dress fully off her shoulders. The fabric pooled around her waist, and she freed the other clasps on his fine shirt. She licked her lips at the peek of chest hair beneath his collar, and her mouth watered at the flex of his muscles as he pulled the shirt over his head and tossed it aside. Then his broad hands gripped her waist and he rolled her onto her back. She lifted her hips enough for him to pull the dress and her underthings down her legs and off, and he tugged at the laces of his breeches, but his-- "Boots off!" she all but yelped in exasperation. He pressed his forehead against hers and laughed. She groaned as he sat up and did whatever unbuckling and untucking he needed to do to get those clomping things off, and then he was between her legs, pressing her down into the pillows, bare skin to bare skin, and she hummed happily.

He chuckled as he loomed over her, his dark hair falling around them like a sheet, and then he pressed in, in, in-- She pulled him down tight, and he was a solid weight over her. She buried her face in the crook of his neck and his broad shoulder, and he was just so much.

He moved slowly in her, as inexorable as the tide, and she was a loose, quivery mess from her own peak. She clung to him, hands running through his hair and over his back, pulling him closer, ever closer. But their bed play before had him already on edge, and soon he shifted her legs over his shoulders and-- and-- oh! that, right there-- and she must have said something aloud because he replied roughly, "Yes--!" And he drove into her with abandon, and this-- this-- he was breaking because of her-- and she reached up to run her fingers through his beard, lightly dragging her nails against his jaw, and then she twisted her grip and tugged just so, and-- he let out a sharp breath like it was punched out of him. He wrenched himself out of her, threw off her legs, scrabbled up over her waist, fisted his cock a few times, and came with a shout all over her chest and neck.

Oh the hot streaks that fell on her skin thrilled her, but his face-- his face as he stared hungrily down at her, even as he slumped and panted-- oh she basked in that glow. She lifted a hand to cup his bearded cheek, and he tilted his head into her touch even as he rasped, "You, you wicked thing--"

She just lifted her brows and asked innocently, "Who, me?"
He shifted down to kiss her fiercely, pressing her into the pillows, and he growled, "Oh yes, you. Pulling my beard--!" But his attention was drawn back down to his seed spread across her flushed skin, and she reveled in the weight of his gaze.

She teased, "So, am I to expect a similar reaction if I were to do it again?"

Another growl rumbled low in his chest and he kissed her again.

After a long while, though, once the mess on her chest started to get uncomfortably cool, she shifted beneath him and said, "Alright. May I have a damp handkerchief now?"

He just pressed a biting kiss to a clean spot on her jaw and ground out, "No."

She blinked and cried, "No?"

He leaned up to look her in the eyes again and rumbled dangerously, "No. I'm not done with you yet, my Burglar." He grinned sharply, and she gasped out a breathless oh!

-----

The next morning, she had a bath while he cleaned their armor, and when she returned to their tent, he slipped her mail over her shoulders. She sighed as the cool weight settled against her skin again, and she felt one little layer of security snap back into place. From the way his hands lingered as he did up her jeweled clasps, and from his soft expression, she guessed he felt the same. The elven gowns had not been cut with the mail in mind, but that could not be helped. Thorin smirked as he wove his beads into her hair, and she blushed faintly. He'd left enough marks on her neck that she needed her mithril today. She straightened his collar too, a little too forcefully, and he bent to press a sweet kiss to her temple.

She grumbled at his cheerfulness, "Oh, you are going to be insufferable today, aren't you?"

His chuckle was answer enough, and she rose on her tiptoes to press a kiss to the corner of his mouth. Then she sighed, settled back on her feet, slipped the Ring back over her neck and tucked it between her dress and her mail. When she looked back up at him with a watery grin, she caught a glimpse of his worried expression before he pressed his forehead to hers. Then, together, they went to find breakfast.

They spent the day leisurely milling about, sharing stories with Arwen and her ladies-in-waiting, seeing the sights, and sitting in the sun in the garden. Galadriel did not join them. And when they spent the evening over dinner in the courtyard again, as pleasant as it all was, Bilbo couldn't help but feel horribly restless. They had practically sprinted to get here, and now they were doing nothing. The gently-thrumming harp did nothing to calm her nerves.

Thorin placed a broad hand on the small of her back, and she settled somewhat. But something itched beneath her skin. They could not tarry here.

They bade the elves goodnight when night had fully settled over Lothlórien. The odd silver light of the city did nothing to dim the stars overhead, and nightingales' song floated on the cool air. Bilbo fidgeted as they walked, but before Thorin could ask her what was wrong, she froze and stared off through the trees. He looked where she was looking, but couldn't-- no, there. A glowing figure passed between the trees. She darted off toward the figure before Thorin could stop her. He cried, "Bilbo--!" and hurried after her. He caught up with her just as she paused at the head of a set of stairs, and below, Galadriel bent before a fountain, gleaming like an earthbound star, and then Bilbo ghosted down the steps as if in a trance. Thorin muttered, "Bil--" but then he sighed and followed
The Lady of the Wood stood like a statue before them, holding a shining silver pitcher, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. Then she spoke in ringing tones, "Will you look into the mirror?"

Bilbo stood before the plinth and asked, "What will I see?"

A small, dangerous smile lit Galadriel's face, and she replied, "Even the wisest cannot tell." Then she poured water that seemed to shine all the brighter in the darkness.

Bilbo stepped up to the mirror, and Thorin had to fight back the urge to catch her by the waist to pull her back, to run back to their tent and flee the Wood entirely. He was horribly unnerved by the way Galadriel stared at Bilbo. But then Bilbo bowed her head over the mirror, and-- nothing. She finally started fidgeting, and then she looked up at Galadriel and cleared her throat. "I, ah, I don't see anything."

Galadriel shut her eyes slowly, troubled. Then she turned her unsettling gaze to Thorin and asked, "Will you look into the mirror, son of Durin?"

Thorin hesitantly stepped up beside Bilbo and, after a second hard look at the elf, bent his head to look into the still water. He blinked hard, because he saw stars reflected above his head, but that was all. He looked back up at Galadriel and shook his head.

Galadriel turned away, face pulled tight, and Bilbo asked, "What does it mean?"

The elf went perfectly still, but then she sighed and turned back to them. She said gravely, "It means we are being kept blind, stifled by outside forces. I am troubled, for I have been unable to contact Gandalf or Elrond. I fear that someone else knows of what you carry."

Bilbo stiffened. Then she said, "It has brought us nothing but grief." She pulled the Ring from the inside of her dress and held it out to Galadriel. "You would know what to do with it more than me. Would you take it?"

The elf stood poleaxed, then she breathed out shakily, "You offer it to me freely?" Thorin did not like the dark hunger that flashed across her face as she reached out, hand trembling, but before she even touched the Ring, a gale filled the courtyard and she cried out, "In place of a Dark Lord, you would have a queen!" Then Galadriel changed, and when Thorin moved to protect Bilbo, he was thrown to his knees. Galadriel's voice was now overlaid with the baying of hounds and the screaming of storm winds, "Not dark, but beautiful and terrible as the dawn! Treacherous as the sea! Stronger than the foundations of the earth!" Thorin tried once more to rise, and he screamed when he could not, but his voice was drowned out by the terror before them. Galadriel declared, "All shall love me, and despair!" But then she seemed to shudder and shrink in on herself.

Thorin stared up at the elf, who stood gasping before she turned away. He scrabbled to his feet, but the elf just shook her head and kept her eyes down.

Bilbo cried, disconsolate, "But I cannot do this!"

Galadriel's gaze snapped to her and she said sternly, "This task was appointed to you, Bilbo Baggins. If you cannot find a way, no one will."

Bilbo shut her eyes and tucked the Ring back into her dress. Then she straightened and asked firmly, "What can I do, then? I cannot keep it, and it seems I cannot give it away."

Galadriel seemed to weigh her options, then said, "Such a thing is not safe in the hands of any on
Middle Earth. It will need to be destroyed."

Thorin made a small angry sound and grated, "We were already on our way to Erebor, there are no greater crucibles in all of Arda!"

But Galadriel shook her head. "Not even dragonfire could destroy this Ring. It can only be unmade in the fires of Orodruin, in Mordor."

Thorin croaked, "No--!" and spun Bilbo behind him.

Galadriel shook her head and chided, "You cannot hide her from this. You cannot keep her from this."

Thorin snarled, "Then I'll take it to Mordor for her."

Galadriel smiled sadly. "Could you, oh King under the Mountain? Could you really?"

He opened his mouth to rant, to fight, but Bilbo put a hand on his arm. He stilled. She looked up at him, the same resolve on her face as when she'd come running after them in the Shire two years before. "We'll do what we must, for Raetha. And then we'll go home."

His jaw clenched, but he shut his eyes and pressed his forehead against hers. "Yes, amràlimê."

Chapter End Notes

Sindarin:

*Goheno nin, mellon. Noro lim!* - Forgive me, friend. Ride faster!

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Galadriel's temptation taken verbatim from FOTR because some scenes are just vital.

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"On silver necklaces he strung
The flowering stars, on crowns he hung
The dragon-fire, in twisted wire
He meshed the light of moon and sun." --JRRT, The Hobbit

One stanza from that azlâf song was lifted from the book. Yes, that sly fox did deliberately pull from 'Far over the Misty Mountains cold' because he now has some idea about what that song did to Bilbo that first night.

"As he lay in bed he could hear Thorin still humming to himself in the best bedroom next to him...Bilbo went to sleep with that in his ears, and it gave him very uncomfortable dreams.

Me too, Bilbo. Me too.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Words are exchanged and gifts are given.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Thorin woke to bright sunlight filtering through the fluttering tent walls. Bilbo still slept against his chest. He screwed up his eyes against the light, but no thumping or wailing pulled him from sleep. His gut clenched around the familiar ache. He missed Raetha, sleep-mussed and whiny, with her curls flying in an untamed halo around her head and her insatiable curiosity, even her incurable love of waking up at dawn, and he allowed himself a few moments to dwell on this soul-deep longing. But then Bilbo stirred, and with a sigh, he put the emotion aside. He knew, from long and hard experience, that he could not afford to give his yearning free reign. They had too much to do.

And Bilbo, his strong and stubborn Bilbo, shifted again, burying her face into his shoulder to try to block out the light. He reached up to run a hand up and down her back, and her arm tightened around his waist. Then she blinked up at him, blearily, and thumped her cheek back down against his chest with a sigh.

She mumbled, "Did I dream last night?"

He chuckled, "Maybe? I don't know if you did at all, but we did meet Galadriel, if that's what you meant."

She poked his side half-heartedly and yawned, "Yes, that. That was real? Good gracious."

He spread a big palm between her shoulders and hummed, "Mmhm."

She nuzzled his chest and muttered, "Too big a thought before breakfast."

They lay in a warm, sleepy tangle of limbs for a moment, but it felt odd, from the comfortable pile of cushions to the quiet and the lack of the rush to get up and get going. Bilbo fidgeted in his arms, then she peeped, "Thorin...what now?"

He pressed his cheek to the top of her head while he thought. Finally, he said slowly, "I think we wait for Gandalf and Elrond. We know what we have to do, now we have to figure out how to do it. But it's not like we need to decide just now. We'll figure this out. We've got time."

She started to sit up, but he tangled his fist in her sleep-tousled curls and gently pulled her back down for a kiss. She huffed, then kissed him back sweetly, lightly, and when she sat up again, he let her. She brushed a strand of his silvered hair away from his brow, but he looked up at her with so much tenderness that she just-- she couldn't take it. She pressed her forehead to his, and his broad hands came up to cup her cheeks, and she breathed, she breathed.

He gave a little, questioning, "Bilbo?"

She just shook her head, forehead still pressed to his. Then she whispered, "I just--" but she couldn't
speak. How could she tell him how much he-- how much she--? He was-- he was everything noble and good and strong and she-- she-- didn't know if she could ever deserve his regard, but she'd be damned if she wouldn't try, because she could still remember doing this on her own, and oh though she knew she could, she never wanted to let him go, not again, but-- the words lodged in her throat, all half-formed concepts and ridiculous emotions she was half-ashamed to admit to, because no well-bred hobbit allowed their feelings to-- to-- knock them arse over tea kettle like this, and--

And she felt all this tumult in the space between one breath and another. When she didn't answer, he just buried his fingers in her hair, thumbs stroking her temples, and she arched into his touch.

But then Galadriel's chilling voice sounded in her mind, and they both froze. "Ringbearer--" How could a whisper echo inside her own head? Then a series of images flashed before her eyes, of twisting paths and crossroads and a round table on a sunlit terrace, "Come. Make ready. We can no longer wait for the Council."

And then Galadriel's presence was gone. Bilbo and Thorin stayed still for a moment longer, and then she asked in a horrified whisper, "Did you--?"

He nodded stiffly.

Bilbo asked in a mortified whimper, "Did she--?"

Thorin blinked up at her, then snorted, then laughed, then guffawed til tears glimmered at the corners of his eyes, and Bilbo swatted at his bare, hairy chest and squawked, "It's not funny you great brute!"

But he got hold of himself enough to breathe again, and he rolled them, bare limbs tangled beneath their blankets, and he pressed a set of kisses to her pouting lips. "It's very funny, my dear. Can you imagine Her face? That's what She gets for not knocking or ringing the bell. If She came a-calling before we were dressed, well, that's her problem not ours."

Bilbo buried her face in his neck and grumbled wordlessly.

He sat up and stole away the blankets, the loathsome prat, and she tried to burrow into the still-warm pillows. But he chuckled and patted her ample thigh. "Come on, dear heart, it's time to get up."

Bilbo sat up and muttered darkly, "Where did my snarly, growly dwarf lord go, and what have you done with him?"

Thorin's grin flashed bright behind his beard as he bent to pick up his trousers. "Didn't you know? Making elves uncomfortable is his second-favorite pastime."

Bilbo arched and stretched and his mouth went dry, but then she asked coyly, "Oh, only second-favorite? What's his most favorite, then?"

He tossed her her petticoat and quipped, "Driving his burglar up the bend."

She snatched the lace from mid-air and groaned at him.

-----

The diamonds and pearls on her mail glimmered above the silver-threaded embroidery on the collar of her elven gown, and the sunlight deepened the pale fabric into the exact green of new leaves. She twitched her fingers into the sumptuous sleeves and fought to keep her expression cool and collected even though all she wanted to do was be anywhere but here. Here at a high council table across from the Lady of the Wood and her very unhappy consort. The Lady Arwen and Radagast were also
present, but Bilbo was more concerned about Celeborn's ire at the moment. The elf lord really looked as if-- as if-- well, as if thirteen dwarves had invaded his pantry unannounced, but Bilbo didn't know what they'd done to upset the elf and that made her horribly self-conscious. What if they'd unknowingly offended him? Oh goodness, what if she'd broken protocol or broken some awful Galadhrim taboo on accident? The elf glared at them balefully over the rim of his tea cup as the last of breakfast was cleared away.

Thorin pressed his knee against hers beneath the table, and she fought to get herself back under control.

When the last of the pages left the sun-drenched terrace, Galadriel intoned, "We called for the meeting of the White Council to evaluate that which Bilbo Baggins carries, yet now I am unable to reach Elrond, Gandalf, or Saruman. Something, or someone is blocking my Sight, but there is now no doubt that this is the One Ring, and that means there is only one course of action open to us." She stared at the chain as it disappeared beneath her dress collar.

Bilbo huffed internally, Yes, yes, you already told us as Arwen gasped and pressed her pale hand to her mouth.

Radagast was distracted by a swift that landed on his staff, its tail flicking as it peeped insistently. Celeborn cleared his throat loudly, and Radagast jumped. "Sorry, what would that be? It's just--oh dear," he petered out when the elf lord glared.

Galadriel said gravely, "It must be cast back into the fires of Mount Doom. But there are a number of ways into Mordor, now we gather to discuss which route would be less hazardous."

Radagast raised his hand as if to say something, but Celeborn asked over him, "What of you, Master Dwarf? Do you have anything to contribute?"

For a long moment, Thorin just stared. Then he asked roughly, "To contribute? I agree that the thing must be destroyed, and I believe the Lady's assessment that it must be destroyed in that cursed mountain."

Celeborn pressed, "And what, in your opinion, is the safest way to Mordor?"

Thorin stiffened. "I have no idea, as I have never been there."

"Really?" Celeborn asked archly, and Bilbo clenched her fists beneath the table. But then he added, "I would have thought you had kin there."

Thorin snarled, "None of my kin serve the Deceiver. I am a Longbeard, not some Ironfist."

Celeborn arched his brows delicately. "Forgive me, I could not tell the difference."

Bilbo, now shaking with rage, grit out, "Then, my Lord, if you did not know, it would have been best to stay quiet on the matter. You would not want to inadvertently cause offense, I'm sure. After all, there can be no doubt of my intended's dedication to this quest, nor of his worth."

There was a long, tense beat of silence. Then Radagast tried to pipe, "I really think--" at the same time Arwen started to speak, and when they both stopped, the wizard bowed his head to her.

Arwen nodded back and addressed Bilbo and Thorin. "While I do not know the way to Mordor, my father said that there is a doorway into the side of the mountain."

Bilbo shut her eyes for a moment, then muttered exasperatedly, "A doorway. What's another
doorway, really? Once you find one, you'll find them all."

Thorin asked Arwen, "There isn't by chance a timeframe on this doorway? One that only opens under the shadow of an eclipse or something equally awful?"

At his side, Bilbo snorted and covered her mouth. Arwen just shook her head, "Not that I'm aware of. I suppose it is possible that the door was shut after the Battle of Dagorlad, though. I don't know of anyone who's been back there since."

Radagast started to say, "Um, I really shou--"

But then a brace of armored guards tramped into the courtyard, frog-marching a blindfolded Kíli and Tauriel. Their chairs screeched against the flagstones as Thorin and Bilbo leapt to their feet, and Thorin roared, "What! Kíli? Unhand him!" The guards slipped the hoods off both elf and dwarf, and Kíli tossed his hair out of his face, blinking in the bright light.

Celeborn snapped, "We have our laws, Oakenshield. No dwarf may know the location of Caras Galadhon. An exception was granted to you when you came on the coat tails of an invitation."

It was perhaps fortunate that when Bilbo and Thorin and Tauriel voiced their objections to this, their words crashed over and under and on top of the other's, and nobody could tell who said what when. The guards still took umbrage to this, though, and the council descended into a shouting match.

"Enough." Galadriel's quiet voice cut oddly through the cacophony, and they all froze. She stood, still appearing utterly composed, but the silence echoed as if their ears were ringing in the aftermath of an explosion. Then she said firmly, "It appears that our attempts to safeguard our lands have done more harm than good, if these divisions are our bitter harvest. Our peoples have quarreled for so long it seems we've forgotten that this was not always so." She looked around the council table, then settled her unnerving gaze on the two dwarves. "I remember when Celembrior and Narvi worked together to craft the doors to Khazad-dûm, when the halls of your fathers rang with hammers and song. It is an honor to welcome the sons of Durin again."

Thorin stared at Galadriel like she'd just-- well, like she'd just spoken Khuzdul freely and without disgust.

Kíli ducked his head and stammered quietly, "I'm--I'm honored, my Lady, but-- um-- well, there are more pressing matters at hand--" His shoulders hunched under the stares of the entire council.

Tauriel rapped out, "A host of orcs march from Dol Goldur. They will be here by nightfall."

"An army?" and "How many?" Bilbo and Thorin cried at the same time, over the din that erupted from the elven guards.

"So soon?" Arwen asked numbly. "How did they know?"

Radagast thumped his staff and declared, "Excuse me!" They all turned to him, and he fidgeted. "Muriel here bears a message from Gandalf. Saruman has betrayed us all. He means to lay siege to Lorien and claim the Ring for himself."

Amid all the shouts, Galadriel slowly sank back to her seat.

Celeborn sniffed, "They will break like waves on our borders. There is no way they will be able to breach our lands--"

But Radagast shook his head so fiercely his hat was knocked from his head. Bilbo turned and
pressed her face into Thorin's chest, not wanting to hear what else, and-- "He means to raise Durin's Bane."

Thorin fisted the back of her dress and he choked out something in Khuzdul. The Galadhrim guards broke out into shouts once more, but Thorin rasped to Galadriel, "I will need to stand against it-- it's ours, and it's our fault it will be set upon you--"

But the Lady shook her head, "No. No, you and your One have a far greater task before you. Go. Pack your things, but do not worry about supplies, we will prepare that much. Change, and meet us here as quick as you can."

Radagast peeped, "I will take you again. We'll need speed over stealth, now that-- now that-- oh dear." His hands fluttered about his cheeks. "Oh Saruman!"

Galadriel urged, "Hurry."

They nodded, unable to do more than wave at Kíli before they left, and they ran back to their tent. Behind them, they could hear Kíli yelp, "What! Where are they going now?"

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Once back in their now-clean but still travel-worn clothes, they hurried back down the path. But then, at a bend, Thorin froze, eyes locked far away, through the trees, and when Bilbo looked, she too could see the white peak of Caradhras looming in the distance. His expression was utterly blank, and she reached down to clutch his hand. His fingers shook beneath hers, and she asked worriedly, "--Thorin?"

He almost flinched, and she stepped in front of him to reach up to cup his cheeks. Then he took a shuddering breath and tore his gaze from the mountain. He told her roughly, hollowly, "Six years of war, of brutal carnage in the deep--" he shut his eyes and squeezed her hand. "If the day the dragon came is my worst memory, then Azanulbizar is my next. Those filth-- I lost my grandfather, my king, my father, my brother, my brother-in-law, Balin and Dwalin's father, Dain's father, so many-- all for naught. We were still homeless, and that-- that creature still profanes our sacred halls. And now--" his voice broke. "Now this wizard seeks to set Durin's Bane on you, when it's by the failure of my people that it was awakened, and by the failure of my people that it remains--"

Bilbo caught him by the braids and pulled his head down to hers. She kept their foreheads pressed together and ordered, "Not your failure. Not your fault. Did you make the Balrog? No. And I know what they-- what they say, about how 'The dwarves dug too greedily and too deep,' but that's stuff and nonsense. How would they have known? Unless there were signs tacked up on the walls warning 'No further--serious demon below here, we mean it' ...it was not their fault either. So hush."

Thorin shuffled and grumbled wordlessly, but she kept her hand twined through his hair until the stiff set of his shoulders relaxed. Then she brushed a brief kiss across his frown and smoothed his braids back again, making sure that they framed his face neatly, and said, "And who's to say it was all for naught? Arguably, if you hadn't fought and gotten rid of all those orcs in the first place, there'd've just been that many more in the Battle of Five Armies; instead of being hunted by an orc pack on the quest, we might not've even made it back to Erebor in the first place--" She swallowed and barreled on, "Instead of a few wolves and raiders in the Fell Winter, we might've had to face an army of our own, and you might not have even ever had a Burglar in the first place. We cannot always see all ends, all we can do is do what we can to uproot the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule." §
For a long moment, he just stared at her, eyes wide. Then he ducked his head to press a kiss to her palm, and she flushed to the tips of her ears as she remembered his words in the dark, about what those kisses meant: *these hands, these hands I adore above all others, for their skill and their strength.* He murmured softly, "Such courage and wisdom, blended in measure--"

She ducked her head and twined their fingers together, huffing, "Come now, none of that. We need to get going."

He bowed his head and let her tug him back down the path, piously intoning, "Yes dear."

"Oh *now* you 'yes dear' me. Tell me, did Adalgrim or Rorimac get to you?"

"Oh no, that was all Isengrim, one of the first things he taught me when he saw I would have a Took lass for my own."

Bilbo snorted, intensely grateful she was able to turn his mood. Her heart ached for all his struggles and his losses, though, and if, while they walked, she clung to his hand, well, he clung right back.

-----

The table on the terrace now hosted the Galadhrim war council by the time they returned. Tauriel and Kíli were being grilled by Galadriel's generals. Radagast's sled was already loaded with supplies, and the rabbits thumped excitedly to see Bilbo and Thorin again. She reached down to scratch one behind the ear, but Galadriel stood waiting for them.

Bilbo's breath caught when she looked up at the Lady of the Wood. Sunlight gleamed upon her hair, and though her expression still held deep worry, she smiled at them warmly. Then Galadriel reached for the table and held up a travel cloak in a strange non-color. "With these gifts, please take our blessings as you go. May these cloaks hide you and guard you." She passed a cloak to them both, and Bilbo shucked off her threadbare cloak. Thorin folded his coat and fur mantle on the sled and ran a finger along the stylized leaf clasp before wrapping the cloak around his shoulders. He bowed to Galadriel, but then she handed him a box with three smooth, plain spheres tucked securely inside. He looked up in confusion as he accepted the box, and Galadriel explained, "Take these, Thorin Oakenshield. One thrown, once broken, will send all into darkness for a time. If you ever need cover to escape, may these help you on your way. Not all shadows are an evil."

Thorin ran a gentle finger over the fine ceramic, then shut the lid without a sound. Finally, he croaked, "Thank you, my Lady."

Galadriel turned. "But for you, Bilbo Baggins, I can offer no greater gift than the one you already bear."

Bilbo blinked and pressed her hand over the Ring, quite uncomfortable at the thought that that thing could be in any way considered a gift--

But Galadriel shook her head, "No, your zarb." Her eyes trailed over the glittering diamonds and pearls that peaked out from behind the tatty blouse and added, "Such a gift, given in love, has its own power. From what I can see, your zarb has already been acting as a shield against the malice of the Ring."

Bilbo pressed her hands to her chest and looked down, confused. "My zarb--? What-- oh, my mail?"

Beside her, Thorin shifted uneasily.

Galadriel nodded and smiled brightly. "It is a kingly gift. But then she held out a delicate
adamantine phial and said gravely, "Though we cannot offer a gift to compare, I give to you the light of Eärendil. May it be a light for you in dark places, when all other lights go out."

Bilbo took the glass in hands that trembled, and the phial felt warm to the touch. She bowed low, unable to speak.

Galadriel eyed them both sadly and tolled, "You carry the hopes of us all. May all the Valar protect you. Namárië."

Then Kíli was standing there, twisting his hands, and he asked tremulously, "Uncle?"

Thorin stepped forward, grabbed Kíli by the shoulders and pressed their foreheads together with a bit more force than was necessary. Kíli made a face, but quickly wiped his expression when Thorin looked down at him with such glowing fondness. "Oh my boy, I could wring your neck, but I am so proud of you. If not for you and your advanced warning, we might not have had this chance."

Kíli smiled that awful Durin smile, the one that lit up their whole face, and Bilbo hated that she had to tug on Thorin's elbow. Thorin clapped his shoulder once more, and then Kíli bowed to her.

Bilbo yelped, "None of that now, you scamp!" and she tugged him down into a fierce hug.

He buried his face in her shoulder and mumbled, "Yes Auntie." Then he stood and pleaded, "Be safe. Would that I could go with you--"

Bilbo shuddered and ordered, "No. We mean it this time. They will need you here before this is all said and done. And not that you'll listen to me, but if you cannot be safe, then be smart."

He nodded and she let him go. Tauriel, the guards, all but Celeborn and Galadriel bowed to them, and with her heart in her throat, they got back into Radagast's sled.

As they passed out from beneath the southern-most Mallorn trees and turned east away from the Anduin, Bilbo finally twisted and asked, "Thorin, what is a zarb? That's not a Sindarin word--Thorin?"

His arms were tight around her waist, and she felt him press his cheek to the top of her head. He sighed and explained, "A zarb-- my zarb, is my gift to you to show that I can provide for you as a husband should."

She blinked and asked, "What, like a dowry?"

"No, it's--" he huffed. "There is no right word for it in Westron. It's what the dwarf gives to-- acquire their betrothed. It can be a sum of money or a contract or--" he flushed and huffed again, "or something as simple as a shared bed, but whatever it is, the zarb represents the-- my obligations as a husband, to you. And as king of a restored kingdom, with all its wealth and might at my command, I could offer you a zarb worthy of song." He still floundered for words, and she rubbed her thumb across his knuckles. Then he grated out, "I once told Gandalf, before we even left your hole in the ground, that I would not guarantee your safety or be responsible for your fate, and-- oh my burglar, ever have I bitterly regreted those words. Even in my gold-addled mind, I sought to rectify that. I would do anything, give anything to see you safe, amrâlimê. And your fate is mine."

For a long moment, she was quiet. Then there was nothing else for it but to shift and shuffle around until she could wrap her arms around him and curl ever tighter into his embrace.

They rode on.
"It is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule." ---J.R.R. Tolkien

More on the ripple effects of *The War of Dwarves and Orcs*.

Thorin's gift is shamelessly inspired by Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder, bless those Weasleys.

Zarb and all associated azlāf details come from the Dwarrow Scholar, long may they reign.
Kíli stared after his uncle (his King) and their Burglar long after they’d passed from sight. Around him, above him, the elves were a whirl of activity, their foreign words washing over him without his understanding. Had this been how Bilbo felt, those first few weeks on the quest before they’d warmed up to her? His gut clenched. Then he flinched when Celeborn raised his voice, but--

Tauriel stiffened and cried, "You cannot keep blaming these dwarves for Moria, no more than for the sack of Doriath, either!"

The whole bustling courtyard froze and stared. Celeborn stood, and Tauriel added, "My Lord."

Kíli tensed, preparing for a fight, but then the dark-haired lady seated next to Galadriel said softly, "She is right."

Celeborn stared down at her and chided, "Arwen--" Nobody else dared breathe.

But the lady, Arwen, shook her head firmly. "We're long past the point when casting blame even matters. We need to make ready for the siege. With any luck, they will believe the Ringbearer still remains within our borders."

A chill ran down Kíli's back. In the ensuing silence, Tauriel deliberately went back to caring for her bow.

Galadriel watched as she rubbed linseed oil into the plain wood and asked, "Captain, is that bow yours?"

Tauriel's hands stilled. Then she said quietly, "It is now."

"What happened to your bow?" The Lady's voice seemed oddly intent.

*Thranduil had cut it in two.* Tauriel swallowed. "My-- King Thranduil was going to recall his warriors from the battle before Erebor when we learned that orcs--" she shook her head and instead said, "I objected. He objected." She smoothed a thumb over the pale wood. "I took this bow, supplied by the garrison."

Galadriel merely hmm'd and turned her gaze away. Slowly, the rest of the war council resumed their tasks.

Tauriel's shoulders slumped a fraction, and Kíli told her quietly, "I didn't know that."

Her eyes snapped to his. From her seat, they were nearly of a height. Her lips twisted in a wry smile and she shook her head. "You didn't need to know. You have already formed your own opinion of
Thranduil. It would help no one for word to get out how close he came to leaving the dwarves again."

Kíli put a hand on her arm and said fervently, "Yes, but putting his actions aside, you-- Tauriel, without you--"

But she shook her head again and said, "Hush. It doesn't matter now." When he opened his mouth to argue, she told him, "You should get some rest. Recover your strength before tonight."

He leveled her with such a disgusted look that she couldn't help but snort a laugh. He sniffed, "Trust me, I'm ready. But I don't want to wait for tonight. I want to try to get to the gates before Saruman does."

She froze, eyes wide. "If we leave, we'll be caught outside the siege."

He replied fiercely, "The siege won't matter if he wakes the Balrog. We have to try to stop him before he gets the chance."

Tauriel asked hollowly, "But what can we do against a wizard?"

"I will come with you," Arwen said.

Kíli and Tauriel both jumped, then Kíli yelped, "But my Lady, it would be too dangerous!"

Arwen merely looked at him sternly, and he shut his mouth with a snap. She replied lowly, "Too dangerous for whom? You, who with all your skill as a fighter, haven't an ounce of magic, or me?" Kíli hung his head, but Arwen pressed, "I have spent the last decade under my grandmother's tutelage-- she, who you call 'witch,' as if that was the extent of her power! If you are to stand a chance against the wizard, you will need me." The jewel upon her breast blazed like a star in the evening.

Kíli bowed deeply and pleaded, "Forgive me, my Lady. I only spoke in an attempt to keep you safe."

Arwen met Tauriel's gaze with a private smile, and she said, "Bilbo did tell me that the dwarves' over-protectiveness stems not from a belief that we are somehow worth less, but that we are worth more, so I will forgive you. But, as she has said, we are not mathoms to be kept in a china hutch." A feral grin lit her face, and Kíli gulped and nodded quickly.

Then Galadriel stood before them. She held out a pale, intricately carved, wicked-looking longbow to Tauriel and said gravely, "To speak out against your ruler when they do wrong requires great strength and courage. Please take this to honor that." To Kíli, she said, "Son of Durin, I confess I have no gift for you. What would you ask of me? For I wish to aid you in this task."

Kíli longingly eyed the clean lines of that powerful bow and thought quickly. "None of your bows would fit me, I'm afraid, but-- my Lady, could you perhaps set a blessing upon my arrows?" He shrugged his quiver off his shoulder and held it up to her.

Galadriel smiled brightly. "Through your faith in me, I will grant your request." She gently pulled three arrows from his quiver and ran her hands over the stiff fletching, the straight shafts, the gleaming points. Nothing shimmered or glowed, no gust of wind blew, but she smiled at him and thrust them back into his quiver. Kíli bowed deeply in thanks, all the hair on his head standing on end.

Then Galadriel cupped Arwen's cheek for a long moment and said gravely, "My heart tells me you
When the caravan stopped that evening, the itch behind Fíli’s heart flared into panic. Kíli was not there.

Dís’ shout, “What you mean, missing?” rang up and down the line, and Raetha woke from her fitful sleep, shrieking again.

Fíli spotted one guard’s hard flinch. He stalked over and rapped out, “What do you know?”

The Iron Hills dwarf babbled, “Last I saw him, he went back to get his pipe.”

Fíli growled, “And did you not notice him come back?”

“N-no, your Highness.” The guard started sweating.

“When was this?”

“R-right after we set off again--”

“And why did you not raise the alarm then!” Fíli shouted.

Then Thranduil’s blonde, pointy-eared, leaf-eating spawn dropped from the trees, all lazy grace, and said, "Peace, Prince Fíli--"

Fíli’s head whipped over, mustache braids swinging, and he growled, "Peace? My brother is--"

"Off following his King, as he said he would," the elf drawled laconically.

A young guard pushed through the crowd to snap, "And I suppose he told you this, did he?"

"My captain told me this when she went with him," Legolas said stiffly.

"Why yeh traitorous, tree-shaggin' wood fairy--!"

Fíli dug an elbow into his side and murmured, "Gimli--"

But he blustered on, "Yeh let him off on his own through this cursed--"

Legolas sniped icily, "It is not my concern if your prince disobeys a direct order, but he is not alone!"

Gimli opened his gob to roar back, but Fíli clapped a hand over his mouth and asked loudly, "He's with Tauriel?"

Legolas glanced from the struggling Gimli, whose face was now as red as his new beard, back to Fíli and nodded.

Fíli’s shoulders slumped. "At least there’s that. That idiot. I'd hoped Tauriel would've been able to talk him out of it."

Legolas replied glumly, "I would have once said that she certainly had more sense, but, alas, that was before she met this dwarf." Fíli snorted and the elf swung back up into the trees.

Gimli wrested himself free from Fíli's grip and blustered, "What? That--! That's it? We just let him
go off with that elf?"

An acorn pelted him on the nose, and with a snarl, he shook his fist up at the trees.

Fíli caught him in a headlock and ruffled his hair mercilessly. Gimli quickly ducked away, expression wounded, and Fíli slung his arm around his shoulder. "Come on, Gimmers, what else can we do? At least we know he's not dead in a ditch somewhere. Besides, he's with Tauriel. There's no place he'd rather be." He waggled his eyebrows at his little cousin. Gimli cried out in disgust, once more ducking out from under his arm, and quickly smoothed his hair back into order. But then Fíli said more quietly, "Thank Mahal at least she knows what she's doing."

Dís, observing the whole scuffle, pinched the bridge of her nose and grumbled, "I can't even blame your father for this-- no, this is entirely due to Durin pigheadedness-- Mahal save me from the stubbornness of dwarves!" She walked up to Prim and took Raetha into her arms, trying to console the screaming faunt, whose voice was starting to grow hoarse, but her niece only shrieked louder.

Dwalin stepped closer to Dís, growling, "I should have known better, I shouulda tied him to a wagon myself--"

With a hiccup, Raetha stopped crying. Her wide blue eyes blinked up at Dwalin, and she held her arms up to him, hands grasping at air. Dwalin's tirade petered out mid-sentence, and he stared at the tiny fauntling. Then her brow furrowed in a scowl so familiar that he almost choked on his tongue and she demanded, "Dalin, hold me."

Dís handed Raetha over to her still-shocked cousin, and she had to clap a hand over her smile when Raetha flung her arms around Dwalin's thick neck, buried her face in his broad shoulder, and heaved a massive sigh. When she'd regained control of herself, Dís asked lightly, "Would you like me to get the wrap?"

"Yes."

-----

They rode out from beneath the mallorn trees under the noon sun. Arwen's lavender gown streamed behind her like her dark hair. Tauriel kept a tight arm looped around Kíli's waist. They crossed the Nimrodel, and like a gust of cold wind, he felt when they left the borders of Lothlórien. Goosebumps rolled down his arms. They were on Azanulbizar. The high sun burned down on them from above, baking the pale stone they rode over.

Tauriel must have felt him stiffen, because she asked in his ear, "What's wrong?"

He took a deep, slow breath and replied just as quietly, "There was a terrible battle here, right before I was born. My father died here."

Her arm tightened around his waist and she breathed, "Oh meleth nîn, I am sorry."

He shook his head. "I've no claim to grief, not like Thorin-- not like the rest. I don't remember-- I never knew my father. But they-- they lived it, and have had to keep on living with it." He shivered and tried not to let his imagination run away from him. There were no ghosts here, just his memories of their memories. But the stones remembered. He could feel it, like an echo of agony. Then he caught a glimpse of bright water in the distance, and he cried out, "Look! Over there-- Mirrormere." He felt Tauriel look, and he swallowed hard. Then he said with a careful, casual calm, "We call it Kheled-zâram."
He didn't think he imagined her quick intake of breath. After a moment, she repeated softly, "Kheled-zâram?"

He nodded. "Where-- well, really--" he shifted and started over, "When Mahal made the seven dwarf lords, six woke next to their wives, but Durin woke alone. And alone he wandered, naming the hills and rivers, fields and mountains, but when he came here, he saw his reflection in the Mirrormere, crowned with seven stars, and he knew this would be his home."

Tauriel was quiet for a moment before she asked, "So he, too, loved then the stars?"

Kíli put his hand over hers, where she held him, and he nodded.

Their mounts' hooves clattered on over the bare granite, and the lack of cover twisted something low in his gut. His eye was ever caught by the way Arwen seemed to glow, her pale arms like silver, the gems in her gown glimmering, and he felt uncomfortably exposed and vulnerable. They could not afford to draw even more attention, not out here in the open like this. The setting midsummer sun had already sunk below the mountains, casting the vale into shadow. Before them, Caradhras loomed. The vast gates of Khazad-dûm stood vacant and open in the side of the mountain, yawning like a gaping wound. The gates should not be open-- the city should not be empty-- it should not be a silent tomb, desecrated and defiled--

Below them slept a monster.

--at least, he fervently hoped it still slept.

Kíli burned. They had a home now, but he remembered being homeless. He remembered going hungry. He remembered watching his uncle work himself to the bone, becoming as brittle as old iron and bitter-- he tossed his head and tried to focus on their reclaimed mountain, on their bright-lit halls filled with the sound of echoing hammer-falls, to try to keep this helpless anger from settling in his bones. But the dwarrow who fled the Balrog had also wandered, homeless and hungry, before they too had resettled in new halls. He clenched his fists as they neared the gates. His people would no longer want for shelter, for food, for honorable work, not while he had a say in things. He could give them this.

He dismounted with a clatter of steel-capped boots against granite and pulled his bow from the saddle horn. Beside him, Tauriel leapt as lightly as a leaf from a bough. He could see no sign of other company, but the bare granite hid many secrets. He pressed one rough hand to the lintel of the doorway into the mountain, listening.

GoblinsOrcsScreamingTrollsDwarrowSmokeSCREAMINGSilenceSilencesilencesilenceWhite

He looked back to the curious elves and said roughly, "He's already here." Then he ran inside, into the dark.

Tauriel and Arwen shared a glance, then they followed.

Not ten paces inside, the ruined city was as dark as a tomb. Kíli ran ahead, dwarven eyes at home at last, but Tauriel faltered. Then Arwen whispered something, and the jewel on her breast winked, glimmered, and finally flared a brilliant white. Tauriel had to quickly look away. Arwen herself seemed to glow as well, and Tauriel fought the urge to cover her eyes. This, this was Undomiel, Luthien once more in Arda, in whose veins ran the blood of Maiar. Then Arwen smiled at her, a fey, deadly flash of teeth, and she cried in a voice like tripping bells, "Come, cousin. Tonight we hunt."

Tauriel gripped her Galadhrim bow tighter and felt her blood sing. A wizard had betrayed them. The
wizard threatened one of their own. This would not be allowed.

In the darkening eastern sky, the Evenstar kindled.

-----

Haldir gripped his bow, knuckles white and jaw clenched. Behind him, beside him, ever on as far as he could see, Galadhrim waited for nightfall. Fell beasts and orcs sought to malign his home? Let them come. They would all fall.

He could not help but remember the tiny halfling who’d bent to caress the flowers, and he suppressed a flinch. These scum were after her of all people. And he’d heard from one of his troops, whose sister was part of the Lady Arwen's court, that this halfling had already faced orcs before, had even fought in a war. Haldir shook his head. *Face buried in a peony, incandescently happy*-- He could not reconcile the two images. *Her expression as she darted back to her hulking companion, all menace and threat at her side*--

The less he thought about the dwarves, the better. It was their fault the halfling was in danger, anyway.

He ignored the twinge of his conscience that disagreed.

The shadows lengthened before them. The sun had set. A distant, dull tramping began, the first low notes felt before they were heard. Birds flew from the trees, shrieking in alarm, but the Nimrodel babbled on, its musical water flowing ever on toward the sea. Haldir ran his thumb along his fletchings as the sound of drumbeats and vile chanting reached their ears. Beside him, behind him, the Galadhrim waited in stillness.

The thudding, thumping march did not cease, only grew, ever closer, ever louder, and then at last, out of the brushland beyond their trees, battalions of orcs broke cover. Swiftly, they spread out along the borders, their rotten, rusting armor screeching as often as it clanked. They didn't even try to breach the woods yet, and they stayed far enough out of range to be safe from their arrows. Haldir grit his teeth and raged.

An increased rattle and clatter shook the brush, and there, cave trolls dragged heavy catapults. They wore blinders, the leather straps grown into the rotten skin of their bald heads, and they were driven on by spiked whips. Every good thing in Haldir cried out for the twisted lives before them, no matter how evil, none deserved that fate. The creatures bellowed and groaned as they were forced to drag the heavy devices around the borders. Then the orcs began stamping their weapons against the ground or their crude shields, or if they had no shields, their rusty breastplates. The sound swelled and grated, a hateful cacophony--

Then a moth-eaten crone crawled atop a boulder like a spider and cried out in a mockery of a song, "Galadriel, Galadriel!" As one, the orcs stopped stamping. One more sing-songed "Galadriellll!" rang out and echoed into silence. Then the foul hag simpered, "We have no quarrel with the Golden Wood, your Ladyship. We only seek a halfling, just a li'l halfling from the Shire. She has something of ours-- we want it back! If you hand 'er over now, we won't bother you no more!"

Revulsion rippled down Haldir's spine and he spat, "Never!"

The crone snapped, "I din't come here to treat with wood lice. Galadriel, what say you?"

Beside him, light flared, and Haldir caught a glimpse of his Lady standing tall and fair at the front of the line. The orcs hid their faces against her brilliance, and his heart soared.
The silence stretched into a glimmering thread, then Galadriel tolled, "No." Her voice rolled like thunder. "If you want her, come and claim her!"

The orcs charged.

The elves fired.

Those that survived the volley and reached the border were consumed by blue fire, and their fleeting skeletons crumbled to ash.

Galadriel stood as if caught in a gale, her arms outstretched, her golden hair and gleaming white robes whipping around her.

The orcs hooted and shrieked with fear, and for a moment Haldir thought they would flee, but then their vile chieftess screeched, "Attack!"

Up and down the line, in wave upon wave, the orcs threw themselves at the border. The air was filled with their singing bowstrings and the orcs' shrill death throes and the acrid scent of ash and smoke.

-----

Kíli ran ahead, dwarven eyes at home at last. The walls were covered with runes, and as he passed, he caught glimpses of carven blessings, offerings of hospitality and honor to the Line of Durin. The sight of such well-wishes in this empty place twisted a knot behind his heart. Artists had chiseled those words into the stone to welcome all to their home, but the fruit of their labor now lay hidden, unseen in the dark.

But he caught a glimpse of light ahead, and as he ran, he reached over his shoulder for an arrow. Kíli burned. This wizard--this traitor could not be allowed to--to use the very monster that drove out his people and left their sacred home buried in the dark. Then he rounded the corner and there--the thin spire of the Bridge of Khazad-dûm spanned the abyss, and there, stepping off the bridge--

"Saruman!" he roared and fired.

--on this side, he was on this side, and across the chasm, a thin line of fire burned--

And though his arrow flew true, the wizard threw up an arm and froze the bolt in mid-air not three feet from his chest.

Kíli gaped, and the wizard glared up at him where he stood atop the stair. A white crystal burned coldly atop his staff, and, backlit by the distant flames, his face twisted in a rictus of rage.

"And who--?" Saruman started to demand, but then Tauriel skidded to a stop beside Kíli and lithely fired off a shot. Her new bow sang, and Kíli broke through his shock to nock another arrow right after hers.

But Saruman batted their arrows aside as easily as if they were flies, and he shouted, "You dare?! Did you really think your child's toys would be of any use against me?" With a snarl and a sweep of his staff, they were thrown back. Kíli's thick skull bounced painfully off the wall, and he heard Tauriel cry out.

Then a blaze of white light filled the cavern, and Arwen cried, "Saruman! Cease this treachery!"

Saruman halted, and into the ensuing silence he murmured softly, "Peredhel?"
Arwen strode down the stairs, pleading, "Saruman, why do you do this? Why do you act against my father, my grandmother? You were ever their friend--!"

Saruman leaned heavily upon his staff, his old face grave and sad. "Arwen, the time of the elves is failing. The world of Men is rising, do you not see? But their weakness is endemic, they would risk the fate of the world in their foolishness. They need leadership-- we, the Istari who remain, must have power, power to order all things as we will, for that good which only the Wise can see."

For a long moment, Arwen gazed upon the wizard, whose low, melodious voice seemed to echo into the darkness, and Kíli felt a vicious anger swell at her hesitation--surely the wizard was right and just, and his will should be carried out without delay-- but then her face crumpled and she shook her head. "Not like this. Not like this." Her voice was thick with sorrow.

Kíli blinked dazedly up at Arwen, distantly heard her blade rasp as she unsheathed a gleaming curved sword, and then she charged.

Saruman swung his staff at her, but she spun away with all the skill of a dancer, her long hair and long sleeves streaming about her, and the force of his attack flowed around her without harm. She swung her blade back, but before she could get close, he parried with his black staff, and she was forced to spin away again.

At once, Kíli shook off the spell and scrabbled to his feet, but he couldn't get a clean shot. Beside him, Tauriel also desperately followed the fight. She told him lowly, "We have to try to break or-- or keep him from his-- his staff--"  

Saruman taunted loudly, "Foolish she-elf, what do you know? You are meddling in matters too great for you to understand--" but he was forced to quickly step away from the edge of the abyss as Arwen danced ever closer, her blade flashing alternately red and white, throwing reflections of their white fire and the climbing flames from across the chasm.

Arwen did not reply; instead, she began chanting in Sindarin. Her low voice grew, echoing oddly, overlaid with a thousand whispers and the shrieking of eagles, and then a cascade of stones flew from the far ceiling.

Saruman twisted his staff to shield himself from the onslaught, and Tauriel took the chance to shoot, but with a wordless shriek of rage, Saruman destroyed the arrow, leaving a only tiny puff of smoke. The tumbling rocks landed harmlessly around him, and Saruman smashed the butt of his staff against the stone. With a sound like a thunderclap, they were all thrown from their feet.

Arwen skidded on her back across the stone floor, her sword flung from her hand, and Saruman leveled his staff at her. Kíli could feel the pressure even from here like an unbearable weight across his shoulders. He straightened with a shout, drew back his bow in agony, and let an arrow fly. Saruman glanced up and made to flick this arrow away too, but it flew true and struck with a meaty crunch deep into the wizard's shoulder. He staggered with a pained cry, but he did not fall. Once more, he brought down his staff--

**BOOM!**

They were thrown back once more. Arwen's head cracked sickeningly against the stair, and then she was still, and--

"Saruman!" Gandalf thundered above them.

Saruman stared, frozen, up at Gandalf. Tauriel took the chance to scrabble down the stairs, to kneel
at Arwen's side, to check, and check, but Kili could not long take his eyes off the two wizards.

Finally, Saruman chided, "Well well, Gandalf. I am surprised to see you here. You never did know when to give up."

Gandalf replied testily, "And you never knew when to not start." As he stalked down the stairs, the shadows seemed to stretch and gather, and the stones themselves seemed to creak. "Tell me, Saruman, why did you send blight to Rohan? Why did you destroy Tharbad's dam?"

Saruman circled him and taunted, "My my, you finally did realize that that was my doing?" He laughed humorlessly. "It's simple. Refugees become Hillmen, desperate men, who would then turn to raiding the Rohirrim. They, in turn, will beggar themselves to provide food for their own. Soon, I won't even need to raise a hand to cause strife. They will destroy themselves as effectively as any invading army."

Gandalf shook his head in disgust and cried, "Why even--?"

Saruman snarled, "I will not suffer the dominion of Men! They are weak! And if they will not bow down, then they must be brought low."

Kili, incensed, cried, "You want a throne, yet you miss the whole **point** of ruling! Making them go hungry so you can tighten your fist around-- around your would-be **subjects** instead of supporting your people? That's not--!"

A phantom hand wrapped tight around his throat, and he choked, scrabbling at air. But still, before his eyes, was the vision of his uncle, weary and dirtied, skipping yet another meal so at least their dams and children had something to eat.

Gandalf swung his staff, and Saruman broke off his attack on Kili to throw up a defense. Red blood spattered his once-white robes.

"Stay this madness!" Gandalf roared. "You will not raise Durin's Bane, you will not take the Ring. Call off this siege--"

But Saruman only laughed and laughed. "You're too late, Gandalf. You're always too late." Then he twisted a gnarled hand and sent a boulder flying toward Tauriel, where she glowed as she bent over Arwen's prone form--

Gandalf quickly swung his staff, and the boulder flew wide, shattering against the wall, and Tauriel threw herself over Arwen's head to protect her from the flying debris--

--and quick as a flash, Saruman darted across the bridge. Gandalf shouted, "Saruman--!" and started to follow, but by the time Gandalf made it halfway across, Saruman reached the far side. Kili took one last desperate shot, but the arrow again vanished into dust. Then Saruman leapt over the flames and ran off into the darkness.

Kili's gaze snapped over to the elves. Arwen stirred groggily, and a trickle of blood marred Tauriel's hairline, and he leapt down the stairs to be at their side. Gandalf, halfway across the bridge, sighed and turned away from his quarry, but with a **woosh** like an oncoming storm, so much like dragonfire, the flames across the chasm leapt to the ceiling, and--

From the flames, from the shadow, lept the Balrog. When it landed, the whole mountain shook. Its horned head nearly reached the vast ceiling, its flaming wings spread the full width of the hall, and its scorching roar was as hot as the forge.
Kíli skidded to a stop beside his One and Arwen, and every part of his being that made him a dwarf rebelled against the demon before them. He shouted, desperate, "Gandalf!"

Gandalf stood his ground, in the middle of that precarious spire of stone, and raised Glamdring high. He growled, "I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor. You cannot pass."

The Balrog took one thundering step onto the bridge, and Gandalf ordered, "The dark fire will not avail you, flame of Udûn. Go back to the Shadow!"

But the Balrog drew out a flaming red sword and swung--

And as it struck, white fire flared around Gandalf, and its sword broke into pieces.

Incensed, the Balrog swung a molten whip, its hiss and snap a vile menace in the dark.

But Gandalf raised his staff once more and shouted til all the halls echoed with it, "You shall not pass!" Then he slammed his staff down onto the stone, and the crack of it rolled like thunder.

The Balrog only snorted and took another step, and the Bridge broke beneath its weight. With a roar like a blasting furnace, it fell into the abyss. For a moment, the survivors stood in disbelieving silence--

But then its whip caught Gandalf about the knees, and he too was pulled from the bridge. Glamdring and this staff were flung into the empty air--

Kíli yelled, "Gandalf!" and ran a few steps forward.

But Gandalf merely ordered, "Fly, you fools!" And he was gone.

-----

On the borders of Lothlórien, Galadriel faltered.

The orcs that survived the archers' volley made it into the forest, and the Galadhrim were forced to draw blades and engage hand to hand. Haldir scrambled to order the deeper ranks to fire.

But it was only for a moment. Galadriel staggered one step, clutching her heart, and then she rallied. She threw out her power with a deafening, blinding shockwave, sending orcs and trees flying. In the empty, hollow space where his hearing should be, Haldir felt the world rattle.

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On the High Pass above Caradhras, they felt it.

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In the Mirkwood, they felt it.

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On the barren plains of the Brown Lands, they felt it.

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In Mordor, they felt it.
Direct quotes from the text:

"We [the Istari] must have power, power to order all things as we will, for that good which only the Wise can see."

"I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor. You cannot pass. The dark fire will not avail you, flame of Udûn. Go back to the Shadow! You shall not pass!"

-----

I've gone back and added a few minor edits to try to make the issue of the Ring seem a little less out of left field. I still might rename this story "A Love Letter to all the Ladies of the Legendarium" ...I haven't quite decided yet.

But yes, give me fey, dangerous, deadly elves. I love the idea of elves as truly Not Human. (And Galadriel scares the pants off me in such a delicious way, why shouldn't Arwen? Fight me, Tolkien purists).
Warning: it will get worse before it can get better.

Beneath the soot-blackened sky, where no sunlight could reach, the teeming masses of orcs and other fell creatures swarmed over the ruins of Barad-Dûr, their rickety scaffolding covering the broken walls like some mouldering growth. When the deep, rolling rattle shook through the earth, they screeched and shrieked in fear, and more than one scaffold collapsed with a shattering clatter. Orcs fled, and for a moment, all seemed to descend into chaos, but they were all whipped back into line by their overseers. Then the shockwave faded away like distant thunder, and but for the dust shaken from the rafters and the piled scaffolding and bodies, nothing else remained to show its passing. Hesitantly, but with no other choice, the foul creatures returned to their rebuilding.

Deep within the darkest bowels of the fortress, where its walls were still strongest, a shadow stirred. A flock of crebán circled the tower.

Blinded by his tears, Kíli didn't immediately notice that the hall had been plunged into darkness until Tauriel groped for his hand. Arwen's light had faded, and the fire across the abyss had gone out. Kíli hastily wiped his eyes on his sleeve and twined his fingers with Tauriel's. He could see that Arwen stirred, but she wasn't quite awake. He cleared his hoarse throat and asked, "Can we move her?"

Tauriel, blind, replied unsteadily, "Move her where, though--?" but an arrow whistled past her head to shatter on the stone above them. She dove over Arwen's prone form once more, and Kíli spun to see-- there, on the far side of the broken bridge, orcs swarmed from the walls.

Kíli cried, "Anywhere but here!" Another orcish arrow whistled past. Their numbers were too great, it would be hopeless to try to make a stand against them, and it would only be a matter of time before they found their way across the chasm. He stood and kept hold of her hand. "I'll lead you out. Do you want to carry her or should I?"

Tauriel gently disentangled her fingers, lifted Arwen into her arms, and stood fluidly. Kíli took hold of her elbow and hurried up the path, warmed by her trust in him. He told her with measured calm, "Stairs, twenty-seven of them now--"

Another arrow flew past, shattering on the stone beside their feet, but Tauriel did not falter, though she walked through absolute darkness.

Kíli fought to keep his voice steady, "Platform, turn to the left, good-- left again, and now more steps-- um, thirty-four this time--"

Behind them, drums began to sound in the deep. His grip tightened on her arm, but she still moved with all the grace of her people and held Arwen with care.

Kíli, frantic, tried to think beyond his next steps-- by rights, they ran from one enemy into the arms of
another, but neither could they just stay. He choked out, "Platform-- turn right. Can you see the light ahead?"

She nodded and sped up, and they burst out of the gates, back out under the stars and under the moon. The silver light threw the dale into stark blacks and whites, but there, out on the open stone, stood one of the Eagles of Manwë. Tauriel gasped a small Oh! and when they were but a few paces away, she stopped and bowed as low as she could with Arwen in her arms.

Kíli copied her bow jerkily, with a lump in his throat-- so this explained Gandalf's sudden arrival-- and he croaked, "My lord, I am sorry-- Tharkûn has fallen--"

The eagle blinked slowly, then it turned and let out a pained screech, and Kíli and Tauriel both flinched violently. The giant bird baited, buffeting them, and Kíli began to wonder if they should try to find cover, but then the eagle settled once more and cocked its massive head at Arwen's limp form.

Tauriel swallowed hard and said quaveringly, "We need to get her to safety, to Lothlórien--"

Then the eagle bowed and dropped into a crouch, as if-- as if inviting them onto its back. Tauriel let out a sigh like a sob, and she carefully settled Arwen, climbing up behind her.

When Kíli made no move to follow her, she turned to him frantically, but he shook his head bravely, "There's no room for me. I'll make my own way back."

The eagle ruffled its feathers, then it spread its wings. Tauriel cried, "Kíli--!") But then with a great gust of wind and beating wings, the eagle took flight. Kíli watched, heart in his throat, as the bird flew higher, and for a moment, the horrid loneliness flooded him, but then the eagle banked and turned back and-- and dove, claws outstretched, and-- he let out a mighty yelp, and the eagle caught him about the middle in its massive claws. As they ascended, he felt faint, his legs dangling in the open air below him, the eagle's talons like scythes around his waist, and he gingerly resettled his grip on his bow and quiver.

One arrow, one arrow had worked.

That meant he had two more of the Lady's gift remaining.

A thunderstorm had settled over Lothlórien, and Kíli quailed at the thought of flying past lightning of all things, but as they rose higher, he could still see the stars, and he blinked hard-- a storm without a stormcloud? Then he saw another flash of lightning along the-- the ground?

No one could enter the Wood without the Lady's leave.

He swallowed hard and tried not to think about that too hard.

Then he saw bright spots of light arc through the air below-- burning pots of oil launched by catapults-- and he flinched as they flew toward the trees, but they never reached the Wood. They burst upon the air as if they'd hit glass, raining burning oil down upon their own fell troops. Then he spared a moment to fear that they, too, would meet a solid wall where only air should be, but then that same strange change settled over them-- the night was suddenly warmer, richer, and far below them, the trees rose ever higher. Then the eagle dove for a clearing beside the river, and Kíli did scream.

Not ten feet from the ground, the eagle spread its wings, and his breath was punched out of him, and he was falling, and then his feet hit the ground. His knees buckled and he rolled, a tangle of bow and pack and quiver and flying hair. The eagle landed with a surprisingly quiet rustle in the grass, and elves from all sides ran up to them. Kíli stood shakily and brushed off his gambeson. Tauriel
gracefully slid off the eagle's back, and a team of healers rushed forward to gently pull Arwen from her arms.

Kíli jumped when something stinging pressed against his temple, and he whirled, but an elf maiden merely leveled him with a sour look and tutted, "You're bleeding, let me look at it."

He just shrugged away and muttered, "I'm fine--"

But before he could take more than a step toward Tauriel, the elf groused, "Yes, yes, hard-headed dwarf, now let me at least clean it, or would you prefer to let infection set in?"

Kíli glared but stood still and endured the stinging iciness.

But the elf tutted again and clucked, "This will need stitches. Come, Master Dwarf--" she tried to guide him with a hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged away again.

"But--!" he cried.

"Don't be stubb--"

He twisted away from her, trying to find Tauriel again--

"--Ai, I may as well ask the sun not to shine!"

He couldn't find her. "Tauriel--!"

The elf caught him by the collar and groused, "Oh for-- she's coming too, you--" she bit off an epithet.

Kíli sagged beneath her hold, looking sheepish but offering no apology. He finally let her half-push, half-pull him toward a series of tents pitched beside the river.

Another elf held open a flap, saying, "Ah, Laerfindel, here--" he waved them inside to a cot beside Arwen, where Tauriel already sat and submitted to her own set of stitches. Kíli visibly relaxed when he saw her again, and she let the tiniest hint of a smile play across her lips. But he sat impatiently beside her and tilted his head up for the healers' ministrations.

When the elves did not immediately get to it, he growled, "Come on, I need to get back out there."

But the elf maid-- Laerfindel-- huffed, "Fret not, Master Dwarf, our fighters have things well in hand. You, however, need rest."

Kíli scowled, but then Tauriel covered his hand with hers, and he let his shoulders slump, and he let the innumerable aches finally make their presence known. He was weary, so bone weary, and now that he'd let himself slow down and stop, that was that. While he waited his turn, he fell asleep against Tauriel's shoulder before the healers even took a needle to his head.

-----

Bilbo stared at her round green door. It stood open onto the empty smial, and-- she took a deep breath and hitched Raetha higher on her hip, and she felt her daughter's arms tighten around her neck, and-- and she slowly stepped inside.

The front hall was empty. The walls were bare. Light flooded through the round windows, golden streams caught on dust motes that would never have been there before, and it was silent.
She stood in the entry way, the tile cool beneath her feet, as echoes of memories flooded through her-- her father humming as he baked, her mother marking her height against the kitchen lintel, Bofur's dratted ditty and their raucous laughter. She'd lived here her whole life, but one night and now all she could half-hear was the dwarves' rowdy bid to clean up after raiding her pantry-- the silence, the stillness, that wasn't right.

She heard Thorin's heavy tread behind her, but she did not turn. Finally, he asked quietly, "Bilbo?"

She let out a wet laugh and wiped at her cheeks. Where had these tears come from? She just shook her head, sniffled, and pressed a kiss atop her daughter's head. She told her, "This was once my home, dearest. Look! Here was where I met your Adad and threatened to clock him upside the head, can you imagine?" She glanced back at Thorin, who leant against the lintel with his arms crossed and a sardonic smirk hidden behind his beard.

Then, as the silence seemed to press in on her ears like a physical weight, she took one last look around the empty space, and she sighed heavily.

Thorin straightened as she rushed past, back out her round door and out onto her lawn, and then she called, "Lobelia!"

"Come back here, if you please." Bilbo hitched Raetha higher once more and trotted down to her fence.

Lobelia marched stiffly back up the lane and glared, but her sour expression faltered a little when Thorin came down the walk to stand behind Bilbo like a-- like a brawler, and was it really necessary for his arms to be that very broad? No matter. Lobelia arched her neck and leveled Bilbo her haughtiest look.

Bilbo pinched the bridge of her nose and said, "You and Otho are my next-of-kin."

Lobelia merely sniffed.

Bilbo lifted her gaze like she was asking for strength and grit out, "It doesn't make sense for Bag End to sit empty."

Lobelia's nostrils flared, angry spots of color high on her cheeks, and she huffed, "No indeed! But yes, do rub tha--"

Bilbo spoke over her tirade, "Which is why you should take it."

Lobelia's mouth hung open and all the color drained from her face.

Bilbo hastened to add, "Just in trust, mind. Don't make me fight you if I were to ever return and find myself in need again-- just, I don't really see that happening," she ended sheepishly.

Lobelia breathed, "Wh-- Bilbo? Really?" with an expression of such soft openness that she was nearly unrecognizable. But then she seemed to puff up like a ruffled hen and cried, "Wh-- what, now? You decide this now, after all the inconvenience--?"

Bilbo snapped, "Consider it repayment for all the inconvenience you've put me through this last year, Lobelia!"
She at least had the grace to appear moderately chastened.

Bilbo finally said quietly, "We may never have gotten along, but we are family, and it would have been nice to be treated as such."

Lobelia straightened her shoulders and met Bilbo's eye glare for glare. "Indeed, it would have been."

Bilbo blinked, then nodded.

For a long moment, they just stared at one another, then she jumped when Lobelia clapped her hands sharply and declared, "Right. Well? Let's get this down in writing, then. If you think I'm letting this remain a verbal agreement, you've anot--"

"Yes, very well, dear cousin. Come by the Great Smials this evening and we'll have it ratified by the very Thain." She rubbed her forehead, and they both nodded their 'good days.'

Bilbo shifted in Thorin's arms, eyes dry from their endless drive over the Brown Lands, ears numb from the constant rush of wind. Three days and nights, three days of motion and food eaten cold, for they could risk no fire, but by all the Valar above, the nights had been cold in this barren place. The land rose and fell around them in swells much (as she imagined) like the sea, tall grass rippling like waves on water. Behind them, the setting sun painted the west with fire. Before them, the distant peaks of Mordor rose, all jagged menace, and she swallowed hard around the lump in her throat. She burrowed her cheek down against his shoulder, and his grip tightened around her waist.

Behind them, Radagast prattled on about the unexpected usefulness of odd things, but when he started to extol the benefits of spider webs as bandages, Bilbo fought down a shudder.

_Her dwarves strung upside down from the webs, all bundled in webs-- still, too still-- she was too late--_

She blurted out, "Radagast!"

He stopped mid-sentence and asked kindly, "Yes, my dear?"

Helplessly, she cast about for a new topic and asked, "Wh-- I mean, um--" she blinked a few times, then had an idea. "Er, can you tell me more about my gift from Galadriel?"

Radagast sighed wistfully, "Ah, the twice-distilled light of Laurelin and Telperion!" Bilbo bent her neck to look back up at the wizard, and he added, "Now that is a sight I'll not forget. All those who looked upon the Trees beheld the light of Aman. Tell me, young hobbit, do you know of the Trees of Light?"

Bilbo peeped, "Just in passing."

Thorin rumbled, "Mahal crafted the sun and the moon from them, right?"

"Well, yes, but-- only from their last sullied fruit and flower, from all that could be salvaged from Morgoth's destruction." Radagast's face closed off for a long moment, but then he nodded down at Bilbo. "There remained but three perfect sources of that light, and Eärendil's was set in the sky so that we all might all be graced to see it." He pointed into the eastern sky, where the first star glimmered in the gloaming. "By the Lady's arts, they were able to capture the-- the spirit of that light. It is a blessed object, most certainly."

Bilbo smiled, warmed at the thought. She looked out over the plains, from their rare vantage point on
a low hill. Below, a little a brooke carved its way through the earth as it wound its way west. The light was fading fast. They would be stopping to make camp soon-- her brows furrowed. Something moved out across the plain.

Thorin felt her shift and turned to look, too. Then an eerie, high-pitched, reedy cry echoed in the distance.

Radagast sucked in a horrified breath and whimpered, "Oh no!"

"What?" Bilbo cried and clung to the sides of the sled as they sped over the rise.

"Wraiths!" Radagast cried.

Thorin breathed, "--No!"

Bilbo asked, "What?"

Thorin snarled, "They were once kings of men, before they were ensnared by the Deceiver. Does Saruman's treachery know no bounds? How else did they know to seek us!"

Radagast gibbered, "They are drawn to the power of the Ring-- oh--! Oh no!"

Bilbo asked, "Can we outrun them?"

"N-not for long!" the wizard answered quaveringly.

She asked worriedly, "--Can we fight them?"

"If we must," Thorin rasped, but Radagast shook his head.

That same eerie call sounded again, closer, then another, and another--

Bilbo huffed, "Alright then," and she pulled the Ring from her shirt.

Radagast yelped, "You can't use it--!"

But Bilbo merely slipped it beneath her mail, teeth gritted at the feel of cold metal against her bare skin, and replied stiffly, "There."

Thorin whispered, "--oh Bilbo."

She shook her head tensely. "If Galadriel is right and my mail has been shielding me from-- from this, then-- then the converse should also apply. If-- if so, then they won't be able to find me now."

Thorin protested, "But--"

But then a shrill screech pierced the air before them. A rider in black reared upon the knoll, its rotten robes flaring, and Radagast threw all his weight upon the brake. Thorin and Bilbo and their bags were thrown from the sled, rolling to a stop in a disoriented heap on the grass. Bilbo scrabbled for her crystal phial, half-terrified that she'd shattered it, but it remained whole beneath her palm, now warm as a summer day, and she pulled it from her cloak. It blazed in her hand with pure light, flooding the hollow, and with a bone-chilling, ear-splitting shriek, the wraith fled.

Gasping, Bilbo lowered her arm and sagged back onto the ground. Thorin quickly pulled her to her feet and bent to sling their bags over his shoulder, saying, "Hurry, we don't know how long they will be gone--"
But Radagast ordered, "No, let me draw them off. They saw the sled, let them chase the sled." He glanced gravely down at Bilbo. "If you're right, this may give you a chance. But guard yourself, Bilbo. Do not give in to its influence."

Bilbo blinked back tears. "Oh Radagast--!"

But he shook his head. "There's no time. Until we meet again!"

She cried, "Be safe!"

He waved his hat and turned his sled and, with his rabbits' wild thumping, was gone.

Bilbo whispered, "Oh-- oh, he said he couldn't outrun them--"

But Thorin tugged on her elbow. "We need to move-- we cannot tarry."

She hastily wiped her eyes and took a pack back from his arm for her own. They fled, staying low within the lees of the rolling hills and moving as quietly as an armored dwarf can, on through the last light of evening. Then those wretched, horrid shrieks echoed once more from across the distance. They glanced at each other and quickly belly-crawled to the top of a knoll.

Far across the plains, against the fading light left by the sunset, they could just barely make out Radagast with nine riders in pursuit. Bilbo clapped her hand over her mouth but, for now, she could not tell if they were gaining. Thorin rubbed a gentle hand over her shoulder, then pulled her back down the hill.

They needed to find a pocket of shelter for the night. They needed to refill their water skins. They needed to snatch a few hours' rest. They needed. They needed.

She shouldered her pack and they walked on.

-----

The sun had gone down behind the hills above Hobbiton, and party lights glowed against the last flush of the evening. Pipes and fiddles played merrily, the field was filled with dancers and the tables were filled with food. Ollo Bolger's birthday cake had been cut, now the ale flowed as freely as their laughter. Lobelia even had a smile on her face as she chatted with Rosa over the last bites of a truly delectable pie.

But then a chill, damp wind gusted across the field, and one by one, the party lights guttered out, smoke swirling thick. The musicians ceased playing raggedly, and the dancers stood stock still. In the uneasy quiet, they could hear the slow shuffling of many feet. Then the hobbits closest to the road cried out in fear and fled, knocking over tables in their haste, and all descended into chaos.

Lobelia stood on shaking knees and, through the smoke and darkness, saw a passel of shambling, roting creatures approach. What little light remained glinted on golden and bejeweled armor, necklaces, and swords-- and their eyes glowed coldly, like marsh light. Her blood ran cold. Wights. Wights had come down from the Barrow Downs, it could not be--

They passed right through the remnants of the party, marching straight for-- for-- they were heading straight for Bag End, where-- where Otho had stayed behind to put Lotho to bed--

Beneath her fear, an indignant rage kindled in her heart-- and this had been such a pleasant party, too-- Lobelia cried in her most scandalized tones, "What is the meaning of this? Begone! You have no place here!"
The wights merely turned their cold gaze upon her, and she had to lock her knees to keep upright. Finally, the one wearing a crown spoke, its voice a melodic torment, "And we would leave you to your wretched light, but for our one task. Where is the halfling of Durin's Line? Where is this Bilbo?"

The Thain stood from his table and raised his old fist. "We won't tell you nothing. Go back to the nothingness where you came from!"

But during this declaration, the wight had edged closer, and it reached out for Isengrim with a mouldering, skeletal hand. Lobelia shrieked, "Wait!"

They turned their fell eyes upon her once more, and she gulped. "I-- I'll tell you, but then you have to leave, without harming anyone, mind! Just-- don't take him!"

The Thain, the fool, snarled, "Lobelia!"

But she waited silently for the wight-king to respond, ignoring the way Rosa tugged on her arm. Finally, the wight nodded, and Lobelia choked out, "She went with the dwarves back to their home-- back-- back to Moria, wherever that is."

Isengrim shouted, "No!"

But the crowned wight gave an awful rusty laugh and bobbed an awful jerky bow and said in its wretched voice, "Thank you, madam."

Lobelia just ordered through clenched teeth, "Now go."

With the horrid sound of dry tendons snapping against exposed bone, they shuffled off.

Lobelia let herself fall back onto the bench, but Isengrim stalked over and hissed, "You-- how could you?"

She snapped, "Shh!" She could still see them, and she hurriedly pulled out her matches and set about relighting as many lanterns as she could reach, and she cried, "But how did they leave the Downs-- how did they get here?"

Rosa whispered quaveringly, "They were raised."

Isengrim's head snapped toward her and she added, "Do you remember, in her stories? That Gandalf had had to go deal with a necromancer?"

Lobelia's heart seized, and Isengrim cried, "Well-- that-- that! didn't look well and truly dealt with!"

Then he whipped around to face Lobelia once more and snarled, "And you-- I knew you and Bilbo have never gotten on, but that--! To just set those creatures upon her--"

Lobelia huffed, "Now, really!" She crossed her arms and snapped, "While I would happily fleece her for every coin she's worth, and I hope her bacon always curls, I would never wish her harm, which you would've known had you actually listened!"

Isengrim scowled thunderously at her, and she tutted, "She's on her way to Erebor, not Moria, you daft goat!"

Isengrim just stared slack-jawed at her, then he chuckled a bit wildly and busied himself with packing his pipe. Around the bit, he smiled, and little bursts of laughter kept bubbling up.
Rosa just fretted, "Now, I never did understand the source of all your animosity."

Lobelia sniffed haughtily, but finally she said, "You're a Baggins, and you're a Took," she directed at Isengrim. "You wouldn't understand."

"Do try me, my dear," Rosa said kindly.

Lobelia began to pick at her napkin, lips twisted. Then she explained stiffly, "I love Otho, but I have never felt like the family ever thought I was good enough for him or the Baggins name." Rosa gasped and tried to argue, but Lobelia pressed on, "No, it's true. No one would ever be so ill-bred as to admit to entertaining the idea, but tell me you’ve never heard 'Not some Bracegirdle from Hardbottle!' Hm? No." She ripped the napkin. "I've worked hard to gain a modicum of respectability, to help my brothers get a foot up into decent livings of their own, but-- that will never be good enough."

She looked up at Bag End, at the lights in the windows and the smoke rising from the chimney, and she went on, "While we never went hungry, we didn't have the coin to spare for something as sweet as sugar, either, and-- and-- to see all that prosperity wasted by her-- only someone who has never truly known want could take all that for granted like that, and makes me-- made me sick. And then to always see her smug sense of superiority, and to be greeted with nothing but suspicion? No, I will not say that Bilbo and I got on, but nor will I allow anyone to think that that was solely my own doing."

Her chest heaved, and Rosa gently covered Lobelia's hand with hers.

-----

The damp rot of Mirkwood clung to Drogo even in his sleep, what little he could take in this wretched place, but he could not say what exactly roused him this night. Between one moment and the next, he sat bolt upright, heart pounding, in utter darkness.

He heard the dwarf guard nearest him jolt, and she grunted, "What, lad?"

Drogo blinked rapidly (for all the good that did in this pitch blackness) and waved her off. The fire had gone out, smoldering wetly and smoking up the little clearing where they'd set up camp for the night. He didn't know why, but all the hairs on his feet stood on end. The darkness pressed down on his eyes like a weight. All around them, the only sounds were the dwarves' innumerable snores.

Then he heard the dwarf guard hiccup, "Wha's tha--?"

The leaves rattled without a breeze, and the trees groaned.

Drogo whispered, "What do you see?"

The dwarf yelped quietly, "There's nothin'-- naught that I can see, but it's like-- like the trees themselves are movin'!"

Drogo leapt to his feet and bellowed, "Huorns!" All the hobbits startled awake and scrabbled to their feet while he fumbled for his flint and tinder.

Then a great creaking groan emanated from the woods, and he heard an awful smattering of soil falling like rain, and the dwarf shouted in panic. With a crash, the tree's roots smashed back to the earth, where the dwarf had just dove out of the way. The trees came at them, swinging.

Above the din of the roused camp, Adalgrim was at his side. Drogo shouted, "I can't get the fire to
light!" Around them, dwarves rose to arms, their axes singing in the darkness, the night no barrier to their eyes, and soon the air was filled with the sounds of battle cries, Raetha's terrified wails, the thok! of axes on wood, and the heavy thuds of flying dwarves.

Then a ghostly green light flickered into being, and Drogo fervently wished he could go back to blindness, if only to be spared the sight. The trees lashed out at the dwarves with root and limb, but upon the road stood the phosphorescent, warped shape of what had once been one of the Big Folk, wavering like a candle in the wind.

Drogo heard some elves cry out, "An Avari!"

He yelped, "A what?" and continued fruitlessly striking at tinder.

An elf quavered, "The unwilling-- an unhoused spirit, who failed to go to Mandos and instead, lingers--" he kept his gaze well averted from the gently-flickering light.

"What can we do?" Drogo bleated.

"Do not engage it!" the elf cried.

One of the flung-dwarrow staggered to his feet and groused, "Oh aye? And we're to what-- let them stomp us to jelly?"

"Not the trees, the fëa!" the elf called, as his fellows tried to sing the trees back into calmness, to no avail.

"The wha--?" Another dwarf flew past and landed in a clatter of armor and axes.

The elf sighed and shouted, "Do not engage with that glowing green light! Do not let it catch your eye, do not let it spea--"

With a voice like distant flutes, it asked something in elvish-- the elves all clapped their hands over their ears and cried out.

It looked around at the commotion, its voice at once melodic yet gave the same effect as teeth on silverware or nails on chalkboard, and Drogo quailed.

It tried again in Westron, "Halfling of Durin? I see halflings and I see dwarves. Where is this Bilbo?"

Drogo could just barely make out Dís as she stood tall and declared, "We do not deal with rakhâz!"

It flickered out of being and reappeared right in her face, its whispering voice like a howling gale, "Is that so?" It floated around her, chuckling awfully. "A halfling of Durin's Line-- now that is a joke. A tainted scion of an already stunted race--"

Then it stopped before Raetha, who, held in Dwalin's broad arms, whimpered with fear. Dwalin quickly shifted to shield her from sight, and Dís swung her axe with a roar.

The Avari swirled into glowing green eddies, laughing, before it reformed without fault, and it reached out for Raetha--

Legolas jumped between them, alight as if he stood in a beam of noon-sunshine, and he declared, "You are trespassing on my father's lands. Begone!"

It stood tall before him, almost affronted, but did not leave.
Legolas wrapped himself in his most royal mien and ordered, "By all the laws of elvendom, you are unwelcome here. Heca, Úmaia!"

With a little, fluting laugh, it just shook its head. "You have no power to compel me, Little Prince--" and around them, the darkness seemed to press down upon them like a physical weight.

-----

The last light of evening had faded and only stark moonlight remained when Radagast felt his rabbits falter. He stuttered, "Oh, oh no-- Percy, you can do it! Just a bit further now--!" And it broke his heart to see his rabbits try to give one last push, but they were well and truly spent. This last rise finally did them in, and Radagast pulled them to a stop. From atop the knoll, he could just barely make out the woods of Lórien in the distance. He sucked in a shuddering breath as the Nazgûl behind him let loose their chilling shrieks, their mounts' hooves pounding the earth as they finally caught up and surrounded him. Radagast's mouth twisted to see the horses flecked with sweat and bleeding from where they'd been mercilessly rowelled. But, mounted, the wraiths were so very tall, and they rode circles around him til they all seemed to blend together, shadows in shadow, and he had to lock his knees against the terror they wielded like a weapon.

At last, they halted, and the Witch King dismounted with a clatter of armor perilously close to his lead rabbit.

"Don't hurt him!" Radagast cried desperately.

The Witch King stared out from beneath its empty hood, then deliberately kicked the rabbit aside.

Radagast cried out as if he'd taken the blow himself, and he dove to the ground to cradle the shaking rabbit to his chest. He ignored the rasping shing as the wraith unsheathed its sword, so focused was he on comforting his friend.

After a long moment, as if annoyed at being thus ignored, the Witch King hissed with great difficulty, "Where are you going in such a hurry?"

Radagast snapped, "Away from you, you--"

The wraith snapped back, the air crackling, "Before our pursuit, you fool."

Radagast blinked up, bemused, and asked, "B-Before?" It let out an unearthly shriek and Radagast jumped. "Oh right, before. We-- that is, my rabbits and I-- were on our way to-- to--" He floundered and the Witch King stomped closer. Radagast cried, "--to Gondor!"

"Do not lie!" the Witch King hissed beneath its shriek, and Radagast's ears went numb.

He insisted, "I do not!"

The Witch King stalked closer and loomed down. "It may have escaped your notice, but Gondor is south."

Radagast replied, guileless, "Yes, it is! South!" He pointed east.

The Witch King just stared. Then it hissed, "And what of your passengers? Where are they?"

"M-my passengers? You mean my Baggins-- my baggage, you mean, hm? I lost that while fleeing from you lot!" Radagast babbled.
The Witch King circled the wizard menacingly, almost at a loss. Finally, it demanded, "And why would a wood-wizard need to go to Gondor, hm?"

Radagast puffed up self-importantly and declared with utmost gravity, "I need to ensure that the cats and the mice are sticking to their accords-- that treaty took months to negotiate, you know!"

The Witch King screamed, and the plains echoed with it. It leveled its sword at Radagast and repeated, "Where are your passengers, wizard?"

-----

In the Barrow Downs, secure within the deepest vault, the wight took leave of its stolen mortal coil and pushed its way into the howling gale beyond the world. There, no distance mattered, and it brushed its consciousness against its Lord's: "Bilbo-- Moria--"

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The plain echoed with those unearthly whispered words, and the Witch King of Angmar lowered its blade. Radagast blinked up, confused, when the wraith sneered, "Well, little fool, you get to live."

With one last ear-splitting screech and a swirl of its robes, the Witch King swung back into the saddle, and all nine rode off.

-----

Drogo stared in horror as the Avari taunted the elf prince, but then a shrill screech seemed to echo through the wood, the sound at once horrible and wrong, because no sound could echo like that in this close space-- then the Avari snarled and-- it straightened stiffly.

"If only I had time to teach you a lesson, elfling, but my master calls." It smiled without humor and promised, "Until we meet again." Then it winked out.

The trees at once went still. The dwarves warily kept their axes leveled at them for a long while after, and it took a very long time for anyone to calm back down.

-----

For days, they walked. The jagged peaks of Mordor never seemed to grow closer. The rolling hills seemed endless, like they were walking in place. But at night, at night, oh, the sky was filled with more stars than she had ever seen. It was so very cold, but he held her tight and he was oh so warm.

"No! What are you doing here? Melhekimh, you don't belong here!" His features were twisted in a snarl. "Go home!" His voice cracked.

She pushed that memory aside angrily.

"She has been lost since she stepped foot out her door! She will never be one of us!" He snarled. She trembled upon the solid path, both at his words and the memory of the empty air beneath her feet.

He put his big palm on the small of her back and asked softly, "Bilbo?"

She just shook her head.

"...You?"

She tried to suppress her shudder.
They walked on.

Chapter End Notes

rakhâz (Khuzdul) - demons
Heca, Úmaia (Quenya) - begone, demon

Photoset here.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Warning for canon-typical awfulness. See below for specific (spoilery) warnings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bilbo was too tired to feel. They had tried to outrun a storm, but with nothing-- nothing-- nothing for miles on this desolate plain, they were forced to huddle in the lee of a knoll. The rain hit like a wall, icy and stinging, and they were buffeted by the wind. She jumped violently when thunder cracked right overhead. Thorin opened his cloak to her, and she huddled against his chest, but ultimately, it was a futile gesture. Within minutes, they were soaked through. But he pressed his cheek atop her wet hair, and she shivered in his embrace.

The torment did not end once the storm passed, though. They were forced to trek on in their sodden clothes through the waning light, and that-- that was even worse.

She kept walking through the storm and through the thunder battle. She kept walking til the path fell away from her and she clung to the rough side of the cliff, skun knees knocking against the rock, hands cramping and cut by the ledge--

"She has been lost since she stepped foot out her door! She will never be one of us!"--

They could risk no fire, though the night was cold and their clothes were still wet. He held her tight as they tried to curl away from the wind. He was like a forge against her chest, but-- but her chest no longer ached. Her milk had finally dried up. She knew, she knew that it would happen, she'd even hoped it would happen sooner, but now-- her child, her baby was half a world away. She would never have weaned Raetha so soon, and now-- now when they were finally reunited, she would be unable to provide for her like she wanted. That reality crashed into her with a jagged finality. She scrunched her eyes shut tight to stop her tears, but she did not succeed.

"I'll tell you what happened-- she saw her chance and she took it! She’s thought of nothing but her soft bed and her warm hearth since first she stepped out her door! We will not be seeing our hobbit again. She is long gone."

--Had he really thought so little of her that he believed she'd abandon them in their need?

She had, though.

--but not in their need! She had come back when they needed her--

But she did leave. So who was to say he had been wrong?

"I have never been so wrong in my life--"

--with the Ring warm in her pocket and his arms warm around her--

The days passed. They walked on over the endless sea of waving grass, the only sounds the soughing of wind and his clomping footsteps. The mountains seemed no closer, and fear and restlessness clawed beneath her skin-- were they even moving forward, or were they caught
wandering in ever wider circles? Finally, she asked tightly, "Do you even know where we're going?"

He pointed toward the looming mountains. "Do you see those three peaks and that deep V?"

She peered in that direction, squinting, and shook her head.

Brows furrowed, he gestured again. She just leveled him with an exasperated look. He stooped down to her height beside her, and pointed so she could sight down his arm.

"Oh," she peeped as what he described became clear. Then, "--Then how did you manage to get lost in the Shire?"

He huffed and grumbled, "Give me some credit for stonecraft, my lass. I may get lost in your rabbit warren, but I know how to navigate in the mountains." He frowned as he stared at the border of Mordor and added, "We should reach the ruins of the Black Gate by evening."

-----

Dawn did not break that day. A miasmic fog surrounded the woods of Lórien, as much a siege device as the catapults. Saruman's magics lingered on the back of Galadriel's tongue with a metallic tang. The orcs hid within the fog, a vile menace along the edges of her consciousness.

She walked within her lands, bare feet carding through the cool moss, and she took comfort from her blessed home. So much of her magic had been sunk into this earth, and she was able to replenish her strength and ease her mind.

But beyond her borders, she was still blind, and that hollow, deadened space in her mind itched like an old wound, like a lost limb. Beyond her borders, the White Wizard prowled, as yet too weak or cowardly to attack, she did not know. She clenched her fists and walked, sending down deep roots into her lands, and was revived.

-----

Elrond and his guards steadily climbed the pass over Caradhras, though once they reached the snowfields, their mounts began to struggle against the drifts. Then the mountain made its objections about the travelers known; a storm began to brew over the highest peak, and soon they were all plunged into darkness. Snow battered them. The wind deafened them. But they climbed on-- there was no shelter nearby, and to stop meant they would risk being buried beneath the drifts.

Through it all, Elrond walked with only half a thought bent upon his path. He could not reach Galadriel.

Lightning flashed within the clouds. Glorfindel ran up to Elrond and cried, "This is no mere storm!"

"What makes you say that?" he asked, deeply worried.

Wild-eyed, Glorfindel gestured toward the hidden peak. Lightning flashed from within once more, and the wind seemed to carry foul voices on the air-- a distant sound like a roar. He pressed, "You know what lives beneath this mountain, my Lord. I fear that the powers of darkness already move against us!"

Elrond's gaze darted between his captain and the raging storm upon the peak, and he reached once more for Galadriel. His mind seemed to slip across black glass, impenetrable and without fault, and he pursed his lips. Then he sought Gandalf, and it was like being plunged into a raging torrent. The
tumult of battle overwhelmed him for the barest instant, and Elrond staggered. Breathless, he cried, "Gandalf is up there!"

Glorfindel barked orders for part of the guard to stay with their horses, then they raced for the hidden peak.

As they climbed, the roars grew louder, clearly now no part of the storm, and the very mountain seemed to shake. Elrond feared what they would come upon once they cleared the swirling snow. Thunder crashed above them, the mountain crashed before them, and they pushed on ever harder.

Then, through the steam and snow, Elrond saw Gandalf standing before Durin's Bane, with Glamdring raised high to meet a bolt of lightning. The demon roared. Glorfindel skidded to a stop beside Elrond, frozen in horror, as the balrog forwent all weapons and swung a clawed paw at Gandalf, but the wizard darted within its reach and buried his glowing sword into its chest. The balrog let out one last ear-splitting roar, then toppled back off the peak to land with a crash upon the mountain, its fire utterly extinguished.

Disbelief and joy swelled in Elrond's chest, but he saw Gandalf collapse.

He ran.

-----

As their shadows lengthened before them and the mountains loomed ever higher, Bilbo caught a faint noise. After so long with naught but their own footsteps and the never-ending shush of the grasses in her ear, the distant thumping set her on high alert. She stopped, brows drawn down in a tight line, and Thorin stilled beside her.

He looked his question at her, and she pointed to her ear, brow quirked. He shook his head. He didn't hear anything, not yet, not after his years in the smithy. He reached over his shoulder for Orcrist, but she gave the barest shake of her head and checked an inch of Sting. Her blade did not glow, and her shoulders relaxed a fraction. She murmured, "It's distant, yet, but I can't-- I don't know what--."

They crept on across the plain, the noise steadily rising, and Bilbo's nerves frayed. Dwarves were not quiet, they did not blend in with the earth as was instinctive to hobbits, and half the time she fought the urge to drag him back from the top of a knoll by the scruff of his neck. And as the thumping became banging became clanking, loud enough now even for his rough-trodden ears, she watched recognition and dread dawn on his face. They edged their way carefully to the top of the last rise, and--

"--Those are not ruins!" Bilbo whispered numbly, as they dropped to the ground and peered through the tall grass.

But Thorin stared in horror, his stoic mask broken, down at the laboring dwarrow below, at the clever dwarven cranes and scaffolds and harnessed-workers-- dwarrow and orcs and trolls together, at dwarven craft being perverted in the service of that-- that--

"Thorin!" Bilbo hissed from his feet, already crawling back from the top of the hill. She tugged irritably at his boot. Teeth clenched, he followed.

Below the knoll, she stood and paced, clutching her hair. "Thorin, what-- what now?"

He did not reply. He could not see beyond what they'd just seen, and he choked on his rage and despair. She clutched at his hand-- when had his hands balled into fists? He twined his fingers with
hers and clung to her like a lifeline.

She put her face in his and whispered hotly, "Thorin! What?"

He shook his head hollowly and grit out, "Shorn dwarves-- dishonored dwarves-- shorn dwarves crafting for the Deceiver--" He snarled something in Khuzdul and buried his free hand in his hair. "It is a sacrilege."

The wind carried the sound of shouted counting and a thunderous bang, of something enormously heavy dropped, and he winced.

Bilbo sourly thought that Celeborn's assumptions weren't helping Thorin deal with this, but frankly, they had bigger problems at the moment. She tugged on his hand and asked urgently, "No, what now? Is there another way in?"

He tossed his head and said distractedly, "Those mountains are teeming with goblins." When he didn't elaborate, Bilbo huffed irritably. He frowned down at her. "Goblins mean goblin tunnels. I saw one such bolt hole not a stones throw from the Gate, but I am sure each would be as safe as our last foray through the mountains. I'd hoped to avoid such a route, but--"

"But." Bilbo finished for him, goosebumps rolling down her arms.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "It's too dangerous to try to enter by the door by the Gate, we'll need to find another way in."

Bilbo huffed, "How? D'you propose we pop into every cave, have a sleep, and wait for the floor to open beneath us?"

He scowled, "I know how to spot a goblin tunnel."

Her brows shot up. "Oh really? You tell us this now?"

He looked away and muttered into his beard, "Would you believe me if I said I had been tired?"

She threw up her hands and cried, "Oh that's nice! Don't-- do you have-- if-- do--" She stumbled over her tongue in her agitation and began to pace.

He snapped, "You cannot possibly blame me for-- for not seeing that trap. I already know that I erred, but that was a horrible day. I'd almost lost my sister-sons-- I'd almost lost you. You cannot expect me to--"

Bilbo thumped her chest. "I'd not have this if not for-- for--" Her face crumpled and she turned away.

She didn't see the way the bottom fell out of his stomach. She didn't see the way he almost staggered. He whispered, "Bilbo--" She just shook her head. But then another fury and clatter sounded from beyond the rise, and he choked out, "Come, we need to be far from this hateful place."

In silence, they walked on.

-----

The sun set once more on the woods of Lórien, and once more the hoard crashed upon their border like waves upon a harbor wall. Haldir noted drily that that Sylvan elf and her dwarf companion seemed to be engaged in some childish game on the front, loudly calling their count with a cheer ill-suited for the battlefield. But when he noticed the grins on his fellows' faces, he let it be. He did find
it interesting that the dwarf now carried two quivers, but only used the arrows from one-- what strange creatures dwarves were.

After these days-- these nights upon nights, the draw-aim-loose-repeat had almost grown routine. He did not know why these orcs persisted upon throwing themselves upon their arrows and the Lady's fire, they were not getting through. Galadriel's power flowed around her like a gale, and the orcs still shielded their eyes against her brilliance.

Then Saruman's voice rang out, as close as if he stood at their sides, and the Galadhrim frantically cast about to see how he'd breached their lines. Orcs charged, and they quickly refocused on their foes. Finally, Haldir spotted him, standing well back behind his lines (behind his lies), out of arrow-reach, as calm as you could please. Black spattered his once white robe, but he still stood tall. Haldir's teeth clenched as he tried to ignore the traitor, but his melodic voice could not be denied.

"My Lady, there is no need for this to escalate any further. Simply surrender the halfling, and you shall have peace."

"Not while the mountains still stand," Galadriel tolled, and the wood echoed with her words.

"And why, my friend, would you trust the Ring in the hands of a stranger, instead of me? After all our centuries together-- after all that we have worked for, together?" Saruman's words bled sincerity.

She stared at him for a long moment, then spread her hands. "The orcs were rather a dead giveaway, 'old friend'"

Saruman's face twisted in a snarl, and he sent a shockwave of light at the border. Galadriel planted her feet and threw up her arms. The light collided with her barriers with a blinding, deafening CRASH, and the orcs and Galadhrim alike were thrown from their feet.

In the ringing silence that followed, through the gale that whipped her robes, Galadriel's voice rang out with the screaming of storm winds and the thunder of Rauros' falls, "You will not have her."

Then a shrill screech rent the night.

Galadriel gasped in horror, "--You would call upon them? You would call upon the Nine?"

But even from here, she could see Saruman's shock, for all that it was too late. This could not be undone.

The orcs scrambled into a more rigid formation in a frantic attempt display of discipline as the Nazgûl rode past their backs. Saruman leant on his staff; beyond his initial shock, he let no expression show.

The Witch King reined in its horse before Saruman and hissed, "Where is it? We seek a halfling in Moria, yet find a siege upon Lórien. What do you know, wizard?"

For a long moment, Saruman gave no answer, and Galadriel watched with baited breath. But then-- "She sought shelter with the elf witch. We're even now trying to draw her out." And with that, Saruman's treachery was complete.

The Witch King turned its empty face toward the wood and hissed slowly, "Then we will send forth the legion."

Bile rose in Galadriel's throat.

-----
The sun set on a long, fruitless day of searching. Bilbo let her pack drop when Thorin set their meager camp in the pocket of a little knoll, but the wind blew dry and sour from Mordor. She paced. For all his supposed knowledge, he had not found another goblin tunnel. She took his offered cram without a word. She was still too angry to speak.

He sighed. "Bilbo..."

She hunched her shoulders tighter and would not look at him.

He chided, "You've been brooding all day--"

"That's rich, coming from you," she snapped.

She didn't see the way his eyes widened or how his face pinched. Then he sighed and got creakily to his feet. (He was so tired, but this-- this could not go on). She stood stiffly, watching the colors fade in the west, and he came up behind her and wrapped his broad arms around her waist. But she did not yield. He pressed his cheek against her curls.

"Are you even sorry?" she asked bitterly.

He stiffened, affronted. "You want an apology? No!"

She wrenched herself from his arms with a snarl.

He snapped, "Are we still on that? I will not apologize for something that-- yes, I erred, but with the circumstances as they were, it was not my fault--"

"Damn the circumstances, you can at least be sorry!" She spun away, shoulders rigid.

Mind scrambling, he remembered how Balin had told him about Bilbo's own shocking apology when they had raided her pantry. He'd still been perturbed because he, for the life of him, could not discern where she'd been at fault. Did apologies mean something different to hobbits? He said in his most level-headed tone, "Bilbo, Melhekînh, are you seriously inferring that I was in breach of contract?" She did not answer. He pushed, "When you are my queen, you will have to learn that apologies are grievous things to dwarrow--"

She snapped over her shoulder, eyes blazing, "I am no dwarf!" And she stalked off as far as she dared.

She wrapped her arms around her middle and shivered. If it hadn't been for him, she'd never have fallen into the goblin tunnels-- she'd never have had to riddle in the dark with that-- that horror-- and she'd never have taken the Ring in the first place. She'd never have taken the Arkenstone, either, and they'd never have been parted to begin wi--

Would you, though? Would you have even come together without its influence?

"I have never been so wrong in my life--"

--with his arms warm around her and the Ring warm in her pocket--

If they find their one in one who is not a dwarf, then they're mistaken at best and hoodwinked at worst.

Its sole purpose is to rule-- through its machinations, you became High Queen of the dwarves--

He hadn't shown any interest in her until after she'd found the Ring.
But then something seemed to shift inside her head, and she could almost smell a hint of pipeweed on a gentle breeze, as if Gandalf sat beside her on her bench outside Bag End.

She even clearly heard him say, "There are other forces at work in this world, Bilbo, besides the will of evil. You were meant to find the Ring, in which case you were also meant to have it. And that is an encouraging thought."

And then her anger passed like a cloud over the sun. She sighed and opened her eyes.

Thorin stood before her, worry carved into his face. He held up his hands. "You are right, of course you are right-- you are not a dwarf, and I should not expect you to think as such. But, too, I am not a hobbit, and you will sometimes have to explain things to me, as well. What do apologies mean to hobbits?"

She opened her mouth to say it means you're sorry-- but then she blinked and thought harder. What did it mean? Slowly, she tried, "Sorry means-- means-- regret for one's actions and condolences and-- and a bit of that 'I wish this had never happened to you' all wrapped up into one. We don't really couple the idea with 'fault' like you seem to. In fact, we'll regularly apologize for things that aren't our fault, because-- because-- well, it's just what's done. It's the polite thing to do." The ire was now entirely gone from her voice, and she seemed to deflate. "And I'm sorry, Thorin--" her voice broke. "I'm sorry for everything."

He pulled her into a crushing embrace, and she cried against his chest. He ran one hand up and down her back and buried his other in her hair. His stomach tried to jump out of his throat as he murmured praise and encouragement and prayers against her curls. When she quieted, he pulled back enough to look her in the eye and declared with all his boundless conviction, "Then I am sorry, as a dwarf to a hobbit. My One, do not doubt that I wish that this had never come to you." He cupped her cheeks and kissed her softly. Then he tucked a stray lock behind her ear. "How could I not? We would still be in Erebor, never having needed to be reunited-- our daughter safe beneath stone, you in your rightful place beside me, and together we would be leading our people to prosperity--" He brushed a rough thumb over her cheek and said gravely, "But we cannot dwell on what-ifs and might-have-beens. That way lies madness."

She sniffled and nodded, and at last, they settled in for the night.

-----

They left the Mirkwood without further incident, and Dís would never be happier to see open sky. The road up and past Esgaroth was a (well-maintained) welcome change from that overgrown, root- addled goat track through the forest, and now, every day, the Lonely Mountain rose higher. She had to stop herself from telling Raetha every morning look, look there it is, look how close we are--

The caravan trundled on past the lake and up into the foothills, winding ever higher. Prim walked beside her brother's wagon, Raetha snug in the wrap across her chest, and they stared at the looming peak. Wheels clattered over the clank of cowbells and the crates of gabbling geese, and the dwarves sang as they rode, their spirits winding higher the higher they climbed. The road was steep, and the sky was so vast overhead. Even the wind smelled different-- dry and sharp and carrying the barest hint of snow. Prim pulled Raetha closer. This was not the Shire.

Dís' heart lodged in her throat. Ravens flew overhead. She had only been a child when they were sent into a smoking, scattered exile, and those memories would ever tint this sight with fear and sorrow, but oh--
They were close. They were so close. She twisted in her saddle to find-- there. She wheeled her mount and rode back to Prim. The hobbit looked up worried when Dís rode up, but she just shook her head and dismounted. "We're almost there. We're almost home-- may I?" She reached out for Raetha.

For a moment, Prim wanted to refuse, to clutch Raetha to her chest a little longer, to let her remain just a hobbit-- but she couldn't, not really. Prim smiled shakily and reached back to loosen the wrap. Raetha reached up for Dís with tiny hands outstretched, and she lifted her high. The faunt giggled and then Dís cuddled her close while Prim untied the wrap and fitted it around Dís' waist and shoulders. Once Raetha was settled, Dís nodded her thanks and climbed back in the saddle.

Raetha waved over her shoulder, "Bye Pwim!"

Prim clutched her chest and fought to breathe.

Dís rode back to the front of the line, and they climbed ever higher until then-- they crested the ridge and to see it-- to see the massive green gates lit by the sun-- her breath caught. She pressed a kiss to the top of Raetha's cloud of curls.

Then, from Ravenhill, she heard the drums echo deep. They were almost home.

Raetha startled against her chest and looked around for the source of the noise. Dís pointed up to the guardhouse. "They're letting the mountain know that we're on our way." Raetha gripped Dís' beard and stared, wide eyed.

Dís rode on. Behind her, the caravan crested the hill. Below, before the gates, green grass waved under the breeze. Dale also stood before them, but Dís only had eyes for Erebor.

He had done it. Her damn fool of a brother had done this. They were coming home.

Raetha craned her neck to look up and up and up at the impossibly large carven dwarrow guardians as they approached the gates. The River Running sprang forth with rushing whitewater, and the musical notes of a thrush sang out over the river and--

Drums. Drums and pipes.

Tears filled her eyes at the sound of a brace of bagpipes-- they were being welcomed home by royal pipes and snares--

Raetha's head whipped around, searching for the source of this new sound, and Dís rubbed her back with a smile too wide for her poor cheeks.

The great doors opened to triumphant strains of music, the mountain echoing with it, and they rode inside. For a brief moment, she was sun-blind, but then her eyes adjusted. The golden lights of Erebor shone down over the city, and there, the silver fountains rang like bells, an already-gathered crowd cheered, and over it all, the pipes played.

Dís ran a thumb over Raetha's slack cheek and whispered, "Ah, my dearest, we're home."

-----

Dain Ironfoot was in the middle of the driest meeting of the day when he heard the distant pipes. Discussion cut off mid-word, and he sat frozen for a moment. Then he leapt to his feet and sprang from the room, shouting with glee.
He wasn't the only one running, either.

Their King was home.

From a portico, he could see the guards corralling wagons from a ...great caravan, and he spared that a curious thought before he caught sight of black hair. He ran down the stairs, shouting, "About time, yeh great lug of a cou--"

But Dís (not Thorin) turned, with a wide smile and a wee bairn against her chest.

Dain nigh swallowed his tongue. "Dís yeh never said yeh were with child when yeh set out!"

Dís just laughed loud and long. Finally, she said, "It's good to see you too, cousin. She's not mine, though the resemblance is uncanny, isn't it? You've two guesses whose." She hitched Raetha higher in her sling and turned so the faunt could see Dain. Raetha promptly began to chew on the braid in Dís' beard.

Watching realization dawn on Dain's face was utterly satisfying. Finally he let out a great donkey-bray of a laugh and shouted, "No! Oh Mahal's hammer, after all this time? That little shite. Where is 'e? I've a few lumps ta give 'im, in line after the Burglar of course--" but he petered out when he could not find him. He blinked at Dís' expression and asked more seriously, "Dís, where are they?"

He saw her note all their audience, and she muttered, "I'll explain more later--"

Then Fíli dismounted with a clatter next to her, and he answered with a voice that carried, "Our Burglar went to go heal the Mirkwood, and Thorin went with her to keep her safe."

Dain leveled Dís a look. She leveled him one right back and explained, "Hobbits have deep ties to the earth. That's why some of her kin and kind have come, to help heal the Desolation." She gestured expansively to the gawping hobbits.

Dain eyed the hobbits and asked quietly, "Later?"

Dís nodded minutely.

Then Dain pasted on a cheerful smile and cried, "Welcome, then, you lot! We'll get you settled today, and then tonight, we feast!"

The assembled dwarrow burst into such cheers that dust shook from the archways.

-----

Another night, another day's fruitless search. As they huddled together against the cold and appraised their dwindling supplies, they were forced to conclude that they could not afford to keep looking for another way in. And if he clung a little more tightly, and if she buried her face a little deeper, neither said a word.

They next day they turned back. A perilous way is still more useful than no way at all.

And so, as they returned to that vile place, as the clatter of dwarrow-hammers profaned the air, Thorin watched, stretched out on his belly atop the knoll, and observed their movements. No one seemed to use the tunnel-- and why would they with the Gate flung open right there? He wondered if it served as a sally port, where fell troops could swarm out to surround any who dared their Gate. But at the same time, it was too close for them to approach without notice. In a way, it would have been easier if the tunnel had been in use-- then they might have been able to slip in with the stream. Dim,
watery sunlight shone down, so at least the trolls and orcs weren't out.

Bilbo shifted beside him, and he raised an eyebrow at her. Her nose twitched in that damnable way, and he shut his eyes against what new ways she'd come up with to court danger now.

"--How recognizable are you?" she finally breathed.

Whatever he was expecting, this was not it. "What?"

"I mean, are you immediately recognizable as the King of Durin's Folk? Or would you be just another dwarf to them?"

"--What?"

She floundered. "Well-- what I mean to say is-- um. Your beard is still rather short--"

His lips went white, and she hastened to add, "So why would they assume that you are somewhere where you're not supposed to be? I mean, the game would be up if they recognized you-- somehow I don't think they'd believe that you were sincerely making diplomatic overtures, but--"

He pressed a finger to her lips, and she quieted. For a long moment, he did not speak. Then he asked, "Are you proposing that we just-- walk right up there like we're meant to be there?"

She shrugged. "It's worked for me before."

He stared.

She just looked back expectantly.

He buried his face in his hands.

She insisted, "If you act like you're exactly where you're meant to be, people won't question that, especially someone with such a-- commanding presence as yours."

He groaned, "Bilbo-- it's too dangerous."

She quoted, "The closer you are to danger, the further you are from harm." Then she sighed. "Do you have any other ideas? Because we cannot linger."

His jaw clenched, muscles taut beneath his beard, until he finally croaked, "Give me your beads."

She tried to pull her brooch off her cloak, but it was sewn on too well. Thorin reached over and, with a sharp tug, ripped it right off. The broken threads at his throat made her skin crawl. She pocketed the broach and made a face as he splashed a bit of water from their skin onto his palm and scrubbed his cold, wet hand over her chin. Then he took a handful of dry, pitiful dirt and rubbed that over her skin. Her hair blew unbound across her face, and she felt sick with nerves. But this was no longer a new feeling to her, so she took a deep breath and arched both brows. Are you ready?
Face set in a scowl (*If we must*) he nodded.

But he started forward as she tried to go back. She hissed, "What are you doing?"

"I thought we were going?" he groused.

She shook her head fiercely. "You can't just walk in head-on like that! No, we'll come up the road from further down, not by kicking up a fuss and raising a clatter by skidding down this scree right in front of their faces." She started walking back down the hill. He followed.

Once out of sight of the Gates, they slipped and slid down the loose pile of shale, past the few stubborn gorse bushes that still clung to the solid earth below. Bilbo kept one eye on their path, the other on road below. Then the dirt was as hard-packed as the road between Hobbiton and Frogmorton, like this was some busy thoroughfare and not the barren back-end of a broken empire. Unease flooded even higher in her chest. She kept close to the nearly sheer roots of the mountains, but she could hear every shuffling footfall behind her.

She grit out, "Stop sneaking."

"What, should I prance in instead?" he shot back.

"Your 'sneaking' is spottable from a mile away, I imagine you *could* prance more quietly."

He just growled wordlessly.

She spun and glared. Then she pointed back toward the Gate and snapped, "Picture that Thranduil is down there, you know something that will just devastate him, *and* you're going to get to tell it to his face. Let that fill your head. Now *walk*; do not change anything else." She turned back and set off again.

He followed, demeanor already different.

Soon, they rounded the bend and there, before them, stood the Gate. The dwarf laboring there gave them no notice. Bilbo felt her knees start to quiver, but she kept her head held high and did not allow herself to rush. She could *hear* Thorin's teeth grinding. They could see the goblin tunnel.

A dwarf driving a cart saw them and waved. "Ho!"

She almost missed a step.

Some of the dwarves near the driver stood to look.

They were so close to the tunnel.

A pair of dwarves set down their hammers and set out to meet them.

Thorin grit out, "New plan." And he clamped a hand around her bicep. Then he threw down one of the Lady's gift, and a cloud of darkness enveloped their world.

He yanked her sideways and threw her over his shoulder as he sprinted for the cave.

Darkness complete swallowed them. She could not tell if her eyes were open at all.

She was too frightened to speak, she just clutched at his cloak, bouncing over his shoulder against the top of his pack, and was already completely disoriented.
But then the sounds of pursuit echoed up the tunnel, and he turned down a different path. Rock scraped her shoulder, and she fought back a whimper. But still they gained. He turned down another corner, but then he grunted and skidded to a stop. Then he backtracked and turned down another path.

The clatter of booted pursuit grew even louder, and then one shouted, "Halt! Or we'll shoot!"

Thorin's steps stuttered-- the way forked in three, and he needed a moment to figure out which path to take.

Then Bilbo patted his shoulder and whispered, "I've an idea--"

For a moment, he was torn. Then he set her down.

The total darkness was unnerving, but the sounds of the approaching dwarf were even worse.

One called roughly, "Who are yeh, and what're yeh on about?"

She took a deep breath and pasted on a bright smile, knowing that they, at least, could see her. Then she called cheerfully, "Oh very well done. This is just what we like to see, yes."

Thorin stiffened beside her, and one of their pursuers grunted, "Wha'?"

Bilbo nodded as if this was a particularly good deal at the market and said firmly, "We're the Eye's Eyes, and we've been testing our border. If we had been intruders, we'd be truly well and caught. So yes, very well done indeed."

Another voice ground out in the darkness, "--why should we believe you?"

"Oh? Well, I suppose that's right and proper of you-- again, very well done. Just let me get my credentials, of course, so you will see--" She stepped on Thorin's boot as she reached into her cloak and--

"Eärendil!" she roared and shut her eyes tight. She whipped out the adamantine phial and blinding light flooded the tunnels.

The dwarf cried out in pain. Thorin caught her about the waist and ran for their lives.

She clung to his shoulder, the quiescent phial clutched in one fist, and she felt the full weight of the foul mountain above them. The darkness was so absolute her eyes played tricks on her. She kept thinking she could see bright flares of light, like Gandalf's fireworks, or pale whisps like ghosts. The only sounds were Thorin's boots and labored breath, but still he ran.

"Is it soft? Is it ... juicy?"

She screwed her eyes shut. It made no difference.

The flickering whisps of light would not stop. What if they were real? What if her eyes were already shut? Would she see them every time she closed her eyes from now on? He ran on, arm still tight around her waist, his dwarven eyes at home.

"Well, Thief?" That silken, rumbling bass shook the very foundations of the mountain. "Come now, don't be shy--"

No no no--
Her mind skittered away from that, *anything* but that--

"It's ours, and ours alone--" His voice warped and twisted, his already-deep tone dropping even lower, til it, too, rattled the very foundations of stone--

She tried to cast about for anything else, any other memory, but--

"There you are, Thief in the Shadows." His thundering footsteps, his thundering voice rolling, his eye glowing glowing glowing--

*A great Eye, wreathed in flame*--

She flinched away as if burned.

"You are being used, Thief in the Shadows. You were only ever a means to an end. That coward Oakenshield has weighed your life and found it worth nothing--"

"--You?" His eyes, his eyes shone with tears even as his face twisted in a snarl--

"Come now, don't be shy. Step into the light." Dragonfire raged and the mountain flooded with light--

The mountain flooded with light. There was light ahead. They were through, they were almost outside--

He set her back onto her feet, gone pins and needles from being carried for so long, and she winced and clutched at his arm while the feeling came back. Then they carefully approached the open air, and they stepped outside.

Bilbo blinked watering eyes, unable to believe the sight. Rolling green hills stretched out as far as the eye could see, to jagged mountains in the distance, and it looked so much like the Shire that she staggered. This was Mordor. This couldn't be like home. It couldn't.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: psychological torture & Ring madness.

==========

Dís and Raetha's return has a soundtrack: *Fallen Through Time from Outlander*. Listen and weep!

(Please don't kill me. I have reasons for what I do. This Mordor is inspired by the acid rain deforestation in Eastern Europe. But. Remember, that Sauron has been gone from Mordor for 3000 years and hasn't been back long. He's weak, still recovering his strength. *But damn if I haven't been haunted by the image of rolling green hills where the grass is the only thing that grows over the skeletons of dead trees and animals*).
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

*Love is a much more vicious motivator.*

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings for Ring madness, intrusive thoughts and whump.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bilbo fumbled for her waterskin and passed it to Thorin. He took it gratefully, breath still labored. They stared out over the empty, rolling hills, then stepped out onto the grass. Mt. Doom rose in the distance, spewing ash and lightning, though they still stood in bright sunshine. She re-shouldered her pack, and they walked on, ever on.

"Keep up Master Baggins!" He growled, he snapped, he snarled every chance he could get. But his icy indifference felt even worse, as if she wasn't even worth his notice--

She stumbled over something hidden in the grass, and he caught her by the elbow.

"Are you alright?" he asked, voice soft and full of concern.

She nodded dumbly.

She could not deny that his behavior had changed dramatically from before, but she tried to rein in her initial dread as she tried to suss out the source of that change, because-- no, do not let your emotions cloud your judgement, my girl, sit back and be rational about this. Look at the facts. Yes, he HAS changed, markedly for the better--

*Better for whom?* a cold part of her asked.

*If they find their one in one who is not a dwarf, then they're mistaken at best and hoodwinked at worst.*

*Its sole purpose is to rule-- through its machinations, you became High Queen of the dwarves--*

When had he changed?

"She has been lost since she stepped foot out her door! She will never be one of us!"

"I have never been so wrong in my life!"

Yes, his behavior WAS better for her, but if-- if she was right, then this 'better' behavior was decidedly, markedly NOT better for him, because it-- it wasn't real. And that meant that his feelings weren't real--that his feelings were as much the work of the Ring as his gold sickness.
She was very nearly sick, herself.

She stumbled again, and he caught her once more. This time he tucked her arm through his, and he patted the back of her hand with his, and his smile was so very soft as he looked down at her, his whole face alight.

_Thief--_

_...Thief--_

_... There you are, Thief in the Shadows--_

No!

If she was right-- (and oh, by the graces, she'd never hoped so hard to be wrong) --then she needed to destroy the cursed thing once and for all, to spare him from its influence.

Cold sweat prickled down her back. But what if he truly wanted nothing to do with her, then?

Her stomach clenched, but she buckled down; so be it, if so. If he cast her aside again, well, she already knew she could survive that, but she could not -- _burgle_ her way into his life, could not steal away his choice like that -- she loved him too dearly. She tried to grasp at the hope that -- that she was wrong, that he really did love her for herself, that the Ring hadn't -- hadn't _tricked_ him into seeing her as someone worth loving, but--

"Bilbo-- Bilbo! What? You're pale and shaking, do you need to sit down?"

She blinked, dazed by the forgotten sunlight, then gasped and buried her head in her hands. "I'm not enough," she choked.

Thorin stopped and pulled her into a crushing embrace. "Shh, ghivashel, shh-- you _are_ enough. You can do this, we're almost there, and you have me. You'll always have me--"

*He doesn't know what he's saying, don't listen.*

NO! Her mind shied away from that thought, and she wrenched herself fully into the present. She breathed. She breathed. His beard scratched at her temple, and his mail was hard against her cheek beneath his cloak.

He was still murmuring, "--ber what Radagast said, guard yourself against its influence."

In a tiny voice muffled against his chest, she said, "I feel like I can't trust myself anymore."

He cupped a broad hand to the back of her head, and his voice cracked. "Then trust in me, trust in _us._"

-----

Radagast sniffled as he cradled Percy in his arms. The poor rabbit still trembled, but he could find no injuries besides what would bloom into a nasty bruise and their exhaustion. Radagast slumped, eaten up inside by guilt over the fact that he'd been the cause of the latter. But the stars wheeled overhead, and what was done was done. He opened his arms, and the rest of his rabbits quickly piled into his lap. Under the stark moonlight, he sang to ease their weariness (and his own), but there was _no time._ The wraiths rode on Lórien, and while he was next to no use fighting them, he could help the Healers help those who _could._ Beneath his hands, his rabbits recovered.
Then, in the distance, he heard hooves.

Radagast snapped his gaze to the west, and there-- a host of riders raced across the plain, the sound of their tack now jangling like bells.

"Oh what now?" he fretted at Percy, but there was naught to do but wait. He could not flee again, not yet, but he made sure his staff was within reach as the riders gained the hill. He was swiftly surrounded.

"Ho there, Traveler!" A mounted, armored Man called down from a horse-length away. No one drew weapons against him, but their hands were all on their hilts.

Radagast replied cautiously, "Yes, well, hello there."

The first rider's mount shifted, as if eager to greet the wizard and disgruntled he was not permitted to, and the Man asked, "Are you alright? We saw your flight from the Nazgûl and sought to come to your aid, but-- how-- do you--" he stopped to resettle his mount and seemed to shake himself. "Why did they let you go?"

Radagast shook his staff at the Man as one would wag a finger, scolding, "Why does any hunter give up their quarry? To pursue greater game."

The Man stared at the staff and gasped, "You're a wizard!"

Radagast's beard twitched. "And you're a Man!"

Said Man dismounted and offered a small bow. "I am Belecthor, son of Ecthelion, captain of the garrison at Cair Andros."

The wizard looked down at his lapful of rabbits and sighed. They leapt back onto the grass, and he rose creakily to his feet, leaning upon his staff. "And I am Radagast the Brown. Thank you for trying to come to my aid, but it's not me who needs help now. Lothlórien is under siege. Will you come to their aid?"

That sent a murmur gusting through the Men. Belecthor finally answered, "Come, let us discuss this in a more defensible place."

Radagast nodded and bent to untangle his rabbits' stays, gently petting their ears once more, and then he stepped back onto his sled. Then they all thundered off into the west. Belecthor rode beside him the whole way.

As dawn began to lighten the sky behind them, the mighty stone fortress of Cair Andros came into view. The Anduin broke around the island like waves upon the bow of a ship, and white spray caught the rising sun like diamonds. Radagast eyed the ford and gestured neatly with his staff, and his rabbits rode over a bridge of air. Belecthor barely managed to hide his wonderment as his horse splashed through the water.

Inside the bailey, he ordered his second to gather the commanders, and then he led Radagast inside to a council chamber, its long wooden table polished to a high shine beneath the candlelight. Pages hurriedly brought in pitchers and trays of food, and Belecthor bade him to sit. The wizard shifted impatiently, but then he remembered that this form did, in fact, still need food and rest. He sighed and tucked in as more men filtered in.

Finally, Belecthor sat at the head of the table and declared, "We've received word that Lothlórien is under attack, by the very forces of Mordor itself." The new men shifted uneasily, and Belecthor
asked Radagast, "How great a force besieges the Golden Wood?"

Radagast looked up from his plate, mouth full and eyes wide. He quickly swallowed and stuttered, "W-well, I don't know. A great host, we were warned, and we had just enough time to get out before they arrived."

Belecthor blinked. "You-- fled? 'We'?

Radagast's beard twitched again as he considered how much (and how little) he could say. "My companions have another task-- that-- that's why the -- that's who the wraiths were after. I was able to distract them so they could escape. The wraiths think they're still in Lórien."

Another man asked gruffly, his voice rising, "Wait, you fled Lórien to escape the Nazgûl, but then they went back to Lórien because they thought they were still in Lórien?"

Radagast shook his head so hard his hat fell off his head. A bird flew out of his hair, peeping in alarm. "No, no. We fled from a host of orcs from Dol Guldur, who are being led by Saruman, who has betrayed us all, but now it's come out that Mordor's coming to his aid and--"

Another man cried, "Wh-- Then it is vital that we maintain our defenses here! If Mordor is launching an attack against the West, we cannot spare the forces to aid the elves--"

Yet another man nodded, saying, "Leave the affairs of the elves to the elves!"

Radagast insisted, "He will bring the whole brunt of his force to bear upon Lórien. No where else will matter to Him--"

"Oh, and you know this how?" one scoffed.

Radagast thumped his staff down onto the stone beside his chair and sat bolt upright. The shadows seemed to creak out of the corners and his voice echoed, "This I know. I am privy to facts which I am not at liberty to share, but trust me when I say that the Eye's blow will fall hardest upon Lórien."

Belecthor, horrified, whispered, "Th-- the Eye? But that cannot-- Sauron was destroyed. The Witch-king rides--"

The candles guttered, and Radagast met his gaze gravely. "No, son of Gondor. He was not." No one moved. No one dared breathe. Then Radagast continued, "He will throw His full might upon the Golden Wood, and it is vital that he do so."

Belecthor asked slowly, "Why?"

Radagast shrank in on himself, and the candles seemed to glow again.

Belecthor stared over the wizard's shoulder. "Lothlórien's defense isn't the sole goal here." Then his grey eyes sharpened. "It is a distraction?"

Radagast peeped, "We must be seen to act as though Lothlórien's defense is the last hope of the free peoples of the West."

Belecthor replied as if in a trance, "A last alliance-- to keep His eye fixed upon Lórien, and blind to all else that moves."

Radagast gave a tiny nod.

Belecthor's jaw clenched, and he turned to his men. "Send out a call to the Rohirrim. We will send
the 1st Battalion to Lothlórien. May their numbers strengthen our force."

One of the commanders gasped, "My lord--!"

"This is my command," Belecthor ordered.

The men nodded, and all was swallowed by chaos.

-----

Eikar was just cutting into his lunch when he heard the drums. His head snapped up and he met his companions’ eyes. Then the bagpipes echoed down the halls, and they scrambled from their seats. The King, their King was back!

Eikar’s heart rose in his throat. Oh, he hoped their—their hobbit was back, too.

Wide, haunted brown eyes over thin cheeks, and unshed tears—

He felt a fierce swell of protectiveness flood his chest, warm as a hearth fire, and they raced for the gates.

A cheering crowd had already gathered, but he pushed through like a battering ram, ignoring the gruff protests behind him. As he broke to the fore, he heard his—King Ironfoot’s booming laughter, and there was the Lady Dís—Eikar’s head whipped as he searched for—there were other hobbits? He saw the prince and the Company, but—

Then the Lady turned, and he saw the bairn—

Wide blue eyes stared into his, but he knew that nose.

He stumbled forward and dropped to his knees at the Lady’s feet.

“I’m takin’ yeh to see the king.”

“Yeh’re what!”

A hand clamped over his bicep like iron, a maze of streets and hallways, and a dozen guards’ eyes quickly averted. A door, a plain door and a sharp rap and then he was being bustled inside. A desk, a gruff voice, “Balin, I’ve already told y—”

Eikar’s knees felt like jelly— he was only a dwarf of common stock and ordinary skill, but this, this was Thorin Oakenshield, a hero of legend. Eikar didn't belong here—

Blue eyes fixed him to the spot before the King turned his gaze to the mad dwarf—the Companion, and he ground out, “Yes, Nori?”

“This one’s seen our Burglar!”

For the longest moment, the King just stared at Eikar, then he brought his hands to his shorn beard and let out a soft, choked sound—

Hollow cheeks and wide eyes and "Ach lad, he’s jus’ tellin’ us ta haul in," and “He lives,” and—

“If whoever he is is the one who gave her her necklace of bruises, then he’d best bugger off!” And it had been the King, the King...
Eikar burned, jaw tight, as banked anger kindled in his chest. He had no right to look so shaken, not after what he’d done—madness or not, and King he might be, but when it came down to it, Thorin Oakenshield was just another dwarf. He was not above their laws. He wore his shame upon his face, but Eikar was not mollified.

Eikar jerked his arm from Nori’s grip and glared daggers at the King. “Aye, I saw her, after we left the mountain last spring. When she fled.”

The King shut his eyes and hung his head, his face hidden behind his hair. But then he straightened and stood, walked out from behind his desk, walked stiffly up to Eikar, and Eikar fought the urge to step back, but then—then the King bowed his head and held out his hands and—

The King said softly, “Let these hands that have hurt be hurt.”

And Eikar stared at the King’s palms, shocked. This—this was an old law, and since Thorin Oakenshield had invoked it, it was within Eikar’s right to… to go so far as to break his hands. He blinked down at the proffered hands, calloused and burnt and scarred, frozen. But then the King reached out further, pleading, and Eikar reached for his belt knife.

Beside him, Nori twitched, but the King shot him a look through his hair.

Eikar’s knife flashed in the candlelight, but the King’s hands remained steady before him. Then Eikar reached out and, shocked at his own daring, turned the King’s hands over. Then he sharply rapped the flat of his knife across the King’s knuckles, first one hand, then the next. Then he sank to his knees at Thorin Oakenshield’s feet and pledged himself into his service.

Eikar knelt before the bairn, the child of his King, who he had known before he was even born—Dain’s guards tried to force Eikar to his feet, but he stubbornly resisted and cried, "Uzbad-dashet, my axe is yours!"

Nori yelped, "Mahal’s beard, Eikar, did yeh know?" but Dwalin elbowed him in the gut as the Lady Dís gazed levelly down at him. Eikar’s eyes flicked quickly at Nori, then back at the bairn, at the silver beads in his black hair and--

The Lady Dís smiled and declared in ringing tones, "Eikar, son of Einur, we accept your service and present to you Raetha... Thorin’s daughter."

"What?" Eikar choked as the crowd erupted, and then a laughing Nori pulled him to his feet. Then they were pushing through the joyous crowd, the prince slapping his back, Nori’s hand an anchor on his bicep, and Raetha, his princess, smiling at him over the Lady Dís’ shoulder.

-----

Tauriel missed sunlight. The vile smog that Saruman had conjured up clung clammy and damp to every surface. The dead air sent shivers of revulsion down her spine. Kíli dozed in the chair across the tent, but she sat beside the cot and gently ran a damp cloth over Arwen’s still brow. The healers had been forced to shave her dark hair above her temple, and Tauriel tried not to grieve the loss. The stitches were hidden beneath clean bandages, and no fever wracked her frame, yet she still did not wake. The healers had done what they could for the moment, but they needed to focus on those more grievously wounded. She would wake when she would, or she would wait. Tauriel’s own fingertips were torn and bloodied from the days nights of endless shooting, but still she dipped the cloth in lavender water and tended to the Evenstar. The Lady was too strong and too fair, she could not--they could not lose her like this.
Behind her, the tent flap opened, and Tauriel turned. Galadriel stooped to enter, and Tauriel scrambled to stand to attention.

Galadriel held up a hand, "Peace, Captain." Then she took the seat beside Arwen's cot.

Tauriel's gaze flickered up and then down to her feet, unable to look at the Lady for long, but she held out the damp cloth.

Galadriel took it with a small smile, but then turned to her granddaughter. "There has been no change?"

"No, my Lady," Tauriel answered around the lump in her throat. "The healers-- the healers could not be spared. She is not in danger, but not yet ready to wake without aid--" her voice failed.

Galadriel's fair face clouded with a frown. "I see." Then she pressed her hand to Arwen's brow.

Tauriel protested, "My Lady--" but she clapped her mouth shut when Galadriel's gaze snapped to hers.

"A little application of strength here to return my greatest ally to the field? No, that is a price easily paid." Then she shut her eyes and blazed like the sun. Tauriel had to shield her eyes.

When she blinked the tracers from her vision, she saw Galadriel help Arwen sit up. Tauriel had to lock her knees in her relief. Then Kíli snuffled awake and cried, "Arwen!"

Tauriel quickly poured a glass of water and handed it to Galadriel, who helped Arwen take small sips.

Finally, Arwen whispered, "Oh!" and rested her head against Galadriel's shoulder. "What happened?"

Tauriel's mouth went dry.

Kíli said haltingly, "You fought Saruman, but-- then Gandalf showed up and--" His voice broke. "And Saruman ran, but then the Balrog-- Gandalf fought the Balrog but fell. Saruman is still at our gates, and now there are Ringwraiths, too."

Arwen gasped, "Gandalf...fell?" and blinked as tears rolled down her face.

Then Galadriel cupped her cheek and said gravely, "Our borders still hold, but you will be needed, Undómiel."

Arwen heaved a breath and squared her shoulders, nodding.

Galadriel smiled like the sun, her whole face lighting up with it just for a moment, and then she stood. "I cannot stay, but I will send for food. Come to me when you're done." Arwen nodded, and Galadriel left the tent.

Arwen wiped her cheeks and looked up at Tauriel and Kíli, then she opened her arms wide. They piled onto her, tangling her in a tight hug.

Kíli whispered in her ear, "One of the Lady's arrows worked. I have two more, and they have Saruman's name on them."

Arwen huffed a short laugh, then asked, "Have we had any word of Bilbo?" Tauriel shook her head, but then Arwen saw her torn fingers and clutched her hands. "This will not do."
As light gathered around their joined hands, Tauriel protested once more, "My Lady-- save your strength, you will need it--"

Arwen just met her eyes and declared, "And I also need you, if not safe, then at least in fighting shape." Cool relief flooded her hands, and Tauriel bowed her head. Arwen squeezed her hands and whispered, "Never let it be said again that Sylvan elves are of lesser standing--" Tauriel's face burned, and Arwen turned then to Kíli, "or that dwarves are, either. I owe the both of you my life."

"And you, mine," Kíli replied quickly.

"And mine--" Tauriel's voice almost failed her. "Hiril vuin."

Arwen tightened her arms around their necks once more, and then a page brought in their lunch, gawping at the sight.

-----

Bilbo stumbled up yet another rise on this barren plain, throat dry, feet screaming. The chain around her neck felt like it was made of lead, weighing her down down down. And they were almost out of water, despite this endless sea of green. Thorin trudged on beside her as always, unaffected, and she wanted to scream. (She was weak, she was the one who couldn't keep up)

"Keep up, Master Baggins!"

You're not fit for him.

Then she caught a glimpse of a glint below, and she cried out, "Water!" She rushed down the hill, happy to finally be of some use instead of a burden, and she pulled out her waterskin as she--

She tripped over something beneath the long grass and went tumbling in a tangle of pack and cloak and hair. Her waterskin popped open, water spilling out over her shirt, and she swore.

Thorin ran down to her and ran his hands over her arms, rasping, "Bilbo? Are you alright?" before he hauled her back to her feet. She was fine, just--

She looked back and shuddered when she saw that she'd tripped over the skeleton of some foul beast, its bleached bones now disturbed and rising white over the grass, its exposed ribs like fangs. Then she turned and drained the last of her waterskin, ready to refill it with fresh water--

But Thorin clamped a big hand over her arm and pulled her back. "Wait," he grit out when she looked askance at him. He carefully knelt at the water's edge, at the ring of bare earth where nothing grew, and he leaned close to the surface. Then he wafted a hand over the water, sniffing--

"Thorin, what--?"

But he scowled darkly and scrabbled away from the pool. "Do not touch it. The water's caustic."

She blinked stupidly for the longest moment, unable or unwilling to understand, but then her face crumpled. She let her empty waterskin drop to the grass, and he gently enveloped her in a steady embrace.

“Shh, I still have—we’ll keep looking—there’s still hope.”

She buried her face in his chest and tried to believe him.

-----
Belecthor stood with Radagast on the western curtain wall of Cair Andros. A mouse stood atop the crenelation, and Radagast ran a finger over its head. Belecthor tried to hide his stare while he listened to the wizard.

“—Now, I know I’m not very wise or learned, not like my fellows, but we all have our purpose to serve, and, well, my place has always been here, to protect those like this little fellow. But even these lives, no matter how small, still get caught up in times like this, when the mighty get notions into their heads, and so here I am.”

Belecthor felt those words resonate behind his heart and replied slowly, “This I can understand, for what are the Stewards but the guardians of the people? As my father before me, I am a Captain of Gondor, and this year, as I was before him, my brother has become a page in the Citadel. My life is given to the protection of Gondor. This is to be my duty and my privilege, and it is a burden I bear with lightness because of the love I bear for my people.”

Radagast pulled cracked corn from one pocket and spread some along the stone. A flock of pidgeons descended upon the wall with a racket. Belecthor started to step back, but Radagast stayed put, feathers flying around him, with his face set with such placid serenity that he looked almost young. Then he said as if in a trance, “Do not let that love end with your people, though. Men of Gondor, of Rohan, of the wilds and the wastes, of Harad beyond, the elves, the dwarves—” Radagast laced his fingers together and sighed. “You’re not dependent upon each other, yet you are not independent, either. If you are to succeed, you cannot stand alone.”

Belecthor was suddenly reminded of the story his father had written to him of the dwarves, who had come to the aid of the refugees of Tharbad, and who had brought news of the famine in Rohan, and he nodded.

He stared out into the west. The Rohirrim would come.

-----

"She should not have come, she has no place amongst us!"

"Did I not say that you would be a burden?"

You are a burden.

-----

Elrond climbed frantically, heedless of his bloodied hands as he scaled the peak to get to Gandalf’s prone form. Behind him, Glorfindel broke off to be sure that the Balrog was truly dead, not just injured. Driving snow pelted his face, and lightning still crashed around them, because only one enemy had been vanquished today, and Caradhras would outlast them all, but Elrond climbed higher, then there—

He fell at Gandalf’s side, careful not to kneel on Glamdring, and he reached over to pull Gandalf’s staff out of the snow, placing it back in his hands—his limp hands—his bloodied face—

Elrond pressed his palm against Gandalf’s singed chest but could not find his heartbeat. He darted a hand up to cover his bloodied brow, but felt no glowing warmth, no fèa—and he pulled back and sat heavily upon his heels, dumb with shock and grief. His friend, his friend, who he’d known across the whole of this Age—

He jumped out of his skin when Gandalf gasped, and in the space of a blink, his grey robes gleamed suddenly white, whiter than the snow, and his blue eyes opened.
The sky above Mordor was a strange mix of bright blue and swirling black. Ash spewed out of Mt. Doom, black and filled with lightning, but the cloud did not yet cover the whole sky. Yet as they walked on, they descended into shadow, until the sunshine was a distant thing. Bilbo's mood seemed to darken with the sky. Her lips were cracked and bloodied, and he began to sneak her his share of the rations. The fact that she didn't seem to notice raised all the alarm bells in his mind.

The clouds grew darker and lower, and a cold wind picked up, flattening the grass around them. Bilbo sniffed loudly, and then the first smattering raindrops hit the ground. She immediately perked up and pulled out her waterskin, holding it up and out, ready for the downpour. But then a raindrop fell on her wrist and— she yelped and scrubbed at her burning skin, but then another raindrop landed on the back of her hand, then another, and another—

"Get down!" Thorin yelled and pulled her to the grass. She curled into a ball on her side, cradling her burning hand. As the rain began to fall harder, he covered her and pulled her hood over her head.

She gasped, tears streaming down her cheeks, "What--?"

He grit through clenched teeth, "Caustic rain--corrosive rain--"

She cried, "What on this green earth is that?" Raindrops pelted down around them, fat and pattering.

He shifted to cover her better and grated something in khuzdul. "The-- ah, the fire mountain emits gasses that mix with the --ach, there's no word for it in Westron. Just-- it can burn if it gets strong enough, so keep your skin covered." He grimaced when he saw the livid blisters on her hand.

She yelped, "But what about you?"

He shook his head, "I am khuzd-- Mahal made us to endure."

She pressed her face against his chest, but his mail was too thick-- she could not find the steady thump of his heart.

Eikar fought to keep his expression impassive as he was bustled along with the Company into King Ironfoot's own sitting room. Nori kept a tight grip on the meat of his shoulder, as if he was a flight risk (he was), and Dwalin--the Dwalin, the captain of the King's Guard himself, walked beside him, saying, "Yeh'll join the Guard in our lass' service, I think our Burglar would like that. She told us about you, yeh know--" and Eikar felt like he'd somehow lost grip of the threads of his life and picked up someone else's, or fallen into a ballad, or that they'd tell him later this was all some misunderstanding, a mistaken identity, on your way now--

A gaggle of hobbits gawped at the opulent sitting room, with its hearth taller than they were and the fire throwing the intricate sculptures that covered the walls into sharp relief, and an elf and a man folded themselves into chairs too small for them. Eikar tried not to stare at them too openly, but then, when the Lady Dís sat down, Raetha climbed out of her lap and into the man's. One of the hobbits called, "Hey Dori, how about a spot of tea, hm?"

One of the hobbits nodded vigorously and set about packing his pipe. The dwarves shouted their assent, and a greybeard bustled about, but the smallest hobbit hissed, "Rori, where are your manners?"

Another one, with a head of familiar golden curls, snorted, "He left 'em behind the Misty Mountains,
Prim."

This Prim sniped back, "Well we're out of the wilds and back in civilization now, so we need to *act like it*--"

Eikar stared as the Companion with a bouncing hat leaned forward and asked, "The more pressing question is whether you lot all have your handkerchiefs."

The one with the pipe cried, scandalized, "Of course we do!"

The Company all roared with laughter.

Eikar, confused, met King Ironfoot's equally blank expression, and he quickly looked down. Then Ironfoot clapped his hands and they all turned to look at him. "Alrigh' yeh lot, what's really goin' on? Where's my dear cousin an' his bonnie lass?"

The Lady Dís and Prince Fíli exchanged a glance, before she looked down at her fists in her lap. "They were called to Lothlórien by the White Council. Bilbo has-- information about the Enemy."

Ironfoot's eyebrows shot up. "What--!"

But then a knock sounded on the door, and they all frowned at each other. Nori got up and cracked the door, then let in a beardless youth who held a hawk on an outstretched arm. The bird rapped, "Message for King Oakenshield."

Ironfoot stood and replied, "I am regent in King Oakenshield's absence. Speak."

The hawk baited, but flew to Ironfoot's arm and recited, "Urgent message from Náfarat, second minister of his Excellency the--"

Ironfoot looked to Nori, who explained, "Náfarat was a diplomat who led the trade negotiations with Near Harad last spring."

The hawk continued huffily, "A rebel force has broken faith with our king and our gods to follow the Deceiver into battle against your allies, who are, in accordance with the Treaty of Dale, our allies. They march on the woods of Lothlórien--"

Ironfoot spat, "Ach! Bile their heads, the scabby bawbags!"

The man gently clapped his hands over Raetha's ears.

Fíli growled, "They'll have to get past us first."

The assembled Company roared in agreement.

-----

Another night's endless draw-aim-loose, another night's acrid burning tang as the orcs threw themselves upon the borders of Lórien. Saruman remarked as if commenting upon the weather, "You cannot keep this up forever, Elf."

Galadriel stood within a gale and replied lowly, "You will empty your mountains before you sap my strength, Istari."

If her cheeks were a little pale, no one would say.
The Witch-king gave an unearthly shriek of rage, and up and down the line, Galadhrim screamed in pain. Then he began his own attack upon her borders. Galadriel felt his magics like a skeletal hand around her throat. Then Arwen stood beside her, blazing like a star, and they clasped hands.

Before them, their archers loosed, orcs fell, and their borders held strong.

"You are being used, Thief in the Shadows. You were only ever a means to an end."

"It's sole purpose is to rule--"

"That coward, Oakenshield, has weighed the value of your life and found it worth nothing."

You are nothing, nothing--

Eärendil sailed low in the west when the sky began to lighten behind them. Smoke curled through the trees, and the sounds of battle drowned out what song the birds dared. Arwen sighed, "Look to the east--"

Galadriel answered, "E'er the sun rises," and a faint smile lit her tired face.

Then a horn sounded from the south, then another, and another, until all the dale echoed with it. The orcs faltered, the Galadhrim turned, and by the pale light of dawn, a host of riders appeared atop the hill. Their pennants and bright manes waved in the breeze, and then the wind carried their roar as they charged.

The earth shook beneath their mounts' hooves, and the orcs scrabbled to turn a defense, but then with a screech of metal upon metal, the men were upon them. The cavalry tore through the orcs' ragged ranks, until one by one, they turned and fled the combined onslaught of Men and Sun. Saruman tried to conjure up his fog, but the wind blew it all away. With a shrill shriek, the Nazgûl followed the ragged retreat back under the cover of the Mirkwood.

The men raised their spears and shouted with victory, and the elves joined in.

But out on the empty dale, Saruman still stood, wind whipping around his now-ruined robes, and he planted his staff against the white granite with a crack. His voice echoed foul upon the air, and the skies began to darken beneath storm clouds. Then he tolled, "So you have called upon aid, have you? Then so shall I." He pulled a palantír out of thin air, and in his hand, it caught fire. "The power of Isengard is at your command, Sauron, Lord of the Earth."

Radagast yelped, "Saruman, what are you doing?"

But Saruman just thrust out a gnarled hand, and Radagast went flying sideways.

Then an awful presence filled the dale, as if a hostile gaze was upon them all, and Radagast felt his ears pop on a note too low to hear. Then, on the edge of his hearing, he thought he could catch snatches of dark words, but--

Oh no--

Galadriel shouted, "Fall back to the wood! Get within my borders, now!"

And a shade rose, then another, and another, on and on, until an army-- an army of smoke and
shadow stood upon the stone.

"Oh no," Kíli whispered in horror, standing beside Tauriel and Arwen. "Azanulbizar!"

Then the host which had been felled by the dwarves charged once more.

The Men of Gondor and Rohan bolted for the forest. Belecthor stood his ground, unwilling to retreat before his men could, and a shade bore down upon him. He tried to swing his sword against the shadow of an orc, but his blade passed through as if through smoke. He was cut down with one blow.

One of the Éored dragged a frozen Radagast back to the trees.

Belecthor was not the only one who failed to make the border.

Radagast stared at Saruman, numb.

The shades could not cross Galadriel's ward, but nor did they burn into brilliant blue nothingness, either. They prowled the edge as if outside a pane of glass. Galadriel's face drained of all color. And soon, Saruman's storm clouds hid enough of the sun that the orcs returned to the fray.

_Come on, Bilbo_ Kíli thought desperately as he kept shooting.

-----

Dain cackled as he rode his boar between the legs of a mûmakil, axes gleaming as he hamstringed the beast. As it collapsed in a cloud of dust, Dís cut down the rebel Haradrim that swarmed out of the device upon its back, and she shouted, "That still only counts as one!"

-----

Gandalf and Elrond stared down from the pass at the army below.

"Shades," Gandalf uttered disgustedly.

"Indeed," Elrond replied, impassive.

Neither let their fear show.

Glorfindel's lips were pressed into a white line.

Elrond asked Gandalf, "Have you been able to contact the Lady?"

He paused for a moment, trying, but then he looked back at Elrond and shook his head. "She is fading, though. Can you feel it?"

Elrond paled. "What about Bilbo? What news of her?"

Gandalf shook his head again. "She has passed beyond my sight, into the Land of Shadow."

"We cannot let this continue much longer." He hesitated. "There is one way--"

Gandalf nodded worriedly, eyes fixed on the burning border and the enemy at their gates. "Yes, but the risk--"

"Might not long outweigh the alternative," Elrond finished.
"We are left with but one choice--" Gandalf leaned heavily upon his staff, worry thick in his chest, and Elrond said with him, "--When."

They held out their hands and tapped into the strength of their Rings.

-----

At the foot of Mt. Doom, Bilbo collapsed, the weight of the Ring like a millstone around her neck.

_Without the Ring, you are nothing-- nothing-- nothing, a burden, and a footnote from a backwater. If you destroy it, he will leave you._

_So be it! her mind railed, without hope. I will not bind him to me for naught, if he does not wish it--_ He will cast you out, but he will keep Raetha. Your daughter will be ripped from your arms, and you will be left with nothing.

_No--!

_(Bilbo didn’t feel Thorin drop to his knees at her side, or hear him call her name)._

_He is a strong and worthy king. Who are you compared to him? Nothing-- nothing. Your only use was to produce him an heir, and you even failed in doing that, giving him a girl-child. But dwarves will make do; she will fetch a handsome bride-price some day, even as the shameful half-breed she is. Of course he would keep her, but you, though? You no longer serve a purpose. He doesn't need you anymore-- he has no need for a burglar who can't even burgle, no need for a mother now that his babe is weaned, no need for a queen who can't even rule--_

_No--_

_But I suppose you could keep him, if you worked at it...if you had help. Did you think that the dwarves would willingly allow one not of their race to become queen? But they can be brought to heel, and even one as worthless as you could be turned into a queen worthy of such a king. Did you think that they would willingly allow hobbits to live among them? You need to make them make a home for your kin, or your peoples will always live in strife. With me, your enemies would fall before you, and your people will prosper. Your daughter will be beloved by all. None will oppose you. I can make you a queen both capable and useful...all you have to do is do as I say._

-----

Gandalf and the elves of Rivendell rode down the pass, the light of Narya and Vilya blazing before them and around them, and the shades burned away within that light. Glorfindel charged before them, his blade singing as he met the shades blow for blow, for he had already been beyond and back again and lived once more. The earth thundered beneath their mounts’ hooves, and they battered into the orcs’ lines. The Witch-king screamed his defiance, but they pushed through and gained the border. In their wake, the orcs and shades threw themselves upon the wards to no avail. The White Council was now reunited.

-----

Thorin lifted her limp form in his arms and started to climb. He could see the doorway glowing orange from within. Bilbo stirred in his grasp and whispered, "Anything--"

He climbed faster, breath rough and rattling in his chest.
Then they were inside. The heat was immense, a physical weight even to him. Sweat slicked her face, and her head lolled as he knelt to set her down. He patted her cheeks and called, "Bilbo-- Bilbo, love--"

Her eyes snapped open and she gasped. For a moment, she stared wildly at him, hand pressed to her chest, over where the Ring lay pressed against her heart. She could feel it burning hot against her skin. Above her, his expression glowed with relief and love and-- her heart broke, because it wasn't real. She shut her eyes and her eyes burned with tears she couldn't afford--

_You can have this. You can keep them both, just keep me._

Thorin helped her to her feet and walked her to the edge, heat as thick as bathwater rising from the molten rock below. She stood there, dazed, and he gripped her shoulders, saying, "Bilbo-- we made it! Cast it into the fire!"

She stared down into the cauldron below, at the river of fire that flowed and broiled, and pulled the Ring from inside her mail and up and over her head, but-- she could not look away from the gold in her palm.

Thorin blinked, then cried, "What are you waiting for? Destroy it!"

She tore her gaze from the gold and looked up at him. Then she closed her fist around the Ring and softly, softly said, "No."

He stared at her like-- oh, like when he'd found out she'd taken the Arkenstone, and _oh_ the sight of tears in his eyes again _hurt_, so she told him soothingly, "No, shh. Don't you see? I need this to be yours. I wouldn't be-- couldn't be a queen without this." She reached up to cup his bearded cheek.

He choked, "--What are you talking about? Bilbo-- what-- no, you do _not_ need-- don't _listen_ to it." He pleaded, "Remember what Radagast said!"

Her nose wrinkled, and she scoffed, "What would Radagast know of this?"

Thorin fell to his knees before her, and a molten spot behind her heart glowed with satisfaction at the sight, but no-- listen, he's speaking-- _begging_, "--elieve me when I tell you that you do not need this-- and even if-- even if you decide that you-- Bilbo, you do not need to be my _queen_ to be mine._"

She blinked down at him, taken aback. "What?"

"If-- once you're rid of this _thing_-- if you do decide you don't want a crown, then I will give up mine as well."

She gasped, "--But you can't!"

"Ghivashel, I have already tried to abdicate-- after my gold sickness, after I had failed so badly, how could I rule? But they-- Balin, Fíli, the Company-- they would not let me, and they were right to refuse then. The responsibility to rebuild Erebor was mine to bear-- I could not have thrust the brunt of that burden upon Fíli's shoulders, not then. But now-- dear heart, now? Say the word, and it is done. You don't need to be my queen to be mine. You are _already_ mine."

She blinked rapidly, but then her expression hardened and she shook her head. "No, that's-- that's the Ring talking. It-- it convinced you on the quest that-- the only reason you think I'm yours is because it convinced you I would make a good queen. So I have to be! If-- if I'm not, then you _won't_ want me."
"Bilbo, that doesn't even make sense--"

"You didn't even like me before I found it!" She shook her fist (and the Ring) in his face. He flinched. A dark coil of pleasure wound through her.

He took a deep breath and stared up at her, voice steady and solid, "Sanzeuh, I felt your heart call to mine the night I stepped into your smial."

"Oh, you say that now--" she replied morosely.

He insisted, "If my feelings are solely the fabrication of the Ring, then why would I cast you out when I was actually under the influence of the Ring?"

She gaped down at him.

He pleaded, "You've a mind like a steel trap, ghivashel, just please don't get caught in it. I can see you-- you've come up with all these rationalizations and explanations to fit the poison that's been dripped into your ear, but-- remember what you told me the other day? That you could not even trust yourself? Trust in your heart when you cannot trust your head."

Her face crumpled and she shook her head wildly, "I cannot lose you. I cannot lose Raetha."

"What! Bilbo, you won't, I promise-- you won't lose us." He reached up for her hands.

But her face suddenly twisted, blackened with rage, and she snarled, "Oh! Oh I see! Such pretty words-- you only want it for yourself!"

Thorin scrambled back to his feet and cried, "You've changed, Bilbo!"

"You've changed!"

"You've changed!"

_Tears filled his eyes as his face broke on a snarl—"

She froze.

He begged, "Please, can you not see how much you've changed? Please, trust in me, trust in us. You do not need that thing. Amrālimē-- let it go."

She blinked as if waking from an unexpected nap, confused and disoriented. For the first time in what seemed like an age, her gaze was clear as she met his. Then her face crumpled. Agony writ clear upon her brow, she looked down at her clenched fist, then over the edge to the molten rock below. Her jaw set. Then she shut her eyes, took a great heaving breath and-- opened her hand.

The Ring gleamed as it fell.

For a moment, it glowed atop the fire-- then it melted away.

She swayed where she stood, then fell.

Thorin darted forward and caught her about the waist, and the earth buckled. He staggered back from the edge and ran for the door.

Her lashes fluttered as she blinked up at him. "--Thorin?"
He swore in khuzdul as the mountain erupted behind him. The earth rattled beneath his feet, and then
they were surrounded by a river of fire-- they were trapped on a spire. They were trapped. They
were trapped after coming all this way--

He sank to a seat on the blistering ground and cradled her to his chest, as the world shook around
them.

-----

Saruman's ruined robes whipped around him as he shouted, "There can be no victory against th--"

But then the earth rattled, and a weight suddenly lifted from the air. As one, the shades vanished, and
then a shock wave threw the invaders to their feet.

Kíli threw his arms in the air and shouted, "Bilbo! Bilbo--!" The woods erupted into cheers.

But Galadriel staggered, and Arwen caught her. "My Lady?"

Galadriel gasped, "Bilbo!"

Radagast cast out for her mind, and with the blocks now lifted from the Wood, he found her, and--
"Oh no!" he yelped.

Arwen cried, "The Eagle-- the Eagle is still by the river!"

Radagast nodded so hard he lost his hat, but he ran off without it.

-----

Thorin had dreamt so often that he had been consumed by fire, and now it was to be so. Bilbo had
fallen into a stupor in his arms, and it broke his heart that it would end like this. For once, he allowed
himself the luxury of grief. He railed against the fate that kept him from their daughter, so soon after
he had been allowed to meet her. He railed against the fate that took his bright and shining One from
the world-- away from him, so soon after he’d thought he’d been given back what he’d lost. Of all the
struggles he had borne, he could not survive this-- and he would not survive this, but by all the graces
above, he never thought he’d have to watch his One go, not like this, not like this, not helpless with
her in his arms--

He had no tears. He was so thirsty.

So he thought of his hopes, not for himself (for he now had none), but for his daughter and his
family. May she grow in peace and plenty. May Fíli's reign be blessed. May Kíli and his own odd
One find a home where they both could thrive. May they know how much they were loved.

He buried his face in Bilbo's golden hair.

So it was that he did not see the Eagle until he was plucked from the ground like a fruit. He jolted,
mind scattering into a thousand facets like light on a gem, and he spared a thought to wonder if this
was a dream or death, then all went black.

Chapter End Notes
As always, if you recognize a line, it's not mine. I did pull a few lines from the text, and I did tweak a few lines from the text, too. (Please don't sue me, Wingnut Films or Tolkien estate).

_Hiril vuin_ - Sindarin for 'beloved lady'

(Gotta love Dain spouting some Scottish swears)

Nenya & Vilya are the names of Gandalf and Elrond's Rings of Power.

Poor Belecthor. Denethor canonically has two older sisters, but I thought that it would be more...true to the narrative if his older brother died while in the service of a wizard. It would give more weight to him shouting "Not some...wizard's pupil!" at Faramir, and also provide juxtaposition to how differently they would handle the loss of their older brothers. "Be soft. Do not let the world make you hard. Do not let pain make you hate. Do not let the bitterness steal your sweetness. Take pride that even though the rest of the world may disagree, you still believe it to be a beautiful place." --Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

_Photoset here_ (You're always welcome to watch me procrastinate on Tumblr)

======

Write what you know, they say. Oh! I know, I'll give voice to my own crippling sense of inadequacy and fear of abandonment! That'll create suitably weighty enough conflict to do this fic justice! ...NO. This was seriously so hard to write, you guys. It's hard to type it. I've been shying away from this chapter for a month holy shit three months oh god ohgodimsosorry thinking about what happens next and their HEAs, but NO, I'm done hiding from this now. This is a recovery fic, a healing fic. I owe y'all so much fluff omg. I owe MYSELF so much fluff...

THANK YOU ALL who commented. I haven't replied to any recently because I've felt guilty about not posting updates, but I promise you that I turn into a blushing puddle every time I get a notification.
A fire crackled in the grate as Mama tugged a comb through her curls, but she was past that part that hurt-- all the tangles and twigs and burrs were gone, and Mama was humming idly behind her. She thought she could see dragons in the flames. Thorin smoked a pipe with Father in the armchairs beside the fireplace, but that wasn't right, Mama didn't let Father smoke inside, and then a wolf howled.

She choked on a gasp and opened her eyes, the cold gleaming light in the room making her flinch, and the humming stopped. So did the comb in her hair-- Bilbo tried to turn her head to look, but oh! She ached and the room spun. She snapped her eyes shut.

"Shh, here--" Arwen's soft voice came from her side, and Bilbo tried again. Arwen held a cup out for her, and oh--

Cool water burst over her tongue, and relief flooded through her so violently that her hands went numb. But what-- how--? Her thoughts scattered, and her head felt both too heavy and too light. But-- as happy as she was to see Arwen, where was Thorin?

The Lady brushed Bilbo's hair away from her brow and smiled down at her, and--

Bilbo blinked and rasped, "Was that you humming?"

She nodded and started combing Bilbo's hair again.

Bilbo shut her eyes and whispered, "My mother knew that song."

Arwen paused, then said, "I know. She taught it to me."

Bilbo blinked again and asked softly, "You knew my mother?"

Arwen smiled wider. "I did. And so I can tell you, she would have been so proud of you. We all are."

Bilbo shut her eyes again but didn't have the strength to argue. They shouldn't be proud, not if they knew what'd really happened, how weak she'd really been, how she'd nearly failed.

After a long pause, Arwen asked quietly, "You are troubled. Can I get you anything?"

Where was he? Had she something gone wrong? Why was he not at her side, unless he did not want to be--? She shook her head minutely, and even then, the motion felt subtly wrong.

Arwen put down her comb and took her hands. "Bilbo?"

And oh, look at this, she didn't even have enough grasp on her emotions to keep them off her face, just shameful--

Arwen cupped her cheek and brushed away a tear, much to Bilbo's mortification, and asked again, "Bilbo? Please, what's wrong?"

And now she'd gone and upset her-- her friend-- Bilbo snuffled and asked in a tiny voice, "Where is
The Lady's eyes widened, "Oh! Oh goodness, of course you would be worried, my apologies. He's fine-- recovering just as you."

Bilbo blinked hard, half blind with relief, but still-- "But where?"

Arwen huffed a little laugh, "It's the middle of the night-- he's in his own rooms."

Disappointment and a little dread swelled in her chest, and after a beat too long without a reply, she managed, "Oh." She noticed Arwen pick up the comb again, and she let herself fall into the comforting rhythm again-- but the strokes fell too short. She went rigid, and Arwen instantly stilled. Then Bilbo choked, "Oh--!" and gingerly reached up to her head. And there, her hair-- her hair had been cropped short, as short as she had kept it before she'd run out of Bag End, all those years ago. And for a moment, vertigo rocked her; she wondered if any time had passed at all, if she'd ever been anything more than that silly, stuffy little homebody who'd never gone on any adventures or did anything unexpected-- and if no time had passed, if she hadn't found Thorin-- she wouldn't have Raetha-- She clutched her hair and curled in on herself with a whimper.

"Ai! Shh! Mellon, shh!" Arwen cried in her tender, melodious voice and gently loosened Bilbo's grip. "Bilbo, shh, your hair was singed beyond repair, burnt by the fires of Mt. Doom. We cut your hair to care for you and clean your-- Shh. You were not shorn in dishonor."

Bilbo took a shuddering breath and let her hands fall back to the bed. O-of course they hadn't-- hadn't-- she couldn't even bear to think the word, and she gave her internal self a little bracing shake. She was among elves, not dwarves. A haircut was just a haircut. And anyway, hobbits did not hold stock in such things. It didn't mean anything more than-- alright, maybe she had instinctively fallen into that assumption on some level-- his voice cracked, "Shorn dwarves--" But that was silly. She was not a dwarf. She was just a silly, foolish hobbit--

Arwen reached out and brushed Bilbo's bangs back from her face. "It's alright, you're alright. You're safe, Thorin is safe. Shh. Rest now."

And with an overwhelming feeling like she was sinking into deep water, Bilbo's eyes slid shut. But the feel of fingers combing gently through her hair followed her.

-----

A fire crackled in the grate as she tugged a comb through Raetha’s curls, tutting as she pulled out a dried leaf. Raetha squirmed in her lap and whined as the comb caught on snarls, and Bilbo hummed the first few bars of Raetha’s favorite song. Soon enough, Raetha started singing along, “The Road goes ever on and on, out from the door where it began—“

She woke to empty arms, and it took her a disoriented moment to remember that she was in Caras Galadhon, while Raetha was half a world away. Longing nearly swamped her. She missed her sweet warm-bread-smell, her solid, warm weight against her chest, the give of her chubby, warm arms around her neck, her laughter, her whining, her voice-- She missed her daughter.

Sunlight suffused the room, and birdsong floated gently through the window behind her bed, but she felt so wretched that the beauty felt like a mockery of her pain. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, hunger ached dully at her middle, and she felt like there was a disconnect between her will and her limbs when she tried to move. Slowly, she shifted to look to the bedside seat. Arwen was gone. In her place, Gandalf sat as if in a trance, but while she recognized him instantly, she also did
not. Gone were his grey robes, and his hair and beard were different-- less wild, more… stately. Her first thought was that he would not be deemed disreputable now. Then she snorted a little laugh at how inconsequential the opinions of Hobbiton would be to him, to her, to this greater world, and she was almost dizzy when she realized how small her life had been before. But then his attention was upon her.

She blinked, suddenly a little shy, and she piped, “Good morning.”

His mustache twitched, and he leaned forward to ask gravely, "Is it?" Then he chuckled. Soon she joined in, shaking with full-belly laughter, and in their mirth, she felt some of the rough edges around her heart smooth away, like how garden grit and grime are washed away by a good scrubbing, leaving only good, solid food behind.

Once they got hold of themselves, Gandalf helped her sit up and handed her a tray. Her stomach gave an almighty rumble, and she looked up pleadingly from the small bowl of thin porridge.

Gandalf only shook his head, “You need to be patient with yourself as you recover. Too much food now and you’ll be sick.”

She twisted her lips wryly and ate, but she could not deny her enthusiasm for even this simple fare. But when she could not even finish this much, she was a little shocked and not a small bit worried.

Gandalf reiterated firmly, “You are recovering. My dear hobbit, that was no mere walking holiday.”

Ice water seemed to trickle down her spine, and she shuddered. As she set her tray aside, she asked quietly, “What happened, Gandalf?”

He laced his fingers together across his middle, and her eye was caught by a glint of red upon his hand, quick as a flash, but then it was gone and Gandalf was saying, “Radagast and Gwaihir flew to your aid, and they were able to bring you back to Lothlórien in time.”

Bilbo blinked rapidly and nodded a little dazedly. “What about—are Kíli and--?” Her voice quavered. “Have we had any news from Erebor?”

Gandalf reached over and patted her hand. “Kíli and Tauriel are well. Erebor turned aside a host of Easterlings, but we have not heard more.” Then he settled back and recounted the siege of Lórien, and Bilbo listened in awe. They—Kíli and Tauriel, Arwen, Gandalf, the Galadhrim, the Men, they had all done so much more than she had—they were far braver, far more honorable than she’d been. And when he finished, she tried to surreptitiously wipe her eyes, but then Gandalf passed her a handkerchief, and she burst into watery laughter.

Then she heard a distant rumble from the hall, voices raised in argument, and she looked to Gandalf in alarm, but his face only lit up like an impish faunt who’d swiped a pie, and—

She caught the words,”—can’t keep me from her any longer, I know she woke yesterday, and it’s only by your fool meddling that’s kept me from her side, where I should have been the whole time —”

The door burst open and Thorin stalked through, trailing a harassed-looking elf who kept wringing his hands and tutting, but Bilbo choked up at the way his irritation instantly fell away, at the way incandescent happiness dawned on his face when he saw her sitting up, and she breathed, “Oh!“

Then he threw himself across the room, and his arms were around her, and his hair was everywhere. She fisted his shirt and buried her face in his neck while he grated khuzdul prayers against her ear.
Distantly, she heard Gandalf rise and chuckle, “And that is our cue, Master Elf.” He wrapped an arm around the elf’s shoulders and herded him out of the room, and the door snicked shut behind them.

Then she was crying against his shoulder, whispering, “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry—“

He pulled back just far enough to meet her eyes, brow furrowed, “Ghivashel, what on earth for?”

“I almost—“ her voice broke, “I almost didn’t—“

Then he surged forward and kissed her fiercely. “Oh shush, ‘almost’ doesn’t count. You did it in the end. Bilbo, I didn’t think we were going to make it, and we almost didn’t, but we’re here. Don’t you see?” He scoffed, ‘Almost,’ fah—” He cupped her cheek, and she leaned into his touch desperately.

He pressed his forehead to hers and murmured soothingly, “We’re here, we’re alright, we made it—” over and over until she regained some control over her breathing.

Finally, she let go of his shirt enough to reach up and thread her fingers through his hair, and she rasped, “I want to go home.”

He nodded hard, his forehead still pressed to hers. Then his fingers curled into her now-short hair, combing through where her azlâf braid should be, and he pulled back to meet her eyes-- and oh the fierce intent in his expression stilled the breath in her chest. She met his gaze even though she wanted to hide, because she didn't-- couldn't deserve the way he looked at her. His fingers tightened in her hair, and she kept her chin up as he spoke, ”Atamanel, I want no more misunderstandings between us. Tell me you mean Erebor? I have built a home for you there, because I love you and want you at my side. And I know-- I know what you said-- what you feared, but believe me, the Ring cannot create feelings, it can-- could only corrupt. My Burglar-- my One-- come home with me. Come home with me as my bride-to-be. We will see if you will want to also be my Queen, but we'll make that choice togeth--"

She cut him off with a frantic, tear-stained kiss, whispering, "Yes, yes--" over and over against his lips, until the door burst open and Kíli yelped with dismay at the sight. Bilbo laughed against Thorin's chest until her belly ached.

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Unfortunately, going home wasn’t as simple as that.

Bilbo was still too weak to travel, the stress of the quest still too evident in the way her skin hung loose on her frame, her still-cracked lips, and the healing wound around her neck from where the mithril chain had dug and cut into her skin. She winced whenever she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror—she looked like a scarecrow. Even her hair had turned brittle and dull, like straw. Her cheeks were hollow.

She took to avoiding her reflection.

Then there were the sheer logistics of the journey. The elves were planning their own grand procession, because they weren’t just going to provide them with guards to escort them back, no, but with the coming autumn, they wanted to wait until the next spring. Galadriel and Celeborn, Elrond and Arwen, they all wanted to travel back to Erebor with them for the dual celebrations of a wedding and coronation.

Bilbo fretfully ran her fingers through where her azlâf braid should be.

And so the days passed. She attended the memorial ceremony for the Galadhrim and Men who had fallen in defense of the Golden Wood, pale and trembling. She clung to Thorin's arm and grit her
teeth under the crowd's blatant stares. She and Thorin stood with Galadriel, Celeborn and Elrond as they drank the parting cup with the Men of Gondor and the Êored. They passed their evenings with Elrond in the library, or with Arwen and her court. Every time Galadriel joined them, Bilbo's breath still caught a bit in her chest, but-- She paced the length of the gardens, ever further each day as her strength returned, and Thorin was ever a solid weight at her side, but this enforced idleness itched inside of her skin until she thought she would go mad from it. She wanted to be home. The solemn, stately grace of the elves grated upon her nerves. Of course they could take all the time they needed, they had all the time, but here she was missing another day of her child's life.

A fire crackled in the grate, her knitting needles clicked in her hands, and Hiraeth played on the rug at her feet, driving a little wooden cart around the braided oval--

A shrieking laugh, and a splash of soapy water to her face, and oh! She chuckled as she scolded Hiraeth and handed her a toy funnel in hopes she'd be distracted from how fun it was to just slap the water to-- no, that didn't work. She sighed and resolved herself to the fact that they'd both need a change of clothes after this, and instead focused on sudsing Raetha's curls into a frothy cloud--

A loud smashing clatter, and Bilbo looked up from her notes to see Hiraeth standing-- standing! next to the end table, but the doily was on the floor-- had been pulled off and a ceramic mathom had gone with it, and the sharp broken pieces were all around her, and she wavered precariously, her chubby hands not strong enough to hold her up-- Bilbo leapt from her seat and caught her about the waist before she landed. Behind her, the upset inkwell soaked the page, but Bilbo just nuzzled her face in her daughter's curls and cooed, "When did you learn to stand? How did I miss this, my little miss?"

A dozen conversations flowed around her, but she could not tear her gaze away from Hir-- from Raetha snuggled in Thorin's broad arms, at the way her curls were the same raven-black as his against his chest--

Thorin squeezed her hand tight beneath the table of yet another banquet hall, drawing her back into the present. The tight set of his jaw belied his own feelings, but they were royal guests in a royal house, and so they kept their true expressions from their faces and waited with the appearance of patience and grace.

She vented her frustrations into her pillow once their door was closed. He carded his fingers through her hair.

The next day, they were out in the gardens once more, and yet again Bilbo paced up and down the path. Thorin sat on a bench in the sun, the silver in his hair gleaming, and the fine lines around his eyes seemed even deeper, but this was her time to walk a little further on her own. Each time she passed him, he seemed to have his face turned toward the sky like a sunflower, and the sight eased the knot in her chest just a bit. Then Radagast came tumbling down the path trailing a gaggle of ducks, a pair of cats, innumerable mice, and a donkey. Bilbo smiled and called out to him.

Radagast seemed to start at being addressed, but when he saw them, he beamed and called, "Oh hello! Up and about again?"

Bilbo heaved a sigh and flopped down onto the bench beside Thorin, grousing, "Oh yes! It's about the only thing I'm allowed to do these days."

He cocked his head and asked, "Oh?" A dove landed on the top of his staff.

Thorin put a hand on her arm, and she modulated her tone. "Oh, never you mind me, I've just been feeling a little caged in."
But instead of letting this pleasantry pass, Radagast's entire focus snapped to her. "What's wrong, Bilbo?"

She blinked up at him, unused to such intensity from the normally-scatter-brained wizard, and she had the fleeting thought that she'd underestimated him at her peril. But she glanced at Thorin and decided to be honest. "I want to go home. I want to be home. And, we're grateful to the Galadhrim, we really are-- but they're taking so long." But then, to her shame, she choked on the last word, and she had to blink back tears.

Radagast quickly knelt and, fluttering like a mother hen, cried, "Shh, oh, shh now. That's all? I can get you home, goodness."

Thorin's hand clamped down on her arm, and she clapped a hand over her mouth to try to stifle a breathless sob.

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Things moved remarkably quickly after that, and then they were ready to leave. The golden light of morning slanted through the mallorn trees as they said their farewells, yet-- even as eager as Bilbo was to be home, she found herself loathe to part from the Lady, Gandalf, Arwen, and Elrond. And when Elrond and Thorin amicably shook hands, she had to fight back tears. Then Elrond knelt before her, to look her in the eye, and he wrapped both of his long hands around hers, and he looked so solemn and grave that Bilbo just could not stand it. She threw her arms around his shoulders and squeezed. For a moment, he froze, taken aback, but then he patted her back and chuckled. "I will see you again, my friend."

She let him go and nodded, affecting a stiff upper lip, "Yes, yes you will. Goodbye, Elrond."

Then Thorin stepped into the sled and helped her sit back against his chest. Bilbo fought down a smirk when she saw Tauriel toss Kili onto the back of that deer-elk-monstrosity, and then Radagast's rabbits started thumping, and--

Galadhrim around them called out farewells, voices swelling in song, and then flower petals floated down from above. Bilbo was nearly overcome.

-- and they were off.

*One hand in hers, one hand in Thorin's, they lifted Raetha between them, swinging her through the air--*

They passed under the tangled boughs of the Mirkwood, teeth rattling.

*Watching Fíli and Kíli teach her clapping games before the fire in the evenings, while they waited for dinner to be ready--*

The days passed into nights passed into days in this landmark-less place, but Tauriel seemed heartened by the way the trees grew healthier the further they got from the poisoned southern fortress.

*Raetha's hand clutching her collar, her solemn blue eyes taking in everything over Bilbo's shoulder--*

Just as time and distance seemed to lose meaning, they reached the Road, and from there, the ride was infinitely less rough.

*Raetha's tiny hand clutching onto Thorin's scarred finger as she toddled across the grass, too*
They rode on, until one day, they were back out under the sky, squinting in the sunlight. But there—there to the North—rose the Lonely Mountain. Bilbo clapped both hands over her mouth, and Thorin wrapped a tight arm around her shoulders.

How big would Raetha now be? Would she still know them? Would she forgive them? Bilbo couldn't speak, her heart was lodged in her throat, but every day the mountain loomed larger. Sharp, crisp air filled her lungs, and after so long in the Mirkwood, she felt like every sense was quickened with it, like she could breathe and breathe and breathe forever.

They passed the lake and the ruins of Laketown, and the land rose rougher. They were almost there—today—today—she would be with—they would be with their daughter today—

Thorin put his hand over hers and murmured in her ear, "Breathe."

She turned to give him a look, but she could not bear to take her eyes off the mountain for long. And despite their speed, despite the wind blowing her hair away from her face and drying out her eyes, she had to fight down the urge to get out and run, just for the need to be doing something--

Then they crested a ridge and there—there—were the green gates of Erebor. And the valley between the gates and Dale was rolling gold and fertile—Then she jumped when drums rolled out from the watchtower of Ravenhill, and Thorin's arm tightened around her waist. "They know we're coming, they know we're almost home—" he told her, joy buoying his voice, and oh she could feel her hands begin to tingle. Excitement swelled in her chest, seeming to squeeze all the breath from her—there was no room for something so mundane as air when she felt this much--

They rode on, down past fields of wheat and rye and barley glowing gold in the autumn light, and tears came to her eyes as she saw hobbits working with dwarves and men to bring the harvest home. They were doing this, they were reclaiming the desolation—nothing could replace the lives or years lost to Smaug, but—this was theirs again. They would no longer be beholden to the dubious charity of strangers. This was a homeland again.

Thorin saw her gape, and he spoke into her ear over the rushing wind, "You did this."

She jerked to stare up at him, shaking her head vehemently.

He insisted, "No, yes you did. None of this would be possible without you--"

"Thorin, no! This was y--" she interrupted.

But he interrupted her, "No, no, you, ghivashel, the quest would not have succeeded without you. The land would not have recovered so well or so quickly without your kin and kind. Believe this, my Burglar, all this is due to you."

She gaped like a fish for a few moments before she buried her face in his chest. His arms wound tight around her, and she breathed. She breathed.

And then, then he rasped out, "Bilbo, look."

Almost afraid of what she'd see, she reluctantly turned, but there—there— the gates towered above them, and they rode into the shadow of the mountain. The gates had been restored to their full intricate beauty, and she could hardly look her fill, but then—pipes—bagpipes rang out over a rapid tattoo of snares, and she jumped at the sudden wall of sound. Behind her, Thorin choked on a breath.
Pipes. Royal pipes called them home.

Then the gates opened.

She clamped a hand down over his as they rode inside.

For a moment, they were both sun-blind in the darkness, but--"

This-- this was no tomb. Golden light streamed down from above, a gathering crowd filled the entrance court, cheering, and over it all, the swelling sound of the pipes and drums played. Radagast pulled his sled to a stop, and Bilbo unfolded herself onto wobbling legs. Thorin reached up to steady her, and when he stood, the crowd-- his people roared. Beside him, Kili jumped down from the elk with a clatter of mail and steel-capped boots on stone, and-- and--

Bilbo scanned the cheering crowd desperately, searching for a familiar face, but there were so many dwarrow-- and this wasn't a city, this was a country-- and after so long on the road, she was nearly overwhelmed by the sightsoundsmell of it all-- Thorin wrapped a steady arm around her waist, but where--

"Bilbo!"

Her head snapped over to look, and there-- there-- Eikar pushed through the crowd, with Raetha in his arms, and then she was running, Thorin right on her heels, and Raetha-- Raetha--

"Mama!" Raetha shrieked and reached out as Eikar passed her into Bilbo's arms. Raetha flung her arms around her neck, and Thorin threw his arms around them both. Bilbo cried, "Oh my baby, oh my náthá, my náthá--" and peppered kisses all over Raetha's face as her daughter's hiccuping laughter pealed out, more beautiful than music.

They were home. There was still so much to do and so many hurts to mend, but they were home. Bilbo held her daughter and breathed.

Chapter End Notes

Atamanel - breath of breaths

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Well my loves, all that now remains is fluff. When will there be fluff? I don't know, my brain has kind of been holding this story hostage. I got lucky and had today free, but... well, tomorrow I start GOTV at 7-freaking-AM. Hopefully I'll see you on the other side. (Please vote, y'all).

Ten thousand thanks to everyone who has commented or left kudos or bookmarked this or shared this... I have no idea how this got >30k views (I have no idea how this got >100k words either tbh) but believe you me, your words have been such a source of encouragement in what has been a really rough year (y-y-year...ho shit I first posted the first chapter on 11/8/15)

[...what the hell even is this year, guys]

BUT YEAH. OMG THANK YOUUUUU.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

NSFW, dear readers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bilbo clung to her daughter, blinded by tears. The press and crush and noise of the crowd faded away, and the world shrank down to just them, to their little girl cradled in their arms. Her hair was longer, and she was already taller, her face had lost some of her roundness, but her eyes were still so very blue. For this one blessed moment, Bilbo let herself live entirely in the moment. Then twin hammerblows thudded between Thorin’s shoulders, the force enough to knock through him into them, and he turned to greet whoever was shouting behind him.

Then Dís shoved her way through the crowd and wrapped her broad arms around Bilbo and Raetha, and she cried, “Oh thank Mahâl!”

Bilbo just leaned her head against Dís’ jaw and breathed her name. Then a thundering cheer rose up around them, and Bilbo flinched in alarm. Behind her, around her, chaos reigned in the form of the Company, and she dimly registered booming voices. All of it came crashing down on her—the sensation, the sheer noise, the bright lights and the tang of metal and leather and sweat and precious oils—her breath caught.

Dís ran a broad hand over her shoulders and murmured softly, “It’s alright; you know how my folk can get—overexcited, the lot of them. Dain just called for a feast. But here—you must be utterly spent. Let’s get you settled and cleaned up!”

Bilbo heaved a shivery sigh, then straightened and hitched Raetha up higher on her hip, but Raetha tugged at her grimy collar, and her heart trembled. “I’m sorry, dearest, I can’t.”

Raetha’s brows furrowed in a devastatingly familiar scowl, and she tried again.

Bilbo shook her head, heart in her throat. “Would that I could, my lass, but I can’t.”

Raetha sullenly tucked her thumb into her mouth, and Dís gently offered, “I can bring her to a wet nurse if you need.”

Bilbo fought down a sudden wave of possessive fury—she most certainly did not want to hand her daughter over to some stranger! But her needs and wants were secondary. Instead, she asked Raetha, “Are you hungry or did you just want comfort?”

Raetha just whined and squirmed in her grip, pressing her sticky face into the crook of her neck. Bilbo winced.

Dís smiled kindly behind her beard. “We should take you back to the nursery anyway, you can decide there if you’re hungry or not.” Then Dís met Bilbo’s gaze, and turned into the crowd.

Bilbo quickly reached for Thorin’s sleeve, and as he looked down to see what, Dís called, “Dain, let them at least get changed before you throw the whole thing into their laps!”
The dwarf—and, oh, it was Dain Ironfoot, she’d only seen him from a distance before—barked a great booming laugh and grated, “I’ll be magnanimous and go so far as to let them have a bath!”

Thorin shoved him, a brilliant smile flashing behind his untamed beard. “A mercy, yes. You truly are a magnanimous lord.”

Dain cuffed him on the back of the head with a laugh, and then Thorin and Bilbo followed Dís away from the crowd. Bilbo marveled at the sheer scale of the space as they passed through the great marketplace, over porticos and down stairways that made her heart clench at the lack of railings. Everything was intricately decorated, the golden lights casting shadows over ornate carvings in the hallway walls and the lintels of the high doorways. The stone was warm beneath her feet, the air fresh even so deep underground, and everywhere—everywhere was filled with bustle and people. This was an Erebor transformed, completely different from the tomb she’d found besieged by the dragon.

Bilbo breathed deep.

This place was just so… huge.

Finally they came upon a set of high, heavy stone doors under heavy guard. The dwarf posted quickly opened the doors without a word, the rest straightening to attention. If anything, the corridor grew even more ornate, and Bilbo fought down the urge to gape. Then they turned another corner, and Thorin stopped in his tracks before a set of double doors. Before Bilbo could ask, he whispered to Dís, “Do you remember?”

Dís only shook her head. “Not really. Just flashes. The scent of sandalwood and ambergris, mostly.”

Thorin swallowed hard. “Her beard oil—adad gave it to her on your naming day—“ his voice petered away, and he pressed his face into Bilbo’s hair. She didn’t dare move, not til she learned what had him looking like he’d seen a ghost.

Thorin pressed a shaking hand to the carven stone door, and with awe, said, “I didn’t think I would ever—ever come back here, or ever have need of it—“ Then he took a deep breath and pushed.

The doors opened onto chaos as a dozen dwarflings cavorted around the room, ranging from toddlers to almost-school-ready youths, and then a few dwarrowdams rose from their seats. One held an infant in her arms and smiled shyly.

Thorin cried warmly, “Erla!” and held out his arms. The dam’s rosy cheeks reddened further as he gripped her biceps and asked happily, “Who’s this?”

Erla looked softly down at her babe and said quietly, “This is Bomfris, my Lord.”

“A girl! Mahâl’s blessings upon you both!”

And Bilbo bit her cheek at the sight of his utter happiness. Then Thorin laid a broad palm over the small of her back and said, “Bilbo, this is Erla, Bombur’s wife, and their newest addition.”

Bilbo peeped, “Oh! It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Erla dipped a small curtsy, cheeks flaming behind her red beard, and she made introductions for the rest of the dams present, but Raetha struggled to get down to join her—her friends. Bilbo swallowed hard on the lump in her throat, but she wasn’t ready to let her go just yet, as selfish and needy as that was. She hitched Raetha up higher on her hip and asked her, “Now darling, are you in fact hungry? One of these ladies could help you—“ her voice hitched.
Raetha looked from her mother back to Erla and the other wet nurses, then flung her arms tight around Bilbo’s neck and buried her face in her shoulder, shaking her head and making her hair tickle Bilbo’s nose.

Thorin pulled them both tighter against his side with the smallest smile on his lips, and Dís covered her grin with a broad hand, then cupped her own cheek. “Alright then. Do you want me to send for a bath, or do you want to go to the Springs?”

Thorin asked excitedly, “The Springs have been repaired?”

Dís nodded, smiling broadly, and led them back out of the nursery.

Thorin caught Bilbo’s hand and pulled her down the hallway at a much quicker pace, and Bilbo couldn’t help but laugh at his eagerness.

Dís laughed and called, “You know the way then. I’ll have Dori send up fresh clothes to your quarters!”

Bilbo adjusted her grip on Raetha (who really was already so much bigger than she remembered) and trotted to keep up with her overly-excited dwarf.

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She knew they were finally close when she felt the quality of the air shift—now damp and redolent with minerals and a few degrees cooler. Then they turned a corner and the walls changed: no longer so sculpted, left rough and glittering. The corridor was not crowded, but when they passed, people froze and bowed. Then Thorin practically bustled her down the curving hallway with a warm hand on her back. She hid a giggle in his bicep, but then the hall opened into a wide, natural cavern. Steaming mineral springs flowed musically throughout the space, sound mingling with countless conversations, because—Bilbo quickly shut her eyes—these were well-occupied public baths.

Thorin tutted and patted her forearm. “Come now, ghivashel, you’ve no need to be shy—“

Her eyebrows shot up and looked up, but she quickly averted her eyes. “No need to be—Thorin! I’ve no need—they’ve no need to see!"

But he looked so confused, brows furrowed. “—It’s just bathing.”

Her shoulders dropped and she grumbled, “First elves, then dwarves—is no one familiar with the concept of privacy east of the Misty Mountains?” But she stopped when he stopped and turned fully to her.

“All are sincerity uncomfortable?” he asked, taking hold of her elbows, eyes searching hers. Whatever he saw there made his lips quirk in a smirk beneath his beard and add, “Or are you simply taking the opportunity to grouse?”

She gave an exaggerated gasp, palm to her heart. Raetha looked between them both and clapped a hand to her chest, too.

He laughed and pressed bristly kisses to both of their temples. “So prim and proper! No, you won’t fool me, lass, I know your game. You’ll always be my Burglar beneath that veneer of respectability.”

She hesitated, then peeped, “Is—is that alright, though?”

He blinked. “What?” But then he cupped her cheek and brushed his thumb gently over her lower lip,
eyes so, so soft. “Of course, Sanzeuh.”

She flushed and looked down. “Well then, if you’re sure you can put up with my occasional bouts of fussiness—”

He snorted, “Occasional?”

She shoved him, but like the boulder he was, he only laughed. She continued as if he hadn’t interrupted, “Are you sure this is—proper, though? I mean—” she blushed, “I remember what you said in Bree, that—that caring for each other’s hair is—intimate.”

He blushed then. “Well, of course we wouldn’t be doing that here—”

Bilbo lifted her gaze heavenward—by all the graces, she would never be over the oddities of the dwarves, when they were so blazé about nudity but blushed like sunburn at the thought of brushing each other’s hair— but then she met Thorin’s concerned gaze and bit her lip. “Well then, if this is just a bath—”

Raetha then took the opportunity to get their attention back on her by flopping backwards with a high sigh. Thorin chuckled, pushed Raetha back upright in Bilbo’s arms, and led them down along the springs, back to a nook nearly out of the way from the rest of the cavern. Shelves and hooks lined the curving wall, and Thorin pulled down fresh towels and reached for soaps. Then he reached up and began pulling his beads and clasps free and perfunctorily shucked off his travel-worn gear. She focused on undoing all of Raetha’s fine buttons and clasps, and when she was bare, Bilbo handed her down to Thorin, who was already waist-deep in the pool. Raetha took hold of one of his as-yet-unraveled braids. Then Bilbo quickly divested her own clothing, glad that here, at least, she could keep her mail within sight, and oh—

The water was steaming, just this side of too hot, and it broiled in a soothing way before falling over the lip into ever-expanding pools. She took up one of the soaps and quickly worked it into a rich lather, smiling when Raetha splashed her feet through the water. “And you, my miss, you’re remarkably unfazed by all this. Have you been to these Springs before?”

“Baffs,” Raetha declared and squirmed when Bilbo sudsed her toes.

“Oh, do you like baths now?” Bilbo asked as she worked.

Raetha’s nose wrinkled. “Nuh-uh.”

Thorin chuckled and floated her through the current to rinse her off. Instead of flailing, as Bilbo half-expected, she relaxed into his grip with a happy sigh. He murmured low, “There’s my lass. This is much nicer than just any old bath, isn’t it?” She blinked drowsily up at him and smiled. But heavens above, she kicked up a fuss when Bilbo tried to wash her face. Bilbo huffed and tried to work quickly, but when Raetha squirmed so hard she almost slipped from Thorin’s wet arms, he sternly ordered, “Hush now, that’s enough.”

Raetha looked up at him wide-eyed.

Bilbo took the chance to wipe off the last of the soap from her cheeks. “There, all done my dove.” Then she set to work scrubbing her own weeks’ of grime from her skin. She cringed at how many times she had to scour her hands, then dunked her head—

Colddarktumblingcan'tbreathecan'tbreathe—

She shot back to the surface with a gasp, flailing. Thorin leapt forward and caught one arm beneath
hers and hauled her back to her feet. “Bilbo!”

She looked around wildly, still water-blind, then shuddered violently and took a rough breath. After a long moment, she whispered, “Sorry.”

“Sorry!” Thorin cried, and she looked up. Raetha clung to him, eyes wild and clearly frightened. He swiftly added, “Hush now, you’ve no need to—Bilbo, what was that?”

Raetha reached out, piping, “Mama?”

Bilbo took another shuddering breath and reached out to stroke Raetha’s cheek. “Mama’s fine, dearest. Just got scared by a bad memory.”

Thorin watched her gravely for a moment, then asked roughly, “The river?”

She nodded but then looked around frantically. “Oh drat, the soap—”

He looked too and found it floating on the edge where the water spilled over. Bilbo, still off-balance, babbled, “Huh! Soap that floats—what will these dwarves think of next.”

Thorin firmly planted the soap in her hands. “It’s a craft. I can introduce you to the guildmaster if you’re really interested in finding out how it’s made.”

“No, no, that’s alright,” she replied distractedly and reached for her too-short hair, but Thorin jerked out an arm to stop her.

When she looked wide-eyed at him, he nodded to the other bar of soap. “Use that one, it’s better for your hair.”

She gingerly complied, half-wondering what she would do wrong next.

But Thorin bounced Raetha on his hip and continued, “I do mean it, though. If you take an interest in a craft, I want to encourage you to pursue it.”

Bilbo carefully tipped back to rinse her hair before she straightened once more and met his gaze, soft and serious. “Why do I feel like we’re having two separate conversations again?” She set down the soap and held out her arms for Raetha.

Thorin shrugged as he settled their daughter in her arms and picked up the soap. “It is hard to say in Westron. To craft is to—to be, to honor Mahâl and do what we were put here to do. Each khuzd picks a craft, and we will spend our lives improving our skills and, in doing so, ourselves.”

Bilbo twisted side to side, floating Raetha gently through the water. “Would my fondness for books and maps count?”

He smiled softly down at her as he unravelled his braids. “It could. But you needn’t decide now, just keep it in mind.” But then his face grew somber. “First, though, we’ll see to your battle dreams.” He dunked underwater, and Bilbo bit her tongue at having to wait for an explanation.

When he finally did resurface, flinging his hair back from his face and sending water flying everywhere, she asked sharply, “What do you mean ‘battle dreams?’”

He reached for the soap again and focused on raising a rich lather. “When you—or anyone—goes back to the battlefield after they’ve survived. Our healers can help with that.”

But Bilbo shook her head. “It’s just a bad memory. I’ll get over it.”
Thorin paused with his hands in his hair and met her gaze, though she tried to look away. “Oh aye, just as you’d likely get over a broken ankle, given enough time and rest, but that’d not guarantee that the break would heal straight or that your leg could ever bear your full weight again. No, my heart, let’s not risk it. We’ve both faced trauma, let’s give ourselves the means to heal.”

Bilbo had frozen, staring at him, til Raetha patted her chest and kicked her feet in the water, crying, “More, more!” Bilbo jumped a little and resumed twisting back and forth.

Thorin smiled down at Raetha and asked, “Should we start to teach you how to swim soon, kurkarukê? I didn’t know I had such a fish for a fauntling!”

But Bilbo yelped, “Swim!” and pulled Raetha close to her chest.

Thorin chuckled, “Yes, *swim.* Do hobbits not? I would have thought with such oars for feet—”

Bilbo splashed him, and he guffawed. Raetha squealed with laughter and splashed him too. Then he flashed a bright grin and ducked under.

Ha ha, Bilbo thought wryly, very funny. But as time progressed and he still did not come back up, she began to worry. But then he crashed back to the surface with a roar, soaking Bilbo and Raetha, who both jumped out of their skins, and Raetha burst into tears.

Thorin instantly plucked her into his arms and cradled her to his chest, rocking back and forth, crooning, “Shh now, I’m sorry. Shh, my lass, it’s alright—” til she calmed down. Bilbo shook her head fondly at him til he reached out for her with his free arm and pulled her close. Together, they cradled Raetha between them.

Finally, they got out and towelled off. Bilbo wrinkled her nose at having to get back into her dirty clothes, but Thorin quickly led them back to the royal wing.

This time, when he held open the nursery door, her heart did not leap into her throat. Raetha was already starting to get antsy about being held for so long, and—

Raetha cried, “Sólva!” and tried to jump from Bilbo’s arms as one of the dwarflings climbed onto the back of the couch next to the door.

Erla cried, “Not on the back, Sólva.”

The tot replied earnestly, “But the fwoor’s MO’TEN!”

And nope, Bilbo’s heart clenched. Raetha was no longer an infant. She needed to run and dance and play. She needed more than what Bilbo could provide—

She swallowed hard and gently set Raetha down on the couch next to her friend. “Be sure to listen to Erla, darling.”

Then Bilbo pressed a kiss to her damp curls, and her faunt called a distracted “Bye!” as she joined in the climb over the cushions.

She breathed.

Then there was a short moment of confusion when Thorin stopped still in the hallway. The guards stationed back at their post craned their necks to look, but just as quickly he gave himself a little shake and led Bilbo back to the golden doors.
She finally asked, “Thorin, what?”

He shook his head a little dazedly and muttered, “Muscle memory. That’s not my room anymore.” Then he pushed open one of the ornate doors.

Bilbo walked in and marveled. An enormous fireplace cast bright light into a jewelbox of a room. High ceilings were painted with brilliant frescos and intricately carved mouldings, gold and marble and amber gleamed in the dancing light, and vibrant rugs warmed the floor. He shut the door behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, his chest warm along her back, and he bent to her ear, “By rights, I should settle you in the Queen’s Suites, but to tell the truth, I’ve no desire to be parted from you, my Burglar, ever again.”

She flushed to the tips of her ears and leaned her head back against his chest. He kissed her temple, then led her through what was merely (merely!) the sitting room, past the richest furnishings she could imagine, down another corridor, past a few closed doors and round a bend, and then—

Their room.

She stood stock still in the doorway. Thorin asked quietly, “Does it suit?”

There were no windows so deep within the mountain, but two massive fireplaces on either side of a sumptuous bed bathed the room in light. The white fur of—of Azog’s warg was mounted on the wall, a stark reminder that Thorin lived. Vivid tapestries and wall hangings and the plushest of rugs turned the space cozy and intimate in a way none of the rooms she’d seen so far had been.

She turned and buried her face in his chest.

He pressed his cheek against her damp hair and held her tight.

Finally, he asked, “Well?”

She sniffled and muttered, “Yes, you ridiculous dwarf.”

He huffed a laugh and pressed a kiss to her hair, “So long as I’m your dwarf.”

She leaned back and met his gaze, face serious, “Yes, you are. That has never been in doubt. Now whether I could remain y—”

His lips crashed down to hers, before he grated, “Never in doubt, either.”

Her eyes filled with tears before she quickly blinked them away, and he kissed her again, slow and deep. She buried her fingers in his damp hair, and he lifted her into his arms. She flung her legs around his waist with a little yelp, but his hands slid down to support her bum, and she gasped into his kiss. He chuckled low as he carried her into the room – their room, and then he pressed her down into their bed. Bilbo threw her head back against the furs and he pressed sucking kisses down the column of her throat, and she pressed at his chest, plucking at his travel-stained shirt, muttering, “Off, off—”

But then a bell rang from the sitting room, and Thorin groaned against her collarbone. Bilbo whined, but he stood up and quickly shrugged his clothing back into order. He pressed a broad hand to her chest, telling her to stay— like that, laid out across the bed—to wait, and she flushed scarlet. Then he stalked down the hall.

She heard a shouted greeting and then Thorin’s voice clearly, “Dain, I swear to Mahâl, I’ll ensure you never get an heir—” and then raucous laughter.
“Oh don’ worry, I can give you five minutes –!” then the smack of fist on flesh, and more laughter. Bilbo sat up on her elbows, caught between mortification and her own laughter.

Thorin grated something in Khuzdul that made Dain snort, and then he was back in their room, shaking his head. He held out a hand for her and, with a pout, she let herself be pulled upright. He grumbled, “Time to get dressed. Apparently the Council wants to meet before the feast.” He uttered some Khuzdul curse and shook his head. "Let’s see what Dori’s brought us.”

He opened one of the doors set in the wall opposite their bed, and Bilbo gasped. The closet–no, the room was partly filled with clothes. Admittedly, there was still a lot of space, but that meant it was just waiting for her. Drawers lined one wall, and a well-lit dressing table fit into a nook. While Thorin disrobed, she wandered to her half of the space and reached out for the one fine dress hanging there, as promised. The intricate metallic embroidery made her eyes cross if she looked too close, and she eyed the round neckline.

“Thorin?” she turned to ask, but his head was caught in the wrong hole of a silk undershirt. He just grunted, and she had to cover a smile. “Is there time for my mail to be cleaned?”

He popped his head through and growled, “We’ll make time.” Then he gestured impatiently for it, and she quickly stripped down once more. And that distracted him for a long moment before he shook himself and showed her the drawer that already held some new underthings for her, and he ducked down the hall.

She slipped into a shift and fresh drawers, then turned to the dressing table and sat, eyeing her reflection. Her lips were flushed and swollen from his kisses, and her cheeks were still pink. She was still too skinny, but her hair no longer looked so scraggly. Even now, it was noticeably longer than when she’d woken in Lórien. She sighed and looked over the cut crystal vials on the dresser, opening one and sniffing it – a scent she could not identify, spicy and exotic, hit her nose, and she tested the rest. But then she hesitated—what use had she of scented oils? They weren’t hers anyway. An intricately enamelled box opened onto dozens upon dozens of beads and clasps, all carefully displayed in velvet compartments. A set of ivory combs in various sizes and a boar-bristle brush were laid out neatly beside the box. Bilbo looked in the mirror once more and saw that her hair was already drying into her riot of curls, so she decided to leave it well enough alone.

Then Thorin came back, and he saw her seated at the dressing table. He crossed the room in a few quick strides and bent down, down, down to kiss her softly. She made a little questioning sound and he just said, “I—I’ve wanted you here for so very long, ghivashel.” She wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her cheek to his belly. Then he asked, “Did you find anything you like?” She looked up at him, confused, and he tilted his head at the vials.

She blinked at him, then turned and reached for the one that reminded her somehow of a garden, but not the smell of flowers, more like the smell of hot sunshine after rain, and he smiled. Then he dabbed a little onto his fingertips and—she expected him to use it in his hair, not hers, but she held still as he worked it into her curls. Then she watched in the mirror as he played with one lock, a satisfied smile half-hidden behind his beard, but then he deftly sectioned it for a little braid, where her azláf braid would go again once her hair grew long enough. Her breath caught, and he reached for the box, pulling out a tiny bead. He slipped it over the end of the braid, and there it hung, delicately framing her pointed ear. One more little piece of her heart settled back into place.

Finally, she stood and told him, “Sit.” He met her gaze in the mirror as he complied, and she had to swallow hard. But then she reached for the wide-toothed comb and gently worked his hair smooth, before switching to the brush. Finally, she said, “I’m not sure how to do this part,” and gestured toward the vials. He chose the first one, and as he dabbed that on his fingers, she realized how well
the scents paired. Then he gently ran his fingers over the ends, then higher, focusing where his customary braids were. But when he reached up to section the hair, she murmured, “Wait.” Then she stood in front of him and carefully took over. His eyes fluttered shut. She tried to hide how her fingers shook, but she knew now how to manage the (relatively) simple four-stranded braids that marked him the King of Durin’s line. But as she straightened and cleared her throat, “Those are the only ones I can do yet,” he snagged her by the back of the neck and pulled her back down for a searing kiss. She lost her balance and had to catch herself with one knee on the chair, and then he pulled her into his lap, his hands hot through the silk of her shift—

“Excuse me, my Lo—oh my, I am so sorry!” a page yelped and dove back out of the doorway. He cried, “I’ll leave it on the—in the room!”

Bilbo tried to scramble to her feet, but Thorin just gave an exasperated sigh and clung to her tighter for just a moment longer before he let her go. She pressed her fingers to her burning cheeks and went out to grab her mail. But when the cool links slipped over her skin like water, she sighed, at once feeling much more at ease. She smoothed her hands down her front, then huffed a little laugh at herself and turned back into the dressing room. Thorin was just capping another braid, but he froze when he saw her in the mirror. She raised her brows at him and looked down at herself, with the mithril and her petticoats, she felt she looked a bit silly, but the bare hunger on his face made her blush. Then he shuddered and growled, “I’m about to set the whole guard at our door—”

She shivered and let her eyes fall shut for a moment, but then she turned to the closet. “So many people are waiting for us, dear.”

He muttered a curse and set about sectioning out his next braid. She tore her gaze from him and held up the new dress. The cut was rather plain and boxy, but the cream-and-gold jacquard fabric glimmered as it moved, and the heavily embroidered belt would make it less—square. Hm. A bolt of heavy red fabric edged with a thick border of gold embroidery was also folded over the hanger. She carefully slipped the dress over her head; again the dress fell longer than she’d prefer, but they all seemed to default to floor-length gowns? Then she picked up the belt, but Thorin had stood up and come to her. “Wait.” Then he took the red cloth and draped it over her left shoulder so that it fell to her knees, then cinched the belt over the front, leaving the back to hang. Then he carefully did up her stiffly embroidered cuffs and ran his fingertips along the edge of her collar, making sure the diamonds and pearls encrusting the mithril were just visible, like a necklace. She shifted, fabric rustling deliciously, and she shivered. She had never even seen anything this fine before, let alone be the one wearing it–

Then Thorin stroked a finger slowly up her neck to her ear, and she flushed as scarlet as the bolt. He grinned wicked and leaned down to—to—he dipped a finger under her collar and pulled it aside, and he pressed a sharp kiss there. She hissed, “Thorin!” He looked up at her, trying to feign innocence, but his eyes were blown so, so dark, and she let out a frustrated groan. She tangled her fingers in his hair and pressed him back to her bared collarbone. He sucked a livid mark into her pale skin there, and her head fell back with a whine. Then he smoothed her neckline back into place with a heated little smile. No one else would know but them.

Bilbo gusted a frustrated sigh out her nose and pressed her thighs tight together, feeling like her entire body was tingling. She asked a bit unsteadily, "Later?"

"Later," he rumbled, voice dark with promise.

She let her eyes flutter shut for just a moment, then took a breath and straightened, ordering, “Get.Dressed. Now.”

His lips parted in a quiet oh!, and he quickly ducked his head. Then he turned and reached into his
own (vast) selection of finery, and she licked her lips at the way his back rippled beneath his silk shirt as he pulled on a quilted gambeson, then stepped into a hideous set of boots. Next came fine shining mail that fell to his thighs and a deep blue tunic, heavily embroidered, and she couldn’t help but reach out to do up the intricate filigree silver clasps on the quarter-collar. Then he shrugged into a long, heavy leather coat that was highly embossed and worked with metalic—Bilbo didn’t even know—stamps? Embroidery? Some sort of metalwork along the edges—then he cinched it all with a massive silver belt. Bilbo faintly wondered how he stood up under the weight of all those layers, and she absentely reached out to adjust how his sleeveless coat fell over his shoulders, how the mail fell down over his arms, feeling suddenly bashful in the face of this —this regalia.

Then he reached up and cupped her cheeks, and she finally looked up to meet his gaze, and oh— He pressed his forehead gently to hers, and slowly, her breathing evened out. Finally he pulled back with a soft smile. Then he reached for a heavy robe lined with silver fur, and she cried out, “Oh come on!” He snorted a laugh and she giggled, “You are going to overheat, don’t be sill—”

He cut her off with a huffed, “Nonsense,” and settled the robe over his shoulders. “I can always take it off later if I do, but I’m also going to make sure the Council know exactly who they’re dealing with.”

Bilbo fell back with a worried look. “Do you anticipate trouble?”

He twined his fingers through hers and shook his head. “No, no, but I’m going to ensure we meet them from the most stable footing possible.” He gestured between their garments. “They will expect a certain amount of pageantry, and they’ll respond to that.”

Her stomach twisted with nerves, but she nodded. Together, they went back up to the sitting room, and to Dain.

The massive redhead bounced to his feet when they came down the corridor, his braids flying. “Alrigh’ yeh lot!”

Thorin pulled his cousin in for a cracking forehead smack, and Bilbo flinched violently. Then Thorin wrapped an arm around her waist and formally (finally) introduced them. Bilbo tentatively reached out her hand, but Dain pulled her into an ebullient hug, and her face mashed into beard and fur while he boomed, “Welcome, cousin!”

When she could stand upright once more, Bilbo gingerly touched her braid, then straightened and replied in her most Tookish manner, “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Dain blinked at her, then stared at Thorin and held his hands out to her. “How did you manage to land a Lady of such quality?”

Bilbo blushed scarlet but Thorin just snorted, “You’re an incorrigible flirt, away w’ yeh.”

Dain grinned broadly, but then reached for something on the sidetable – oh. Thorin stiffened as Dain lifted up the crown. “I brought this up from the treasury ta save us the trip.” He handed it to Thorin, who hesitated and stared down at the way the light played over the dark metal ravens. Bilbo put a gentle hand on his back, and he took a long breath. Then he reached up and placed the crown back on his head. Then he took her hand in his and brushed his thumb across her knuckles.

Valar above, how was this the same dwarf who came to her door all that time ago?

What was she doing here, in this jewelbox of a city? She was just a hobbit— Thorin had her arm linked through his as they walked, and she had no idea where they were going or
how to get back to their quarters, and the stone was still strangely warm beneath her feet, like the whole mountain was heated from within. The people in the halls quickly moved out of their way and bowed, and the guards they passed scrabbled to stand at attention, but all eyes were on them the entire way. How could she do this? A sudden gust of air hit her cheeks, and she could look down another corridor to see that cavernous throne room. Her stomach clenched.

Finally they reached a set of double doors and the guards leapt to open them, and the cacophony inside grated to a discordant halt. About a dozen lords sat round a massive mirror-black marble table, with twice as many support staff behind them, but this was only a passing impression because the lot of them leapt to their feet with a roar. Thorin raised his free fist and roared back, happiness shining on his face. Bilbo clung to his arm, wild-eyed. Finally everyone calmed down enough to take their seats (Bilbo on Thorin’s left, Dain on his right), and the assembled lords demanded the whole story. With a jolt, she realized that Fíli, Balin, and Oín were also present, and she let some of her nerves go as they shared their tale.

Then Balin pulled out a sheaf of papers and the regular meeting of the Council was called to order. That was when she learned that the mechanics of governing did not in fact vary that much from her own dealings with her tenants and trade. By the time they reached the state of the harvest, she was even participating, and the lords present listened to her raptly. And though her heart pounded as she spoke, she knew that what she said held merit, and she started to believe that she could maybe contribute something of value here.

And later, Thorin led her into the crowded feasting hall, and the rest of the Company swarmed them. Then she spotted her kin holding back from the crowd, and she squealed and threw her arms around Prim and Drogo.

When she could finally bear to part from them, she looked back up at the high table and saw Thorin waiting for her. She squeezed Prim’s hands and went up to him. Then joyous music rang out as food was served, and she was taken right back to the unexpected party all those years ago, and she clutched Thorin’s hand in her own. She was at his side, surrounded by the exuberant Company, on display-yet-part-of the innumerable dwarrow of Erebor, and her heart was so full.

And after dinner (and enough for supper), after deserts and drinks, Thorin and Kíli and Tauriel stood. Her head snapped up, but he just squeezed her shoulder with a secretive little smirk, so she sat still, infinitely suspicious now. But then they approached the musicians and she clutched her chest. Thorin took up a harp, Kíli a fiddle, and Tauriel a hand drum, and there, before the crowd, they played. Thorin sang of their betrothal and their misunderstanding, their reunion and their discovery of the true nature of the Ring. He sang of their desperate flight into danger, but he made her into a much braver creature than she’d really been. Kíli and Tauriel sang of the Balrog—the Balrog! and the siege of Lórien, and Bilbo thought she would faint. Thorin sang of the lies the Ring told them both, and she blushed to the tips of her ears to have that made public, but she knew, she knew that she needed to face that truth. And when he sang of his promise that they would be married, no matter what else happened (without alluding to the option to abdicate) and how that gave her the courage to break the Ring’s hold over her, a collective gasp rose up from the crowd. She stared at him, out over the heads of their people, and she shook her head slightly. She could see what he was doing; he was turning her into a hero, someone bigger than life and glossing over her flaws. As Kíli and Tauriel sang of the broken siege and Radagast’s rescue, he merely smiled serenely back at her. Then he sang out the final closing notes:

“Far over the Misty Mountains cold,
To dungeons deep and caverns old,
We’ve now come home, our wand’ring done,
To claim our family to hold”
She brought both hands up to her cheeks.

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After that, her days felt like she was plunged into a rushing torrent. They needed her to oversee the harvest and negotiate the trade with Dale. She was happy to meet with Bard again – now King himself, good gracious – but some of his courtiers seemed to have learned their style of governance from the old Master. At first, she tried to keep Raetha with her in her sling, but she was now old enough that that was too boring, so Bilbo was forced to concede that she would be happier in the nursery during the day. Ori and Drogo were constants in her retinue, and on the occasion the meetings were held in Dale, Dwalin, Eikar and Tracker would be part of her guard. She sat with Thorin during council, but she was surprised to learn that he did not hold court in the vast throne room, instead met in one of the larger meeting rooms. He was, in fact, having a whole new throne room crafted, and she was piqued to learn that she wouldn’t be allowed to see it til it was done.

He chuckled and brushed a thumb over her pout, and she relented gracelessly.

Then he (gingerly) brought her to see that the old throne had been turned into a memorial for those who’d been lost to the dragon and their time in the wild. Names had been carved into the marble throne and up into the gold-laced spire. The Arkenstone cast its play of light down on them both, but she felt no pull. If anything, she wanted to throw it away from her, but Thorin’s hand was warm in her own, and when he traced a finger over the stone, she had to blink away tears.

She had been working with Ori to learn Khuzdul, so she could now recognize the runes that spelled Frerin’s name.

Oín had helped her find a healer that could help her with her – her battle dreams. It took her a long time to even refer to these memories as such, but the healer kept assuring her these were not the result of any weakness on her part. And when she finally confessed that she was worried that Thorin’s ballad gave the dwarrow of Erebor the wrong impression of her, they had a long conversation about truths and perspectives, and so she was given a new task: write her story. Write it faithfully, both of herself and her Companions’ actions, but to pay particular mind to how she referred to herself. Did she give praise to others but not credit to herself? Did she forgive others’ actions but not herself? Did she hold herself to a higher standard than the rest? And who gave her that right? Was she no different than any other being? And if so, was she not also worthy of the same regard?

Of all her tasks, this was the most difficult.

She clung to their quiet nights at home, all together curled up in her armchair reading to Raetha, with his fingers carding through her ever-growing hair.

And then through all the busy-ness and bustle, it was Durin’s Day, then Midwinter, until Dori came mincing into her study one afternoon. Bilbo looked up curiously. This level of hesitation was completely foreign to him. Finally he twisted his hands and asked, “Are—are you calling off the betrothal, lass?” He stumbled and she stared slack-jawed at him. “We’d support you if you did, of course, but I can’t figure out for the life of me what—I mean, everything else has been going so well th-”

Bilbo finally unfroze from her stupor and yelped, “Wh-what? I’m not!”

Dori blinked owlishly at her, expression now hurt, and he said, “Well, I mean, I guess it’s alright if you went to a different weaver, I shouldn’t’ve assumed you’d come to me, but you can have help from Dís at least—”
Bilbo held up a hand to stop him, and his mouth snapped shut. She rubbed her eyes and cussed, “Handkerchiefs and hair cuts.” Finally she told Dori, “I’m not working with another weaver, of course not. Dori, you’re the most skilful tailor I’ve ever seen, I wouldn’t go to any one else. But why would this have anything to do with the betrothal? I thought we were waiting for the elves’ procession to come this spring.”

Dori stared at her like she’d just said she couldn’t tie a knot, and he burst out, “But what about your gown!”

Bilbo just gave him a look and calmly ordered, “Explain.”

The dwarf sank into the seat across from her desk and said, “You have to make your gown. You have to.” At her raised brows, he flailed his hands. “The work that goes into the crafting, that’s how you show your intent, how much you value the bond. If you just throw something together all slapdash and haphazard, well, that just means you don’t really care.”

She sat back with a little ‘ah.’ Then she asked, “But what about that very first gown you made me when we returned? That’s –”

But Dori shook his head vehemently. “It cannot be made by anyone else’s hand. It needs to be an expression of you and your hands.”

She paled. “Dori, I’ve never done anything to the scale that – that you dwarves take things to, how am I to –”

“Kin can help, somewhat, but –”

Her chair scraped back on the stone as she stood, wringing her hands. “Take me to your shop, we need to get started now. And I’ve never been to a dwarven wedding, so you are going to explain to me all the traditions that I’ve clearly been missing out on.”

And so passed the winter, snug and warm beneath the mountain, with food enough to keep the people here and in Dale from want. She spent much of the time curled up in Dori’s bright workshop with a needle in hand, once she’d decided on a design and fabric, surrounded by the quiet chatter of her friends and kin. They worked the more flowing hobbit designs into the traditional angular dwarrow ones, threaded through with diamonds and pearls, and it was a long learning curve for her.

As she sucked on yet another pricked finger, she complained, “Give me strength, or this embroidery will be the death of me. Let me work lace any day!”

Dori looked up from where he was working on what would be her bottom hem and cocked his head. “Those doilies back in the Shire, were those yours?”

She shrugged and checked that she’d absolutely stopped bleeding. “Some of them. Some were my mother’s of course, but –”

He shook his head excitedly, “But you can make lace?”

“By tat, hook, or needle, yes.”

He cast a frustrated glance down at the mostly completed embroidery, muttering about how they could work lace in, but then she was struck by an idea.
“Dori. Dori, I’ll have my hair unbound then, right?”

“Of course.” His cheeks pinked a little, and he did not glance at the new braids in her hair.

She thought back to how unbound hair was treated as intimate, and how the dwarves consider the first braids to be of more significance than the newlywed’s first kiss, and she put down her sewing needle. She breathed, “Dori, I am going to make a veil.”

It was almost too late to cast on a full shawl, but now that she had the idea, she burned with it. This, this was what her mother had taught her. Dori helped her find a skein of the finest cashmere and silk, so glowing white that it almost looked like spun mithril. She finished the embroidery around her collar, then let Prim and Menegilda, Dis and Dori, Mrs. Cotton and Tauriel, and more work on the rest. In fact, it became its own honor to do a few inches of silver and gold thread on the queen-to-be’s wedding gown. Bilbo poured herself into the gentle click and flash of her needles, into the careful counting and marking of the lace that grew beneath her hands. She smiled as the pattern became evident: lily-of-the-valley, return to happiness, and remembered the way the scent had carried on the air when Thorin had come bounding up to her in the middle of the Tuckborough Market.

Then one day Kili came running into the workshop, something cupped in both fists, his hair a fright and making everyone jump. “Bilbo! Bilbo you won’t believe what I found.” He opened his fist to a tiny spool of silver thread. Not thread, wire.

Dori gasped and clutched his chest.

Kili cried, “Right?” Bilbo just blinked at him, and he piped, “Mithril!”

Bilbo took the moment to clutch her chest, too. Now that she lived among dwarves, she was beginning to understand just what that meant (and was beginning to understand just how valuable her zarb really was).

“–on earth did you find that?” Dori was asking.

“We were looking through the treasury for beads, and–”

Bilbo tuned him out and reached for the mithril wire. There was not much, and what little there was was barely more substantial than thread. It bent and moved with almost no resistance, and she gingerly placed it with her knitting markers. “I’m going to use that in the border,” she said firmly, interrupting Kili and Dori’s plans to make an expedition to look for more. “Are there still more of the size-zero diamonds?”

Spring came to the mountain, and the meadows filled with flowers. Construction began on the smials in the foothills. The winter barley that had been planted the previous fall grew and grew, and the rest of the crops went in. Raetha’s second birthday party came and went, and she seemed to pick up more words at a frightening pace. But when she spoke her first sentence of Khuzdul, Thorin dropped to his knees and swept her into a crushing embrace.

Bilbo had to fight down a wave of very conflicted emotions, chiefly worry that Raetha would lose her hobbitishness. But it wasn’t fair of her to deny her daughter her heritage as a dwarf, too. Thorin looked up and must have read some of this on her face, because he rose and pulled her in with his other arm, and together they cradled their toddler between them.
Then later that afternoon, he took her hand and led her down a hallway she’d never been down before, and he told her impishly, “Now, we’re not ready for you to see the whole thing yet, so I’m going to need you to close your eyes.”

She leveled him with a look, then let her eyes fall shut and let him lead her blind through a vast space that echoed with their footsteps. He stopped but told her, “Wait.” She huffed, but obeyed. Then he pushed open a door and fresh air flooded the hall. She gave a little gasp and he said again, “Wait.” Then he took her hands once more and led her outside. The door shut behind them, and he murmured in her ear, “Alright, now.”

She opened her eyes upon a blooming garden, high up on the mountain. Drifts of snowdrops and hyacinth, tulips and bluebells covered the ground. Blooming forsythia shrubs lined one wall. A curving stone path meandered through, and at the center, a fountain burbled. Birds nested in trellises covered with honeysuckle and ivy, flying to and fro with beaks full of dried grass, and Bilbo burst into happy tears.

Thorin sank to a bench and pulled her into his lap, and she buried her face in his chest. Idly, almost as an aside, she noticed that his beard was almost long enough to get in the way. But she let herself feel the warm sun and his warm arms around her. Finally she wiped her cheeks and asked, “You did this? For me?”

He just nodded and ran a thumb over her azlâf braid.

She shivered and whispered, “Thank you, Thorin.”

He ducked his head and nodded, blushing. She reached up and kissed him gently, then leapt to her feet. He tried to keep her in his lap, but she was too quick. She darted down to the center and knelt, near to but not next to the fountain, and she dug into her pocket. Thorin cautiously approached her, but –

When she held up the acorn, he dropped to his knees before her, a tremulous cry on his lips. He watched as she ran a thumb over the now-polished surface and breathed, “You carried it all this way?”

She nodded, eyes bright. “I was going to plant it in my garden at Bag End, but – well, I never did end up back there. And then I was going to wait until the new smials were ready—I’d had notions of turning this into the new Party Tree, but this—this you’ve made for me.”

He stared at her, eyes burning and so full of hope, and he asked, “And you—do you want to stay? Melhekînh, you’ve been at my side throughout this whole winter, do you finally believe that you’re ready?”

Her breath caught in her chest, but she nodded. He heaved out a gusting breath like it was punched out of him. Then she used her bare hands to dig a little hole, gently laid the acorn in the black dirt, and covered it back up with a soft pat. Then she fell forward and buried her face in his chest once more.

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When the snowdrops and tulips gave way to lilacs and columbine, and the crops painted the wide fields green, they received the first word that the elves drew near. That was when Dwalin stood in the great market place, blew a resounding blast on his horn, and announced that the wedding would take place in four days.
Bilbo grumpily kissed Thorin goodbye and set up residence in the Queen’s Suites. They would not see each other again till the ceremony. But she was not lonely; now she was receiving every guest she’d ever met in the Mountain or Dale. They gave gifts of seeds and thread, books and tools, blankets and buttons, from the smallest of means to the richest. She was very nearly overwhelmed that so many people would seek to bid her their good wishes in this new life, but she had so much tea and cake that she began to feel like a respectable hobbit once more.

Finally, on the third day, her door opened upon a new set of visitors.

“Gilraen!” she shouted and leapt to her feet.

The woman laughed and knelt down to sweep her into a crushing embrace. Then Bilbo stepped back and ushered Galadriel, Arwen, Elrond, and Gandalf into the sitting room. “Come on, come in! Welcome, welcome. Can I get you some tea? How about something a bit stronger?” She bustled over to the sideboard which had been kept well-stocked during these busy days and asked, “Have you eaten yet? We’ve got some dainties here, not much for afters, but we could cobble something together—”

Gandalf winked, “Just tea, thank you.”

Bilbo stopped fussing and huffed a little laugh, “Oh, right.” Then she waved her arm to invite them up.

Then, after they were settled with the finest refreshments, Bilbo was telling them more of how she was settling in within the Mountain and she added, "And to think that this was almost derailed, not by dragonfire or that Ring—" her voice quavered a little, but she pushed on, "not by any of that, but by that old rumor that there's fairy blood in the Took clan. Apparently the dwarves did not take kindly to that."

Arwen and Gilraen gasped, but Gandalf chuckled around his pipe, shaking his head and muttering, "If only they knew—"

Bilbo cocked her head at him, cake halfway to her lips, and she huffed, "Knew? Knew what, Gandalf?"

He exchanged a secretive smile with Galadriel and said, "It's not fairy blood. Your fairy tales almost had the right of it, like always. Jacobas Took did take a wife of...extraordinary measure. She was the one who first welcomed the Hobbits into what is now the Shire after the Wandering Days, and it was she who turned that into a homeland." Bilbo only stared uncomprehendingly, and he explained, "She was one of the Maiar who stayed in Middle Earth. Indeed, after Jacobas passed, she became the Shire. Her blood flows in your veins, and so a part of her will always dwell wherever the Tooks choose to live. I believe that, given enough time to put down your own roots, you will find that this land, too, will prosper."

She gaped, blinking hard, then muttered faintly, "Gracious!" and took an extra large bite of cake. Arwen met her eye with a knowing smile and—

Then Prim came rushing in with Raetha, crying, “Bilbo, the elves are he– oh!” She flushed scarlet and gabbled, “E-excuse me!” But when she tried to back out, Bilbo waved her over and held out her arms for her faunt. Raetha eyed the strange big folk, popped her thumb in her mouth, and hid her face in Bilbo’s collar.

They all laughed, and Gilraen cooed and spent the rest of the visit trying to coax Raetha into her lap.
And then the next morning dawned, and Bilbo felt like she was only barely tethered to her skin. Kíli came early and swept Raetha off into the care of Erla, and then chaos descended. Dís, Prim, and Menegilda whisked her off to a bath, then primped and pampered her til her eyes were dark with khol and her lips tinted with rouge. They watched as Bilbo carefully ran her favorite oil through her shining, unbound hair. Then they helped her into her mithril and the heavy, heavy gown, and helped her cinch the wide, gleaming belt. Then they loaded up her til her wrists and fingers and ankles were heavy with bracelets and rings. She practically chimed as she walked. Dís had to cover her mouth, emotion heavy on her normally-austere face. Then Bilbo carefully lifted her veil and turned to the mirror—

She froze, unable to recognize herself. Deep blue cloth peeped through the intricate gold and silver embroidery, and the diamonds and pearls of her mithril shone through behind the deep collar. The gleaming border on her veil framed her face, and her hair tumbled gold to her shoulders. Her bare feet were just barely visible. She started to bring her hands to her face, but Prim quickly pulled them back. “Don’t, you’ll mess up the rouge.”

And just as quickly, Bilbo laughed and came back to herself. “This is why I don’t bother with it day-to-day.” The rest of the ladies snorted, and everyone else quickly dressed in their finest.

Then Dís held up a plain grey cloak and asked, “Are you ready?”

Bilbo looked long at her, this dwarf who had already welcomed her like a sister, and she had to fight back tears. She nodded.

Dís carefully wrapped the cloak over her gown and lifted the hood over her veil. Then she held out a simple mask. Bilbo gingerly hooked it over her ears and peered through the tiny eyeholes. Around her, the rest of the ladies donned the same cloaks and masks to keep her identity secret. Bilbo took a shuddering breath, and then Prim opened the door.

The hallway was filled with people in identical cloaks and masks, but clearly she could tell her Companions apart. Drogo and Adalgrim were easily a head shorter than everyone else. Bofur had doffed his hat, but Dwalin still bore Grasper and Keeper over his back, and Tauriel was obvious next to Kíli, her bow in hand. They raised up a massive cheer when they entered the corridor. Eikar sidled up to her and asked with joy in his old voice, “Alrigh’, lass?” He wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

She choked out, “Yes,” and they set off.

There was no way for the entire population of Erebor to attend the wedding itself, but as they passed through the halls, it became clear the kingdom was celebrating it as a holiday anyway. Crowds waited and watched like their procession was a parade, and they cheered as they passed. Garlands and banners hung everywhere. Then she realized they were leading her toward her garden, and her heart soared. But where Thorin had always made her shut her eyes, they led her on until they stopped before a set of massive stone doors. Then they stripped off the masks and cloaks in a flurry of finery, and quickly checked each other over to be sure their clothes and braids hung right— then Dwalin and Dori pulled open the doors.

A horn blew, then another, and another, then drums, then violins— but the music was secondary to the sight before her: a grand cathedral filled with dwarves, and thin spears of sunlight lanced through the walls. Doors along one wall were flung open onto her garden, and the breeze carried in the heady
scent of lilacs and lily-of-the-valley. On the far side, an enormous stained glass window portrayed the Party Tree in full leaf, on a green field beneath a blue sky, done in a distinctly hobbitish style. Its roots sank down into the earth, turning into veins of gold and a dwarven rendition of Erebor reclaimed. Where the two worlds met, a sword was crossed with barley. She had to quickly blink back tears. And below that masterpiece, two empty thrones stood upon a dais, but— she could not see him. Dís touched her elbow, and then, flanked by her kin, she walked up the aisle.

As she passed each row, the dwarrow raised their voices in song, and she recognized the first of the Seven Blessings, and she felt like their words were bouying her onward, like wind behind sails, and her heart soared.

But where was Thorin? The aisle ahead of her ended with a wall of bodies, and confused, she looked to Dís, who gestured her ahead. And there, it became apparent that the path veered left, and then again— and she realized that she was within a living labrynth. As she passed, each dwarf joined into the song, and she wished she had a bouquet to cling to. As she went on, first nearer, then further from the center, she began to see that they were standing in seven circles, and she was traversing them all.

And then she was in the center, and Thorin was right there. She almost stumbled to him in her haste, but she remembered the cadence of the ritual in time. She smiled to see Elrond, Galadriel, Gandalf and Arwen sitting on a bench in deference to those behind them. Then her kin and Company came to surround them in one final circle, and the music swelled to its last final note— and rang for a few seconds into silence. Then Balin strode forward to read the lengthy zarb that they’d agreed to that spring, detailing her rights and responsibilities as Thorin’s wife, and Thorin’s rights and responsibilities as her husband. The whole hall seemed to watch with baited breath. No one moved, no one made a sound except— “Mmmama!”

Bilbo turned and saw Raetha wriggling in Mrs. Cotton’s arms, reaching out for her. Bilbo could not help it, she went and plucked her daughter into her arms, and Raetha snuggled down with a happy sigh. The crowd all chuckled fondly. Thorin’s exultant stare was a physical weight. Balin smiled and finished reading the last part of their contract. Then he closed the scroll with a snap, and Thorin practically burst forward. She met him in the middle, and he thrust aside all formalities to fling his arms around them both. He kissed her soundly, roundly, and then bussed a kiss Raetha’s forehead. The Company all shouted encouragements not suitable for such a stately affair, but she just buried a laugh in his chest.

He squeezed her arms once and stepped back with a burning look. Then he walked— no, stalked in a steady circle around her, the symbol of his promise to guard her within his halls. The hair on the nape of her neck stood on end while he prowled behind her, but she turned to look over her shoulder, to meet his gaze again, and then he was once more before her. The place exploded with sound, as everybody present cheered their loudest, and the noise went on and on. Raetha looked round in alarm, and Thorin stepped closer to cradle her between them. Then Bilbo noticed Fíli and Kíli were looking between each other to time their breathing so they could make their caterwauling constant, and she burst into helpless laughter. Raetha finally squirmed and clapped her hands over her ears, so Bilbo let her down and she ran straight for Dís.

Whenever the applause started to die down, someone else would pick them up, and the crowd cheered with fresh vigor. This went on for long minutes, and all Thorin and Bilbo could do was stare at each other with amusement and wait.

Finally, finally they quieted down, and— her breath caught. Thorin straightened his shoulders and stepped back, keeping hold of her hands. His voice rolled through the room, loud and firm, “Ni dûmê zasamkhihiya zahar, ni kurduzi zâmkihi azhâr.” And she knew, she knew what he said: In my
Halls you will find a house, in your heart I will find a home.

She squeezed his hands and said with everything in her, "Ni dûmzu zâmkhîhi zahar, ni kurdumê zasamkhîhi azhâr." And she meant it, she meant it: In your Halls I will find a house, in my heart you will find a home.

Then he lowered her veil and gently brushed his fingers through her hair. First, he wove their marriage braid where once her azlâf braid was (and wasn't, and was). Then— here, now— he deftly twisted her hair into the twin four-stranded braids that marked her the Queen of Durin’s Folk. Her eyes fell shut and she willed her knees steady. The sensation of his hands in her hair before all these people was almost too much. When she looked back up again, his eyes were blown dark on hers too.

Then he lifted his crown from his head, and oh— She reached up and wove their marriage braid into his black-and-silver hair, and her heart fair leapt from her throat. He resettled his crown and she stared at the braid and the bead, barely able to believe that this was real.

But then Balin was at his side, bearing— oh— bearing her crown, and Thorin lifted it to her gaze. It was delicate and airy, gleaming in the bright light of the hall, a confection of gold and mithril and diamonds and pearls like an abstract spray of flowers. She gaped at his craftsmanship, at the skill of his hands— and he met her eyes with a question in his own. She sank steadily to her knees.

There was a breath, and then— He set the crown upon her head, its weight binding but not heavy, and this, this was real. She breathed. Then he cupped her cheek and bade her to rise, and, like ripples in a pond, the crowd bowed down. He pressed a kiss to her palm, and she flushed to the tips of her ears.

Then the moment passed, and the hall burst into thunderous applause. Bagpipes rang out over a sharp staccato of snares, and the dwarves parted for him as he led her up to their thrones. She clung to his arm as they climbed seven steps, and then they turned to greet the crowd, who roared once more. The cacophony was like a solid wall, and her ears began to ring. Then it hit her all at once: they were married. She looked up at him, at her husband, and the crown on her head was a steady weight. He looked down to see what— and he must have seen some of her wonder and joy, because he bent down and kissed her silly. She broke away with a helpless giggle, and his own booming laughter warmed her to her toes. Then Balin approached the dais with a frothy stein and handed it up to Thorin with a wink. Thorin offered her the first drink, and— well, who was to be surprised, really? She was a hobbit after all, and this was now a party— and she quaffed it back. The dwarrow cheered even louder, and Thorin beamed when she handed him back his half. And then she was caught staring at the way his throat worked behind his beard, and oh goodness—

From there, tables and casks of ale were brought out, and they ate and made merry for the rest of the day. She draped her veil like a sash over her shoulder and secured it with her glimmering belt, then dove in. Between plates, their guests all clamored to congratulate them in person, and between what would have been luncheon and afternoon tea, they danced. Bilbo delighted in the way her bracelets and anklets chimed with the movement, at the how his hair flew, and at the high blush on his cheeks above his beard. Hobbit songs blended into dwarven ones, and there they were, spinning, in the thick of it all. And when they needed air, he took her out into her garden to sit in the fresh sunshine.

His hands were always upon her, fingers twined together or wrapped around her arm, a palm pressed steady at the small of her back, knuckles brushed against her cheek, and once— once—! smoothing over her new braids, and she knew what he was doing. And when he chuckled and ghosted his thumb over the burning tip of her ear, she leveled him with a look dark with promise. He just caught one of her curls and tugged.

They switched to water after that.
The sun went down and fresh courses were brought out, richer foods and pastries, ever more complex deserts, and still the music played. And finally, finally, they took their leave, to raucous cheers and bawdy laughter. She clapped her hands over her flaming cheeks as they both fled, giggling like they were pinching pies.

And out in the corridor, in full light of anyone who could pass by, he stopped to press her up against the wall, knocking her crown askew. She gasped when his lips crashed down onto hers. She fisted her hands in his robes as he deepened the kiss. His hands came up to cradle her face, and when he brushed both thumbs over the tips of her ears, she broke away to beg, "Come on—!" He grated out a rough laugh like a landslide, twined his hand through hers, and tugged—

They would have made their way home sooner if they could’ve just stopped making use of so many darkened corners, but— well—

Her lips were stinging when they finally (finally) stumbled past the smirking guards into the royal wing. And there, once inside their rooms, he shoved her up against the doors. She whined, "Lock them, lock them!" as he lifted her, pinned her with his hips and weight, rucking her heavy skirts up around her waist, and she dug her heels into his back to pull him closer. He slid the bolt home with a satisfying clank, and he kissed her with abandon.

Then he broke away, panting, to press kisses up her ear, and she shivered violently. His low laugh rumbled into her chest, and his voice— his voice held such stunned happiness, such lightness, that her breath caught when words fell from his lips between kisses, "Melhekînh— sanzeuh— amrâlîme — wife—"

And at that, she threw her head back with a high keen, thumping back against the door, and he surged up into a devouring kiss. Then he grated again, "Wife— my wife, Bilbo," til she, breathless, gasped his name.

His hands tightened on her bum and he reared back from the door. She threw one arm around his shoulder and one hand up to her head to secure her crown, and he carried her like she weighed nothing to their room— to their bed— and oh! she had missed him these last few days. She buried her face in his neck.

Then— oh!— then he pressed her back into the furs and blankets. His crown was gone, his lips hot against her throat, and she tangled her hands in his hair. She needed— oh— "Thorin please!" she needed more— and her toes curled at the rasp and scrape of his beard on her already-flushed skin.

He gave a wordless rumble and reached up one-handed to deftly unhook the shining filigree casps at her collar and mail, and he pushed the fabric and metal and lace aside, and— her head fell back against the bed, and her crown tumbled from her curls. He sucked biting kisses along what he could reach of her collarbone, and with his free hand, he cupped her breast through her gown, and she keened— she needed more—

But he was watching her, eyes blown so, so dark, and he knelt back on his heels to stare down at her. He traced his fingertips reverently down the needlework and jewels on her gown, and she arched her back with a high whine. While she was already a disheveled mess, he was still in his ceremonial finest, and it drove her mad. His smile widened, and he asked, "Was there something you wanted?"

Her heart pounded and her breath caught in her throat at the triumphant joy on his face. She bit her lip and stretched her arms up over her head with a heady whine.

He slid his heavy hands up her bare thighs, up beneath her rucked up gown, but stopped so, so close
to *where she wanted him, right now*, and he chuckled darkly as she thrashed. "What was that, my Burglar?"

She gasped, "*You are wicked.*" He smirked and she cried, "Thorin—!" but he just traced the barest brush of a fingertip over her last damp scrap of fabric and— He smiled wider when she writhed. She clenched her fists in the sheets and let out a trembling, "*Ni kurdumê zasammph!*

He surged up to kiss her vows from her lips with a desperate groan, and she dug her heels into his solid, *stubborn* behind, but his clothes— his clothes! She couldn't take it anymore, she rocked up against him, fine robes be damned. He ground down against her, pinning her fully, his now-wild hair cascading around them like a sheet. And she was already sweating in her clothes, with him above her driving her down into the furs, and her skin burned everywhere he'd kissed.

Then she could feel him fumbling one-handed to push down his pants, and she keened into the kiss. He pulled back with a breathless little laugh, like he could not believe that they were really—finally — here. She reached up to cup his bearded cheek, hardly daring to believe it either, and feeling so, so happy that she could just burst with it, and—

And he drove in.

She cried out. He pressed his forehead to hers and panted her name.

Then— then he began to move, and he was everything she could ever need. She tugged down his collar to bite kisses into what parts of his chest she could reach, wormed her fingers up under his mail and beneath the hem of his shirts to cling to the soft skin at his sides, dug her nails into his back, all the while pleading for more. And he gave her more, until she was sliding up the bed with the force of his thrusts and had clung to his thick shoulders.

Finally, sweat beading his skin, he shrugged out of his robe and tunic, his mail and gambeson and undershirt and *oh my goodness why so many layers*, until finally, *finally* she could run her hands up his rippling chest, carding her fingers through his chest hair, and he shuddered. Then he wrapped his broad hands around her thighs, spreading her legs even wider, and his bared thighs smacked against her bottom with the renewed force of it and—

He said something rough and low, but she was too far gone to catch it, and then— she yelped as he rolled them, and the angle was suddenly *so right* and— and— he pulled something from the bed and reached up and—*oh—!* He placed her crown back atop her head, and he thrust up. A breathy wail escaped her lips, and she turned to catch his palm with a kiss. He sucked in a sharp breath, did it again, and ghosted his fingertips down her throat. She tilted her head back for him, so he could see his marks and how his beard had rubbed her skin pink. Khuzdul endearments and praises tumbled from his lips as they moved together.

Then he gripped her waist with both hands, tight enough that she knew he would leave marks there too, and she *shouted* when he pulled her down to him as he thrust up into her, driving into that perfect spot there— and there— and there— and—

She broke around him, voice cracking, throat ragged, hands tingling numb. He keened at the feel of her peak, but he gentled his movements so she could take a moment to recover, quivering. She fell forward, her crown toppling once more onto the pillows, and she buried her face in his shoulder. Her gown half-hung off one shoulder, and her lace lay pooled around her waist, and her mail had to be uncomfortable against his bare chest, but she could not bear to move.

He trembled beneath her, laughing a little giddily as her breathing evened out, and he murmured, "*Good, good, you did so good kurduh—*"
She hummed into the pillow, boneless. Then she turned her head and whispered against the shell of his ear, "I have something to tell you."

His hands tightened around her waist and he gave a little questioning hmph?

"I'm not on anything."

For a moment, he did not react, but then he sat bolt upright, even with her draped across his chest, and she yelped in surprise as she found herself straddling his lap. He met her gaze, eyes wild, and he asked breathlessly, "...Bilbo?"

She blushed and ducked her head, but he caught her chin. "I stopped taking laserwort last week—when they announced the wedding date, and— that is— I mean, if that's alright with you, oh gracious by rights I should have asked you first, but I wanted this to be a surprise for you tonight, but if th—"

He cut off her nervous babble with an ecstatic kiss, both hands cradling her cheeks, before he broke away to gasp, "Bilbo, love, yes."

She gave a little choking laugh and flung her arms around his shoulders, and he clung to her so tightly her ribs creaked. Then he rolled her back onto their bed, pressing sweet, lingering kisses over her hands, hooked her knees over his elbows, and slowly, slowly, he moved in her. His eyes locked on hers, and oh—her heart was so full. He reached out to stroke one tender hand over her belly, and she reached down to lace their fingers together.

"Ni kurduzi zâmkhîhi azhâr," he repeated, voice thick with emotion, and she breathed his name.

She came with a high, reedy cry just as he groaned into her hair, and she felt him spill into her.

They collapsed onto the bed in a tangle of limbs.

They would have time for sleepy chuckles and fumbled clean-ups later, but for now, they just clung to each other, utterly spent.

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(Two months later)

Bilbo hugged Gilraen with all her might and tried to ignore the bustle of the caravan around them. She wasn't ready to face the thought of her leaving yet, would not ever be ready, really—and oh, why was Rivendell so very far away? Finally, she pulled back and wiped her eyes under the After-Lithe sun, and Gilraen blinked gleaming eyes as well.

Beside her, Thorin told her warmly, "You are always welcome here. You and Estel. In fact, I'm inviting him now. Whenever he wants to come train under dwarven warriors, he is welcome." Under his breath, he muttered, "Can't have the elves get the only say—" and Bilbo elbowed him in the arm where his mail ended.

Gilraen stood and nodded gravely, hiding her smile. "Thank you, King under the Mountain. I will bear that in mind."
But then Tracker appeared at her side, apologetic. "My Lady—"

Bilbo clutched Thorin's hand and gave Gilraen one last wave. Then she mounted her horse. Elrond nodded at Bilbo once more, Galadriel lifted one graceful hand in final farewell, and then they were off.

Thorin caught Raetha by the shoulder when she tried to run after the wagons, and she pouted til he picked her up. Her flower crown was starting to wilt from all her carousing with the other dwarflings, and her hair was sticking up out of her braids like a cloud, but from this new vantage point, she waved wildly at the departing elves. Bilbo pressed her palm against her newly-rounding belly, and she breathed.

She breathed.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to the Dwarrow Scholar for their work on dwarven world building

Why the continual references to barley? I couldn't pass up the opportunity to include the Queen's Gift

And then after I posted this, I wondered 'Huh, what's the meaning of snowdrops, why this those come up as the first thing in my mind when I envisioned the garden?' So I just looked and... hope and rebirth.

Well god dammit, I think I'm going to go cry now.

If ever there was a soundtrack for this, here is the wedding music

Actually, you know what? Here's the soundtrack for the whole work.

Have some cover art, too.

And so, at last, we come to the end.

Tolkien wrote these books hoping that someday they would become our new mythology, that others would pick up where he'd left off and create more stories and songs and tales, but he thought it was an impossible dream, and yet...here we are.

I think I've been so afraid of finishing this piece because I was terrified that I wouldn't be able to make something worthy of this fandom, but the response to this has been truly humbling and heartwarming, and I want to thank you all so very very much.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!